

"Sovereignty and Drama, Drama and Sovereignty"

John 10:14-33

Pastor Stephen Ridge

This year in John's gospel, we have listened to Jesus during the last Fall, the last autumn of his life, setting up in a city where he wasn't welcome, trying to offer himself as a Savior to the best and brightest of his people, men who saw themselves as already made with God, descended from Abraham, already kosher, already wise and functional, already powerful and in control. So when Jesus teaches them that he is "*the light of the world*," the response of the rabbi's and priests is "Who needs it?" Our lives are already brilliant, we've got kosher down, we've got Moses nailed. What light can a carpenter from Galilee shine on brilliant souls like us?

Jesus offered them "*truth*" that would "*set them free*." "No sale!" Old Israel answers him, "We've never been slaves!" Even though there's a fortress in their city with enough Roman troops to clear the temple square in about five minutes. Jesus compares their arrogance to Abraham's humility. He tells them he knew Abraham back in the day, and they pick up stones to kill him because all they can see is a carpenter from Galilee with delusions of grandeur. So on his way out the temple, Jesus heals a blind man and tells the authorities that they are blind even though their eyes work fine. "What do you mean we're blind?" they ask him.

Which gets Jesus to talking about shepherds, crashing the wall of the fold when they should have been using the gate God gave them. Oh and by the way, Jesus is the gate a leader should use if he or she wants to get in the business of leading God's people. In order to lead God's sheep, we need to be led by a Shepherd ourselves! So Jesus recommends himself as "*the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep*." And the principal qualification Jesus claimed for himself is that his Father was his Shepherd. That Jesus would hike through the Valley of the Shadows to a Cross, because that was the place his Father led him to go.

And the payback for such breathtaking obedience was the undying, unchanging love the Father keeps in his heart for anyone who'll trust and follow him, beginning with Christ. Jesus put it this way, he said, "*For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again*." The Father knew, Jesus knew, all the angels knew that when Jesus died, it was inevitable that he would "*take...up*" his life again. But that didn't soften the pain, the dread, the shame and loneliness of the death Jesus experienced. He endured it because he believed, like none of us ever could, that the Father would vindicate his Son's goodness after Jesus had borne the full penalty of all the awful things we've done to provoke the Father's justice against us.

So all four gospels teach that Jesus went to the cross, not as any sort of helpless victim, but entirely of his own will in obedience to his own Father. Here in John, Jesus says of his own life, months before the fact, "*I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father*." His Father had promised him that his obedience on the cross would save, not just the disciples he knew, not just a large number of Jews but people far away, people not yet born, people who knew nothing about sheepfolds and shepherds and wheat and tares and good soil and bad soil. Jesus knew that people like us would one day show up in churches and hear the story that God had loved us from before the beginning of time.

And Jesus, musing about what it meant to have the Almighty as his own Shepherd, left the crowds who heard him thunder-struck and divided, "*...again*," John tells us. It sounds crazy to most of them, but a growing minority in the temple square can't bring themselves to dismiss "*these words*" Jesus spoke as the babbling of a demoniac. "*Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?*" they asked. The season had wound on while Jesus and the authorities had wrangled, and now it was Hanukkah, old Israel's winter festival of light.

And, when Jesus appeared on the temple porch, his cloak wrapped tight against the cooler air, John tells us that "*...the Jews surrounded him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly!'*" Now whenever John uses the term "*the Jews*" he means not just any Jews, but the leaders of old Israel. So it follows that Jesus being surrounded on the temple porch is more in the nature of an ambush than a coincidence. And Jesus' answer is indignant, "*I already told you and you don't believe! The works I do in my Father's name tell you all you need to know, but you don't believe because you're not of my sheep*."

So we're back to shepherds and sheep. And the notion here is that God needs to do something in our hearts before we'll believe a word of gospel when we hear it. "*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me*." Jesus said. They are already his sheep when they hear him! He'll go on to say about his sheep, "*My Father... has given them to me...*". Jesus had said, months before in Capernaum, "*All that the Father gives to me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will never, ever cast out*."

