

## The Good Shepherd

Last week we looked at three major themes from the Feast of Tabernacles - centred around the Water Drawing Ceremony, the Illumination of the Temple, and the Celebration of God's Presence, both in the wilderness wanderings of Israel 1300 plus years earlier and in the gathering of His people in Jerusalem for the Feast of Shelters. God's presence brought the people to the city and His presence filled the week of festivities with anticipation and with joy.

To get those three major aspects of the Feast of Booths or Shelters or Tabernacles in last Sunday, I had to leave some passages out, so I'll begin today with a bit of catching up.

There's a passage that begins John 8 which isn't found in the oldest manuscripts of John's Gospel, but which definitely does fit with our understanding of Jesus and with what John is trying to accomplish in his writing. Jesus is teaching in the Temple early in the morning and a crowd has gathered. As He was teaching, the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees come into the circle with a woman they claim to have caught in the act of adultery. "The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?"

There are a number of offensive aspects to what the religious leaders are doing here. One is that they don't bring a man into the process, as if the woman must be found guilty of the death penalty and the man can go free without consequence. That's just not right. The second is that they are not concerned with upholding the law of Moses but are trying to trap Jesus into saying something they can use against Him. Jesus' response was to lean over and start writing with his finger in the dust on the ground, not saying a word to them. What was He writing? Darrell Johnson, in teaching on the Gospel of John, says that he thinks Jesus was writing out the words of the Law of Moses, the Ten Commandments. I think that's as likely as any suggestion because, as they continue to press Him and demand an answer, He finally responds, "All right - go ahead and stone her. But let those who have never sinned throw the first stones!" If the words of the law were written in the dust that lay before the woman's accusers, they would provide a powerful reminder of each person's failure to fully measure up to God's laws. And so the accusers begin to leave the scene, beginning with the oldest. Why do you think the older ones would have left first? Do you remember what you were like when you were 20?

The story ends with a picture of grace. Jesus stands up and asks the woman, "Where are your accusers?" It's interesting to me that Jesus stands. In the culture of the day, a rabbi would be seated to teach the words of Scripture, but would stand to either read the Scripture or to make a solemn declaration. Jesus stands to say, "Where are your accusers? Did not even one of them condemn you?" "No, Lord." "Neither do I. Go and sin no more." Jesus is again declaring His authority - this time to forgive sin - and He does it right in the heart of the power of the religious leaders of the day - in the Temple courts.

This story comes right in the middle of the Feast of Tabernacles. We've already seen the Drawing of Water festival and, right after this incident in the Temple we read Jesus' declaration that He is the light of the world and that those who would follow Him will not walk in darkness. In the rest of chapter 8 we looked at the "ani hu", the "I Am" statements that Jesus made by which He claimed that He was God, that His presence with them meant God was present with them.

After that, we're back to the theme of light - at least in a way. It's like the Cana to Cana bookends between chapter 2 and chapter 4. Jesus tells everyone that He is the light of the world, and then He heals a man who has never seen the light - He opens the eyes of a man who was blind from birth. Chapter 9 of John - 41 verses of one of the most compelling stories on human spiritual blindness, about our unwillingness to see the light, our preference to keep in the darkness.

The story is very direct.

Jesus finds and heals a man born blind.

People are incredulous. Neighbours and friends can't believe it's the same guy.

His testimony: I'm the guy.

They take him to the Pharisees.

The Pharisees decide that Jesus is not from God because He healed the man on the Sabbath.

Others think that an ordinary sinner couldn't heal a man who had been born blind.

The Pharisees can't accept the miracle and look for a way out. They interview his parents.

The parents recognize their son, but that's where their courage fails - they bail with the defence, "He's old enough ... ask him."

That gets you through verse 23. Now, the fun part:

*So for the second time they called in the man who had been born blind and told him, "Give glory to God by telling the truth, because we know Jesus is a sinner." "I don't know whether He is a sinner," the man replied. "But I know this: I was blind, and now I can see." (9:24,25)*

Isn't that a powerful statement! That's the power, the authority that your experience of Jesus has when you're talking with people who don't believe yet. "I know this: I was blind and now I can see!"

