

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
April 25, 2010
John 10:22-30
Plain-Talk Promises**

There is an intentional bit of irony in the opening verses of today's passage. A long time ago, back in 168 BC, the Greeks conquered Jerusalem and converted the holy temple into a temple to the Greek god Zeus. When they tried to get the Jews to worship false gods, the Jews revolted and eventually chased out the foreign conquerors. By 165 BC, they had restored the temple and were ready to re-dedicate it to the Lord. But in preparing to light the menorah, only a small flask of sacred oil was found, enough for a single day. Miraculously that oil lasted for eight days, so the Feast of the Dedication, also known as Hanukkah, has always involved lighting a candle for each of eight days.

So at this festival of lights, Jesus Christ, the light of the world, was accosted by fellow Jews and asked "Tell us plainly: Are you the Messiah or not?" During the feast of Hanukkah in which the people recalled how Judas Maccabeus chased out the unwanted Greeks, someone cornered Jesus to see if he was the Messiah, the One to chase out the unwanted Romans. What were his options? To say "No" I'm not the Messiah would have been a lie; but to say "Yes" I am the Messiah, based on their expectations, would also have been a lie since Jesus did not come to chase out the Romans and militarily re-establish the kingdom of David. So amidst the festival of lights, Jesus, the light of the world, turned the question back on the questioners and said, "I've already told you who I am, but you do not believe."

Let's begin with this point: Understanding who Jesus is can never be simply a matter of deciding whether he measures up to our preconceived ideas about God. You can't hold a clipboard with a "Messiah checklist" on it, ask Jesus a series of questions, and then determine whether or not he is the Son of God. We don't get to define God. We don't get to set the parameters for how the Creator of the world, or Christ, the Redeemer of nations, or the Holy Spirit, the Inspirer of all life, acts and behaves in relation to us. Jesus always defies easy characterization. He surprises us, challenges us, and turns our world's logic upside-down. That is the power behind his miracles and especially behind the Easter event, in which the one who was dead is now alive. So when his fellow Jews asked him who he really was, he replied, "I've already told you in words and deeds. But you do not believe."

Now perhaps this incident makes us feel smug. We think that if they really understood who Jesus was, they would have listened more closely and acted quite differently. It's like the father who was parked in the driveway, honking his horn and shouting for his daughter to hurry up because they were running late for the movies. When she appeared, she chided him by saying, "It is better to get there late than not at all." Taken aback, the father said, "That's great advice. Did your mother teach you that?" "No," the daughter said, "That's what the cop told Mommy last week when he pulled us over and

gave her a speeding ticket.” We hear things differently when we appreciate the authority present in the one speaking to us.

Or do we? It’s time for some plain-talk about this passage in light of our world today. There have been a lot of troubling stories in the news these past weeks: the coal mine accident in West Virginia; the steady stream of Toyota cars being recalled; the continued revelations about how some financial institutions packaged bad loans into consumer products while betting that these same investment opportunities would fail; the ongoing scandal within the Catholic Church, especially in Europe, regarding cover-ups in clergy abuse cases; the embarrassment over Ben Rothlisberger’s unfortunate and predatory practices off the playing field. There are nuances and gray areas in these stories, but a basic pattern exists – when human lives are devalued, God’s creation and even our worship of God is diminished.

Far too often, an imaginary balance is set up into which questions of profit are placed on one side and standards of human value are placed on the other. When the scales go out of balance, when the weight is on the side of profit and self-preservation, bad things happen: coal mines suffer explosions and off-shore drilling rigs blow up; cars roll off assembly lines with unsafe braking units; billions of dollars are lost through greed and out-of-control investment practices. When motives of protecting profits from football games and other sporting events take precedence over enforcing uniform standards of behavior and denouncing anything bordering on date rape, then the scales are out of balance. When it becomes more important to cover up a priest or minister’s abuse of children than it is to protect the young ones under their supervision, then the scales are sorely out of balance. I’m sorry, but reverence of God cannot be partnered with deeds that degrade God’s children and God’s creation. It just doesn’t work.

During that Festival of Lights long ago, some people wanted to define Jesus for their own purposes. They wanted a Messiah who fit their own categories, and who, more importantly, would make sure that the scales stay permanently tipped in their favor. It is a perennial human trait, as true of the Jews back then as it is of Christians of all doctrinal stripes today. But here’s where the gospel turns this inclination on its head. We don’t stand there with checklists and determine whether Jesus is the Messiah or not. We don’t choose our prophets; we don’t choose our redeemers; we don’t choose our shepherds. We don’t grasp God; God grasps us.

And this is where the plain-talk of the gospel offers words of incredible comfort and promise. Jesus was confronted by those who asked, “If you’re the Messiah, tell us plainly.” He replied, “The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand” (Jn 10:25-28). Those verses come from near the end of chapter 10. Just before that, Jesus spent a fair amount of time describing how he is the Good Shepherd and we are his sheep. He described how he goes ahead of the sheep, calls them and they know his voice. How he is the gate which literally protects the sheep

in his fold. How he is the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, doing so out of love and of his own accord.

We sheep may dress up in our finest wool garments and walk past a row of churches, believing we are the ones picking which one will become our sheepfold. We may list off our criteria: comfortable stalls, fresh hay, congenial barn mates, pleasing room temperatures; until at last we say, “I believe in the God of Catholicism, or Protestantism, of Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, or yes, of Presbyterianism.” But the danger of this self-centered mindset is that it carries over to our lives when we step outside this liturgical barn. If the God we worship can be chosen based on criteria related to personal comfort and congeniality of Sunday services, then personal ethics can also be shaped by personal demands – this works for me, so it must be right – and suddenly the scales of life are way out of balance; blind eyes are turned to business sins and sporting sins and ecclesiastical sins and individual sins, and before long lives are lost, holiness is disregarded, and creation is diminished.

But we don’t choose the Shepherd. The Shepherd chooses us, calls us, knows us – all of us. That’s the foundation of faith – we are known. Jesus lived and died for us. Jesus rose for us. Jesus calls us, and if we’re honest and if we listen, we know the sound of his voice. And what he says to us is a promise – “I give my sheep eternal life and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.”

This plain-speaking promise is offered without a trace of irony. Jesus has said that we are held safely in his hand and he means it – a hand that touched a child in blessing, a hand that touched a leper in compassion, a hand that gently lifted up a weeping woman kneeling at his feet, a hand that broke bread and handed it to those hungry for life, a hand that endured nails and a crucifixion, and a hand that after resurrection was extended once more in greeting and in love.

That is the starting point from which everything is transformed. No harsh interrogations or checklists; no situational ethics or out-of-balance human lives – no, it starts with that promise. Christ says, “From my hand you will not be snatched. In my hand, you have life – even eternal life. In my hand, you hear my voice and follow me. In my hand, you believe and understand and are at peace.” Suddenly the Hanukkah lights of the temple shine forth in miraculous glory. Suddenly the candles and sanctuary lights of our modern churches help illuminate what is most important for our world today. Suddenly the plain-sense meaning of a Messiah is heard plain and clear: the Messiah is the One who knows us and loves us and who is truly alive – beside us and calling us forth. What else can we do but follow?

AMEN