It is a principle similar to the wheat and the tares, the good soil and the bad soil Jesus taught in the other gospels. We don't come to Christ because we're better, smarter, more noble than other people who don't believe. We believe the gospel because God's Spirit works in our hearts to make us prone to believe the gospel. It is no accomplishment of ours. It is the grace of God. His Spirit softens our hearts so that we fear God's judgment, and believe his gospel when Jesus comes calling. "*The wind blows where it will*," Jesus told Nicodemus, "*and you hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes, so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit*."

Jesus says here, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." Leon Morris read Jesus' words and said this: "...our...eternal life depends not on our feeble hold on Christ, but on His firm grip on us." Christ gives us eternal life, and he holds onto us from the moment we believe to the moment he returns and eternity dawns. And Christ is not alone in guarding our souls.

Jesus said, "My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one." What Jesus is expressing here is the absolute unity, the unbreakable commitment he and the Father have invested into saving every soul who puts his or her faith in Christ. Father and Son will not be divided on this point. God is our shepherd, and we are the sheep of his pasture, and the Son has already laid his life on the line to get us to the fold at the end of the day.

But behind that moral unity is an existential unity that puts our salvation on even firmer ground. John wrote at the beginning of his gospel: "No one," by which he meant "No [man] has seen God at any time, but the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known...In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. This one was in the beginning with God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." What Jesus was telling the priests and rabbi's in the temple square was that the carpenter they were looking at was God Almighty in human flesh.

"I and the Father are one." Jesus told them. And they understood exactly what he meant. But they could not accept it because of what it would cost them. If Jesus were the Son of the Most High, then they were wrong about what it meant to be saved, what it meant to be free. If Jesus was the end and be all of light and truth and faithfulness and obedience, then their being kosher, their being descended from Abraham, all their accomplishments and power couldn't save their souls unless they bowed to him.

And they wouldn't bow to Jesus because Satan had already sold them on the notion that they could "be like God," by being kosher, by mastering themselves and their circumstances. They had twisted Moses' Law to fit the false gospel the Serpent had taught way back in the Garden. And we need to be careful today not to take Christ's gospel and somehow center it on ourselves. God is God, and Christ is Lord, and what God's word teaches is true, Old Testament and New, properly balanced, rightly understood. And we see God aright, we understand his word only after we face the Savior, heart to heart, and turn from our sins, and give ourselves to him.

Mid-Week Devotional

All That the Father Gives to Me Will Come to Me

*I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger,
and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*

But I said to you that you have seen me and do not believe.

*All that the Father gives to me shall come to me,
and whoever who comes to me I shall never, ever cast out.*

John 6:35-37

Months before Jesus was confronted by the temple authorities on the temple porch during the feast of Hanukkah, he had addressed a mixed crowd in the Capernaum synagogue, only days after he had fed the five thousand in the wilderness. He announced back then that he was "the bread of life" and crowd in the synagogue was intrigued by the notion of perpetually nourishing bread, much as the Samaritan woman had been intrigued by Jesus' words about a sort of "living water" which perpetually satisfied thirst (4:15). She had said to Jesus, "Lord, give me this water..." and now the crowd in Capernaum said to him, "Lord, give us this bread always!"

And, as in the case of the Samaritan woman, Jesus expanded on the meaning of perpetual nourishment in a way that confronted their moral and spiritual need to be watered and fed: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe." In other words, they had seen Jesus perform a physical sign without being spiritually nourished. So Jesus went on to lay out a path by which people can get to a place where they are nourished and sustained by Christ.

And the first fact to note is that people come to Christ at the initiative of his Father: "All that the Father gives me will come to me..."(1:12,13). So it is God who sets people in motion toward Christ, and, having been set in motion, they choose to "come". And Jesus in turn promised that "...whoever comes to me I will never cast out". It follows that the salvation Jesus offers us is stable and certain because Christ is absolutely faithful. He came "...not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up in the last day."

So God's plan to save us is not based on some ephemeral whim or sentiment, but rather on a covenant agreed upon by the persons of the Trinity before the beginning of time that the Father, Son and Spirit would work together to save people like us for all eternity (Ephesians 1:3-14). Jesus put it this way: "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."