



Catalog No. 1369

John 10:22-42

Thirty-first Message

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June 4th, 2006

A GOD WE CAN'T CONTROL

Returning to our studies in the gospel of John, the question before us this morning is whether we want a God we can control or a God we will follow. Do we want a God for our own purposes or for his?

We are drawing to the end of the first half of this gospel, which is often referred to as the book of signs. Chapters 5-10 center on Jewish traditions connected with various feasts, and thus with the core of Jewish worship and faith. John's story indicates that Jesus was turning the Jewish world upside down. Up to this point, the context has been Sabbath, Passover, and the Feast of Tabernacles. Today, beginning in 10:22, we come to the Feast of Dedication.

At that time the Feast of the Dedication took place at Jerusalem; it was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple in the portico of Solomon. (John 10:22-23 NASB)

The Feast of Dedication, more commonly known as Hanukkah, is celebrated in December, roughly three months after the Feast of Tabernacles, which is the setting for chapters 7 and 8. In Jesus' time, this festival was but a recent institution. It marked the occasion of the cleansing and re-consecration of the temple after it had been defiled by the Syrian Antiochus Epiphanes, in 167 B.C., when he set up a pagan altar in the temple. Three years later, Judas Maccabaeus led a revolt, recaptured the temple and re-consecrated it to God. The people of Israel celebrated for eight days, and it was decreed that a similar celebration be held every year. Judas Maccabaeus began a dynasty that lasted for a hundred years.

The feast was also called the Feast of Lights, because lamps and candles were lit in Jewish homes to remember the historic event. Tradition held that Judas Maccabaeus found a cruse of oil, an amount sufficient for a day, but it lasted eight days. The feast was a time of joy and merriment, with no public mourning permitted. Like the Feast of Tabernacles, this celebration was celebrated with palms, branches, and singing of psalms. Psalm 30 was read in the ritual of the day:

**Weeping may last for the night,
But a shout of joy comes in the morning.**

**You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;
You have loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness. (Psa 30:5, 11)**

It was winter, perhaps a metaphor for the frozen spirit of the Jews. The cold drove Jesus to teach in Solomon's porch, the most sheltered open space in Jerusalem. The outer part of the temple had porches on all four sides. Solomon's Porch was on

the east side of the temple, with two rows of pillars on the west and north sides. The south portico was called Solomon's, because it was thought to hold the remains of Solomon's temple. Ironically, Solomon's porch would be the same place where the first believers gathered to proclaim Jesus as the Christ (Acts 3, 5).

This then is the context of another steamy debate between Jesus and the Jews.

The Jews then gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, "How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly." (10:24)

The Jews want Jesus to tell them plainly if he is the Messiah. "How long will you keep us in suspense?" is literally, "Why do you take away our life?" One might well wonder, who is trying to take away whose life? In taking Jesus' life they were taking away their own.

Or the phrase could mean, "How long are you going to annoy us?" Obviously, the Jews are very frustrated. They want the question of Jesus' status cleared up, so they demand that he tell them plainly or boldly. This idea of plain and bold speech occurs three times in 7:4, 13, and 26. Jesus does not explicitly declare, in a public discourse, that he was the Messiah. He made this claim only to the Samaritan woman and to his immediate circle of disciples.

Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these testify of Me. But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one." (10:25-30)

This reference to sheep connects this exchange to the good shepherd discourse in the first half of the chapter. In the works of Jesus, the Jews have all the information they need. More words won't help. They simply do not believe – and they do not believe because they are not his sheep.

Jesus says three things about his sheep.

1. Jesus' sheep hear his voice. He knows them, and they follow him. The Jews to whom he is speaking are not of his sheep, therefore they do not hear his voice. He does not know them, and they do not follow him.

This essential truth means that believing in Jesus, accepting his claims and having a relationship with the Father, can only result from a total conversion which none but God himself can bring about. The sheep hear the voice and they follow. Why does God call some and not others? We don't know. Why does God call you rather than others who are better and more devout? We don't know. We can respond only by falling on our knees, full of amazement and appreciation, realizing that God's salvation is not under human control.