*"But what did he do?" they asked. "How did he heal you?"*

*"Look!" the man exclaimed. "I told you once. Didn't you listen? Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become His disciples too?"*

*Then they cursed him and said, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know God spoke to Moses, but as for this man, we don't know anything about him."*

*"Why, that's very strange!" the man replied. "He healed my eyes, and yet you don't know anything about Him? Well, God doesn't listen to sinners, but He is ready to hear those who worship Him and do His will. Never since the world began has anyone been able to open the eyes of someone born blind. If this man were not from God, he couldn't do it." (26-33)*

The Pharisees say that they know Jesus is a sinner, but that they don't know anything about Him. They don't know about Him because they aren't able or willing to embrace what He has done for this man. So they dance around it, looking for some rational explanation: "What was it exactly that he did that made you see again?" And the man, simply and directly exposes their blindness, their deliberate blindness, and speaks truth, plain, out in the open, truth. "If this man were not from God, he couldn't do it." And their reaction is the reaction of power to a reasonable and faith-filled man - they threw him out of the synagogue in a fit of rage.

Jesus meets the man again and asks him for faith: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "I'd like to." "I'm right in front of you." "Yes, Lord, I believe."

The chapter closes with Jesus making a statement, I think in a louder voice, a statement for others to hear:

*"I have come to judge the world. I have come to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind."*

*The Pharisees who were standing there heard Him and asked, "Are you saying we are blind?"*

*"If you were blind, you wouldn't be guilty," Jesus replied. "But you remain guilty because you claim you can see." (39-41)*

Isn't that a powerful description of the central problem of our time? In Romans 1 Paul states of those who rebel against God, "Claiming to be wise, they became utter fools instead." (v. 22) And here in John we read Jesus' words to those who thought they were wise and full of spiritual insights, "You remain guilty because you claim you can see." There's a powerful lesson in this story, that humility is key to knowing God, to recognizing His activity among us and to being able to discern His leading in our lives.

It's a wonderful story - I love John 9 - but it's not the central story of today's sermon. For that we move forward to chapter 10 and the Good Shepherd. John tells us that this event took place during the Feast of Dedication, what is today called Hanukkah and for understanding of Jesus' words in John 10, we need to understand the history behind Hanukkah or the Feast of Lights.

In the second century B.C., Jerusalem was ransacked by the Seleucid King Antiochus Epiphanes who forced the Jews to adopt pagan rituals and abandon Yahweh. You'll sometimes hear about the Maccabees. This was the name of the Jewish family which led a revolt against Antiochus and eventually liberated the Temple and restored the sacrifices which God had commanded. According to the rabbis, when they searched the temple, they only found one small jar of olive oil that had not been contaminated by the invaders, enough to last for one day. But they lit the Menorah and it stayed lit for 8 days - that's why the celebration of Hanukkah lasts for eight days.

But there was another event that happened at that time which is important for our understanding of Jesus' words in John 10. When the Seleucids advanced on Jerusalem, two of the key Jewish leaders, their high priests, Jason and Menelaus, deserted them. Every year, at the Feast of Dedication, one text that is read is Ezekiel

34, a chapter focused on the failure of God's appointed shepherds and His promise to come Himself to shepherd His people. Here are some verses from Ezekiel 34:

*You shepherds, hear the word of Yahweh: As surely as I live, says the Sovereign Yahweh, you abandoned My flock and left them to be attacked by every wild animal. Though you were My shepherds, you didn't search for My sheep when they were lost. You took care of yourselves and left the sheep to starve . . . For this is what the Sovereign Yahweh says, "I Myself will search and find My sheep. I will be like a shepherd looking for His scattered flock. I will find My sheep and rescue them from all places to which they were scattered on that dark and cloudy day . . . (Ezek. 34:7,8,11,12)*

And Ezekiel goes on from there to describe God's tender care that He will extend to His deserted people. The pivotal verse for our study is verse 23:

*And I will set one shepherd over them, even My servant David. He will feed them and be a shepherd to them.*

So Ezekiel prophesies both the coming of a time when Israel's shepherds would spectacularly fail them and when God would send His Messiah to care for the people like a good shepherd. When you think of a shepherd like David, it's hard not to think of his 23rd Psalm:

*"The LORD is my shepherd, I have everything I need. He lets me rest in green meadows; He leads me beside peaceful streams; He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honour to His Name. (Psalm 23:1-4)*

Zechariah 11:15-17 prophesies the coming of a worthless shepherd who doesn't care for the flock and Jeremiah 31:10 speaks of God as being the shepherd who watches over His people. These dynamics are in play at any time, but especially when the Feast of Dedication and the remembrance of Judah's betrayal by its high priests is taking place in December. That's the setting for John 10:

*The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give life in all its fullness. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will leave the sheep because they aren't his and he isn't their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. The hired hand runs away because he is merely hired and has no real concern for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know My own sheep and they know Me, just as My Father knows Me and I know the Father. And I lay down My life for the sheep. (John 10:10-15)*

There are two kinds of shepherds at the heart of the Feast of Hanukkah - the ones who look out for their own interests first and use that as an excuse to abandon those under their care ... and the one who knows and cares for each member of the flock and who is willing to die for them.

