April 25th, 2010 – Good Shepherd Sunday | The Rev. Diane E. Rainson
Texts: John 10:22-30, Acts 9:36-43 | First Lutheran Church, Waterbury CT

How Long Are You Going to Keep Us in Suspense?

At that time, the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem.

It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon.

Anybody have a clue what the 'festival of Dedication' is?
It's still celebrated today, but it's got a different name.
What Jewish festival do you know that takes place in winter? In December? *Hanukkah.*

The festival of the Dedication in Hanukkah. Anybody know, what's the reason for Hanukkah? What's being celebrated? A lot of folks think it's the miracle of the menorah lamps burning for eight days without oil. But it's not. That miracle happened at the first Hanukkah, the first Dedication celebration. So, they were already celebrating something else. Anybody know? They were celebrating their liberation from Syrian rule, and their rededication of the Temple to God, the God of Israel.
You see, it had been pretty bad times with the Syrians.
The Jews were oppressed, enslaved, and forced to assimilate into Syrian ways; assimilate or be killed.
The Syrians had Hellenistic, Greek ways. So, let me ask you, how many "gods" did the Greeks have? Yeah, lots. Lots of gods. And who was top of the pantheon? Which Greek god was the boss? *Zeus.*
Well, the ruler of the Syrians was a guy named Antiochus Epiphanes. Great name. But, a bit of a jerk, really. He decided to raise an altar to Zeus. To build it right in the place that would most horrify the Jews. Any guesses where? *The Temple.* Holy cow – in the Temple!
The Syrians made the Jews worship Zeus. Made them violate the first, most vital commandment. And made them do it in God's own holy house! And out of fear for their lives, out desperation and despair, many of them did. And it went on for a long time, until finally a small band of rebels rose up, incited the people, and killed off all the Syrian soldiers. They liberated the Jews, cleansed the Temple, rebuilt it and rededicated it to God—the one true living God.

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That's the setting of the gospel. And when you're reading from St. John's gospel, everything you read matters. And just about everything is symbolic, saying something much bigger than it seems at first. That's why John's gospel makes a lot of people crazy.

But that's the symbolic setting; a time of permeating darkness and despair, broken by a shining saving glimmer of hope. And this setting, it's a parallel. In Jesus' time, about 200 years after the first Hanukkah, the setting was very similar. Israel was occupied by foreign forces—this time Rome.
And the great Temple was under Roman rule. It was the same permeating darkness.
But this time, what's the shining saving glimmer of hope?
Jesus . Jesus the guy walking in the portico of Solomon. The portico of Solomon; that's a covered colonnade on the west side of the temple grounds. Yet another specific detail from John.
Why mention it all? Think there's some symbolism there? Yeah, of course. That portico was the only sheltered area around. The only protection you can find from the cold and the harsh elements, is where Jesus walks.
But, not everybody gets that.

> The Jews gathered around him and said to him, 'How long are you going to keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.'

They're not buying this Savior stuff yet.
How long are you going to keep us in suspense?
That's a lousy translation. Word for word, the Greek there says, *How long will you take away our life?* It's an idiom. It's a catch-phrase of the time; like when we say, 'it's raining cats and dogs.' It's not literal. Jesus isn't actually killing people.
How long will you take away our lives? You know what that meant back then?
How long will you keep ***annoying*** *us.* The Jews are irritated. They're frustrated, and a little freaked out by Jesus. *How long will you keep teasing us with this Messiah stuff?*
They think they're being messed with, toyed with. And they're *not* happy. *Who do you think you are anyway,* ***God****?*

> Jesus answered, 'I have told you, and you do not believe.
> The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe.

Jesus has fed the hungry, given sight to the blind, healed the sick. He's done many works in the Father's name; yet they do not believe. Even in the sight of such good and godly things, they can't see him for who he is. It's just too much to hope for. In the middle of all their daily suffering; in the middle of oppression—the violence and injustice of Roman rule—they can't even imagine it. Besides, it's not smart, not safe, to let yourself dream. You just keep your head down, work hard, and try to get through the day. You do the best you can to get by, and that's all you can do.
Amid all the daily disappointments and worries and fear, who would believe that God cares, that God loves them that much? Enough to send his Son to save them. The Jews are so co-opted into despair,

so assimilated by ungodly culture, that to them, hope is nothing but a bad joke.

They're so caught up in the darkness, they can't see the light right in front of them: *Who do you think you are anyway, God?*

I have a friend who calls Jesus' death and resurrection *plan b*.

He says that God sent Jesus as an up-close, in-person message. To show us first-hand that things could be different. To show us that love is enough to conquer the darkness.

But nobody really listened. Nobody listened. So God said to Jesus, *Uh… sorry Son… But we're gonna have to raise the stakes a bit… So I've got this other idea…*

Now, I don't think really think that's what happened. But there is one hardcore kernel of truth in it. The truth that we are so steeped in darkness and sin and suffering… that we are so deep in it…only something earth-shattering and world-flipping could bring us around to the truth. Only Christ's rising from the grave; only his breaking the bonds of death could shake us from our complacency. It had to be that big. It had to be evidence as astoundingly undeniable as resurrection to prove that Christ is God. That Christ *is* the light of the world and *can* save us from the darkness.

A society too beaten down, too exhausted, too guarded to believe? Folks too hopeless to hope in Christ? People too assimilated into ungodly culture to see the truth? Doesn't sound like a problem of the past does it? It hasn't really gone away at all.

But back then, they didn't know. Hadn't seen the miracle yet. But we do. We know. We have seen. You and I have seen Christ's works and we know the Word. We know all about the undeniable, indisputable miracle of the resurrection… *Alleluia, Christ is risen!* ***Christ is risen indeed, alleluia!***

Christ has freed us. Has given us liberty from all the ungodly culture. From the despair, the darkness, and even from death. And we are free to be God's people.

We are free. Perhaps it's time to rededicate ourselves to God. And to celebrate. Because when we let go and let ourselves believe… when we celebrate God's limitless love for us… when we take in the truth of God's amazing grace… Amazing things can happen. You heard the second lesson.

Peter gave up denying Christ, and started living the gospel, and the power of Christ in him raised Tabitha from the dead! Who knows what power you and I have in Christ's name?

Who knows what we can do? How much we can do to change the world and bring light into dark places? If we trust. If we don't shy away. If we're not afraid.

We don't have to be. We don't have to be afraid to believe. We don't have to be afraid to live our faith. We don't ever, ever have to be afraid to follow Christ, our very good shepherd.

Because Jesus has told us,

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.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.