2. To his own sheep Jesus gives eternal life. This refers back to what he said in verse 10 of this chapter in reference to the Good Shepherd: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." The notion of life is found throughout John's story. It is hidden in the metaphors of water, bread, light, and good pasture, and is illustrated in the story of Lazarus in chapter 11.

Jesus calls us in order to give us life: "In Him was life and the life was the light of men." This is incarnation life, transcendent life. It is not heavenly life in the future but life now, in the present. Every day we do things in an attempt to gain life: we get a job, get married, take vacations, play sports, work hard. We want something from something or someone.

One secular author says we live with the illusion that "there is something out there that can fulfill my longing and answer my needs, and this something can last forever."¹ We imagine "bliss to be a commodity that can be gained, lost, found, won, or possessed."² The abundant life, the full life is what we really want. Religion doesn't give it, church doesn't give it, achievements don't give it, marriage doesn't give it, money doesn't give it. Only the Good Shepherd can grant what we desire.

3. Jesus protects us from everything that might destroy us or keep us from life. How secure is this life that Jesus gives to us? "No one can snatch them from my hands," says Jesus. The word means to grab or seize by force, with the purpose of removing and/or controlling. Jesus is not referring to eternal security here, but security from anything that might threaten us or cause us fear. Jesus protects us from the wolf, the thief and the robber. None of these influences has the power to overcome him.

Not only are the sheep secure in Jesus' hands, they are also secure in the Father's hands. Who then can steal from God? Who has the strength to overpower or outwit the sovereign Father? Paul says, "Your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3). There is no greater security.

What threatens our life and why do we fear? We are fearful when we face circumstances or situations we did not design or choose. We fear what will happen if we "let the chips fall where they may." Again, quoting this secular writer, we live with the illusion that "we are in control or need to be in control in order to survive."³ Our natural reaction is to fight, to protect ourselves, to seek control. We fear what will happen if we let go. Jesus tells us that we are safe in the Father and the Son's care.

Then Jesus adds the claim that he and the Father are one. The word "one" is neuter, not masculine. If it were masculine, then the distinction between Jesus and God would be obliterated. Jesus is not referring to the identity of person, but identity of purpose and action. Jesus is doing the works of the Father. The Son's loving care of his flock is, in fact, the Father's love and care. John continually draws attention to the unity of the Father and the Son. But if God is one, as stated in Deuteronomy 6:4, Jesus is making a claim to deity. He isn't stating it explicitly, but he is stating it nonetheless. He is the Messiah, the king of Israel, a king greater than Judas Maccabaeus.

What was the response of the Jews to these words of Jesus?

The Jews picked up stones again to stone Him. (10:31)

The Jews don't respond with words but with actions. They want clarity as to whether or not Jesus is the Messiah. He gives them far more. They want to stone the Good Shepherd, the same response as reported in 5:18 and 8:59. Their desire springs from their perception that Jesus is claiming equality or oneness with God. According to Jewish law, this was never grounds for stoning, but the Mishnah was not compiled until 200 A.D.

Jesus answered them, "I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?" (10:32)

Unlike other times, Jesus does not immediately withdraw but stays long enough to confront his opponents. Again he refers to his works, asking the Jews which of his good works had earned their wrath. "Good" here means noble or beautiful. Jesus' works reflect the character, the glory and beauty of Yahweh.

The Jews answered Him, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God." (10:33)

The Jews contend that Jesus makes himself out to be God. The one who does the works of God is accused of usurping the place of God. This is ironic, because Jesus has not made himself out to be God, or anything else. His works simply testify that he is God.