As we've seen on other occasions in the Gospel of John, Jesus has this amazing sense of timing. It's at the Drawing of Water ceremony that He cries out, "If anyone is thirsty, let them come to Me and drink" and it's at the Illumination of the Temple that He boldly

declares that He is the light of the world. Now, at the Feast where people are remembering the rededication of their place of worship and that they had been abandoned by their leaders in a time of crisis, Jesus tells them that He is the good shepherd. The word “good” here might be better translated as “noble”. Jesus is the shepherd who does the job He is called on to do, who protects His sheep in the places where they are vulnerable, who leads them to places where they can be nourished and strengthened, who will not abandon His people when danger threatens.

A couple of “notes” on the passage we’ve just read:

1. Jesus tells us that His purpose in coming ... is to bring life to the full. This is not the same as saying, “I’m here so everyone can be happy” or “I’ve come so that you can all live longer”; it’s saying that He’s come so that we can know life as God intended it to be. Jesus is promising the life that God created us for, the life that is full of meaning and fulfillment, of love and joy and fruitfulness.
2. The second thing He tells us is that He knows His sheep - He knows us - and we know Him. I think sometimes we can get complicated about “hearing God’s voice” or getting guidance from the Spirit, but it’s not as complicated as we make it out to be - because we know His voice.
3. The third thing I want to point out from this little passage is really important, but something that’s easy to skip over. Jesus says that there’s a thief at work, trying to steal people away from God’s flock. He doesn’t give us a lot of clues about how we can recognize the thief, but He does give us two good ones: a) the thief is never described as noble, as a “good shepherd” because he’s not concerned with what’s best for us, but he wants to have power over us and to take something valuable from us ... and b) the thief won’t make sacrifices to defend us or protect us, but will abandon us when things aren’t going his way.

We’ve covered a lot of ground today, including racing through John 9 and 10, but I want us to take some time to reflect on the lessons from these passages, the things that we can apply to our lives on a daily basis.

1. There are different kinds of power at work in the world. One kind of power is political or military - often the two go hand in hand - and they operate by force and by the intimidation of knowing that they can use force to get their way. We see that kind of power at work when the Pharisees throw the once-blind man out of the synagogue because they didn’t like what he was saying. But there’s another kind of power that is highlighted in that same story, and it is the power of truth, the power of a simple testimony to what one person has experienced. In this case it was, “I was blind and now I can see.” In your case, it will be something different, but having the same authority to it because it’s your real experience. Let’s not underestimate the power of what we have experienced through our relationship with Jesus. We have experienced answers to prayer, we have experienced peace in the midst of crisis, we have experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit, we have experienced His guidance and comfort and joy. That is both powerful and wonderfully good - it’s good news - and because it’s yours, it has power to speak to people who know you and trust you.

2. A related application is from Jesus' teaching about the "Good Shepherd". The application I have in mind has to do with knowing who the "thief" in our story is, and what that thief is after. One of the prime areas where we are vulnerable to theft is in the area of our confidence. Satan wants to steal our confidence in who we are, in Christ, and in what we have experienced - that testimony thing we just talked about, and in the truth of Jesus Himself, what He said and what He did for us. How does the thief go about committing the crime? By and large, he tells us lies - about ourselves, about Jesus, and about what it means to be His follower. He uses media, he uses so-called 'experts', people who write books or teach in universities, he uses bloggers and ranters, and he will often use our own thoughts. You know it's happening; you're losing your joy and feel confused and doubtful of your own thoughts and feelings. Now, what we need to do when this is happening to us is ask the question: is the person who is throwing me into confusion and causing me to doubt my faith a noble shepherd, someone who genuinely cares for me and has my best interests at heart? Or is there another less noble agenda going on here? Do they love me or do they want my vote? Do they care about my life or do they want to advance their cause through my life? Of course, the other big aspect of dealing with the thief is knowing what's true. There are a ton of claims out there that would seek to undermine the truth of Jesus, or even the possibility that truth exists. We have to nail these things down, if not for ourselves, at least for those who come to us with questions about who Jesus is, what He really did and said and what it means for us today. In a cynical society like ours, the knowledge of the truth provides an anchor for our lives. It was the Christian pursuit of truth that provided the intellectual framework for science and the universities. It is the modern rejection of truth that is causing our society to wobble towards an uncertain future. The thief is at work and it requires diligence and persistence to safeguard against him.