Jesus answered them, "Has it not been written in your Law, 'I SAID, YOU ARE GODS'? If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? (10:34-36)

Jesus makes an appeal to Jewish law. Scripture cannot be broken, i.e., it cannot be annulled, set aside or proved false. He quotes Psalm 82 as it is rendered in the LXX. There are a couple of possible meanings to this puzzling text. Some think that "sons of God" is a reference to Israel's judges who stand in God's place, or to human kings who consider themselves divine. The argument is that if these judges or kings were called gods, then, because of his works, how much more should Jesus be called the Son of God?

Another possible meaning is that Psalm 82 is a reference to the Word of God coming to Israel at Mt. Sinai. Israel was called God's son in Exodus 4, the son to whom "the word of God came." Jesus is the Word who is doing what Israel should have done as God's son. Either way, Jesus is basically attempting to say that scripture proves the word "god" is legitimately used to refer to human beings who are not divine.

Jesus is not arguing that he is the Son of God; rather, he is indicating that the Jews haven't thought out what they were saying. They are partly right – he does make himself to be equal with God – and terribly mistaken, because they have not grasped the fact that Jesus fulfills their own Scripture, and what he is doing is consistent with the revelation of God, which they had already received. In the first half of the debate the focus is on Jesus as Messiah; in the second, the focus is on Jesus the Son of God.

"If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father." Therefore they were seeking again to seize Him, and He eluded their grasp. (10:37-39)

Once again, Jesus appeals for the Jews to believe in his works, the same appeal he made in verse 25. But again they seek to seize him. When arguments fail, there is always the option of violence.

And He went away again beyond the Jordan to the place where John was first baptizing, and He was staying there. Many came to Him and were saying, "While John performed no sign, yet everything John said about this man was true." Many believed in Him there. (10:40-42)

Jesus escapes from the clutches of the Jews once again because his hour had not yet come. He goes to where John was baptizing, beyond the Jordan. We have seen a reference to this place already, in 1:6-9. John's story has come full circle. The next chapter will begin the journey culminating in Jesus laying down his life. In contrast to what has taken place in Jerusalem, we learn that many believe. John's witness continues to bear fruit.

What a contrast of places and results: Jerusalem and the Jordan, stoning and believing. This contrast highlights the fact that belief doesn't necessarily come about in the center of religious commercialism. Belief happens in obscurity, in the wilderness, where people are open to the truth about Jesus.

We will conclude by making a theological application, followed by a more practical reflection.

1. Theological. The Jews were celebrating the Feast of Dedication, commemorating the reconsecration and sanctification of the temple. The temple points to Jesus. In John 2, Jesus cleansed the temple and declared himself to be the new temple, the place where people could have access to God. God consecrates or sanctifies the one whom he sent. The irony is

that the Jews are seeking to cleanse Jesus from their midst, and in doing so they desecrate the new temple. However, in desecrating the new temple, God's people will be "cleansed." So here we find yet another Jewish symbol fulfilled in Jesus, who is both Messiah and the Son of God.

2. Practical. These debates between Jesus and the Jews are intense and full of small details. But when you take a step back and look at this exchange as a whole, you realize that the Jews wanted to pin Jesus down, to figure him out, to get an explanation. However, they really were not open to what he had to say. They weren't open to listen; they weren't open to truth. They weren't open to submitting their lives fully to a God who wanted to be present with them. They were filled with prejudices, misconceptions and expectations. They wanted to be in control of their Messiah, and they were playing religious games to maintain control.

Even as Christians we fall into the same trap. We want a God we can control rather than a God we can follow. We have prejudices and expectations. We try to get God to explain himself. We demand he tell us plainly what is happening in our life. Jesus doesn't do this. He reminds us that he has already told us through his works, but we missed it. What Jesus does is call us to believe.

Sheep don't try to figure out their shepherd. They don't ask him which shepherd school he graduated from. They don't ask for his credentials or where he is taking them. Sheep aren't particularly bright, but if they know the shepherd's voice, and that might be the key thing, they trust, they submit their lives and follow him.

Believing strikes at our basic fear – the fear of releasing control. We fear not knowing what might happen if we submit our lives fully to Jesus, who is the Messiah and the Son of God. More often than not we do not let go of control on our own. Usually something has to happen that shows us incontrovertibly that we are not in control – things like cancer, a business loss, a death. We are broken, but it is in our brokenness that we can finally let go and believe. We experience a loss that leads to life, much like discarded bags of sand lighten a balloon so that it can ascend higher. God wants us to let go and trust in the security of the Father's hands.

In the book *The Man Who Listens to Horses*, Monty Roberts describes the process he learned in getting wild, unbroken horses to "join up."⁴ He actually learned this process by watching how a dominant mare relates to adolescent horses out on the range. Monty uses silent language, body language. He begins by bringing a young horse or a wild horse into a closed pen, without any halter, rope or restraint. It's just him and the horse. The horse will not take a step towards Monty because the animal is very aware that the man he is facing poses a threat.

Monty describes what he wants to do: "The first thing I'm going to ask him is to go away from me, to flee. I'm only doing this because then I will ask him to come back and join up

with me.” So he moves abruptly toward the horse, squares his shoulders and fixes his eye on the horse’s eyes. Straight away the horse goes into flight, which is its nature, cantering around the perimeter of the ring. Monty is speaking to the horse in the horse’s language: “Go ahead and flee, but I don’t want you to go away a little. I want you to go away a lot. For now, I’ll call the shots, until we can form a partnership.” Monty takes a light sash line and pitches it at the horse, not to hit him, but to encourage him to flee. He does this for several minutes.

Monty waits for the horse’s inside ear to open to him in an attentive manner. He reduces the number of times he casts the line at him. He recoils the line into his hand and slaps his own leg. Next, the horse begins to lick and chew. This is a sign that he wants to renegotiate. He is saying, “I am a herbivore; I am a grazer, and I’m making this eating action with my mouth now because I’m considering whether or not to trust you. Help me out with that decision, can you, please?”

Finally, as the horse continues to trot around the perimeter of the ring he drops his head so his nose travels only an inch or so above ground level. This is the sign that the horse wants to join up. Monty fixes his eyes fifteen to twenty feet in front of him. He moves his shoulders until they are on a forty-five-degree angle to the horse’s body. He avoids eye contact and shows his flank, so to speak.

The horse stops his trot. He comes away from the perimeter of the ring and faces Monty. He takes a step or two toward him. He then walks right up to Monty, not stopping until his nose is inches from his shoulder. The horse begins to trust. Monty is no longer a threat, he is a safety zone. This is the moment of acceptance, the moment of joining up, the moment when Monty and the horse are on the same side. After that the rest is a formality. Monty introduces the horse to a saddle and a bridle and soon he is riding the horse. The whole process might take only forty minutes.

We are wild and unbroken in our sin and distrust of God. We want to figure him out. We want an explanation. We want control. We can’t trust him or anyone else. So God lets us flee. Sometimes he even encourages us to flee, like Jesus does with these religious experts in Jerusalem, so that we might submit willingly, bow our heads to the ground, open our hands, put our face in his lap, and join up. We might confess Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, but are we willing to join up daily with Jesus? I am not talking about a church or a Bible study, but joining up with Jesus, to be like him and to live an incarnational life. This is the life that Jesus wants to give to us as we let go and rest, content in the Son’s and the Father’s care.

As we come to the communion table we are reminded once again of the love of the Father and the sacrifice of the Son. But we are reminded once again, too, that Jesus wants us to join up, not with our heads, but with our hearts. We open our hands and let go. We move towards him. We enter into his presence and into his mystery, not seeking to control but only to follow. We lose our life to gain life. We feed on this flesh, drink his blood, and embrace again the new covenant – everything from him, nothing us from us.

¹ David Richo, *How To Be An Adult* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1991), 4.

² Richo, *How To Be An Adult*, 5

³ Richo, *How To Be An Adult*, 5.

⁴ Monty Roberts, *The Man Who Listens to Horses* (New York: Random House, 1996), 29-34.