

REVELATION 7:9-17 (p. 995)

MAY 8, 2022

JOHN 10:22-30 (p. 871)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Your people are here Lord, asking you to guide us as we study together this morning. Quicken our hearts, please, so that we will hunger and thirst after you. Unclog our ears, so that when you speak, we will not only hear you, but also understand. And remove the scales from our eyes, just as you did with Saul, so that we will truly see. We ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

“WHO ARE YOU?”

“Who are you?” Or for that matter, “Who am I?” “Who is God?” “And what would you say the relationship between us is supposed to be like?” These are fundamental questions on basic existence, aren't they, what Philosophers and Theologians call “Existential Questions”! Every religion known to man, every belief system, every philosophy for that matter—including atheism, and agnosticism, and secular humanism—is an attempt to answer those questions! There are books on the subject, mountains of books! There are Movies and Video Clips! Morgan Freeman even has a show on the National Geographic Channel titled “The Story of God”, all attempting to explore these questions!

“Who am I?” I mean, I exist, right! Or at least it seems like it, from where I stand! So, since I exist, how did I get here? Where did I come from? Was it random, or planned? Was it by design? Was there intent, or purpose even? Or at a bare minimum, intentionality? How was I made, and by whom? “Why?” Why am I here? Answer those “little” questions, and you have the Meaning of Life, right?

So, it shouldn't surprise us then, that a crowd has gathered in the Temple Courts to ask Jesus those questions! And truth be told, many in the crowd have been asking these questions since they first heard about this traveling Rabbi! "Who are you, Jesus?" You heal the sick, and teach in the Name of God! You do miracles! You are obviously different! There is something about you, to be sure! So, who are you? "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, just tell us plainly!"

And it's Hanukkah, by-the-way, the Festival of Light, the Feast of Dedication. One hundred and sixty some years earlier, God delivered His people from Syrian oppression, through the Maccabean Revolt. The Faithful rededicated themselves to the Lord, and cleansed, both literally and ritually, the Great Temple in Jerusalem, and then rededicated it! God provided for His people, again, like in the Exodus! A single jar of consecrated lamp oil somehow lasted eight days, until more oil could be made Holy! So, every year, the Faithful recommit their lives to their Lord! A good idea, I'd say! And every year, they rededicate themselves to faithfully Worship Him!

That's the mood in the Temple Courts as Jesus walks along Solomon's Colonnade. Almighty God is front and center in the hearts and minds of the people! The Faithful are currently in the midst of praising the Lord—praising Him for His redemption and providence, celebrating deliverance by His hand, giving thanks for His salvation! And most are wondering if He is about to do it again! Will it be Politically and Nationalistically this time, you know, with the Romans? Or will it take place ultimately, with Eternal Redemption! When, and how, will Messiah step onto the historical stage?

So, they ask! “Are you the One, Jesus?” Have you come to usher-in the Messianic Kingdom, to return the Glory of God to the Temple, and to the land, and to the people, just as the Prophets promised? Are you the One that we’ve been waiting for, the declaration that God will reside with His people forever? How long will you keep us in suspense? Just tell us plainly, please!

We’ve heard you say that, “you are the Vine, and we are the Branches.” You’ve stated that you are “The Bread of Life, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” You have boldly declared that, “no one comes to the Father except through you! And that “those who Believe in you, even though they die, will live!” But in all honesty, we’re still confused! So, can you just make it clear?

You call yourself “the Word,” and “the Bridegroom”. You’ve said that Messiah will be “a Scapegoat,” and come like a “Thief in the Night!” We know you’re a Rabbi and Teacher, a Carpenter and Fisherman, but hear you say that you’re “a Broken Loaf” as well! John writes about the Christ being “seated on a Throne in Heaven”, “Worshipped in Glory and Majesty”, by a “Great Multitude too numerous to count”! He describes the Messiah as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” the “Shepherd who wipes away every tear”! So, is that you Jesus? Tell us! Because we really want to know?

Imagine being in the crowd, being one of the Faithful, a God-fearing Believer! That shouldn’t be difficult to do! Imagine, honestly trying to figure all this out, trying to answer those Existential Questions! Imagine asking Jesus to make it clear!

I mean, He is ambiguous, right? A bit vague? He doesn't really say who He is, does He? We do want to know, don't we? Only, He just isn't clear, is He? If He was, wouldn't we...change? Once we knew for sure, wouldn't we respond accordingly?

To which Jesus, a bit exasperated I think, answers, "I did tell you! I have made it clear! But for some reason you still refuse to believe! I have said it plainly, repeatedly, in fact! "I am THE way, THE truth, and THE life!" Not "a way"! Not "one of many ways"! "No one comes to the Father except through me!" "I and the Father, are one!" "Look! God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but instead, have eternal life!" So, is that plain enough for you?

I think He could have gone further. I think Jesus could have reminding the sceptics how, on several occasions in the Gospel of John, He declared, "I AM!"

"I AM, the Bread of Life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger" (John 6:35). "I AM, the light of the World" (8:12). "I AM, the door" (10:9) "I AM, the true vine" (15:1). "I AM, the good shepherd. The Good Shepherd give His life for the sheep (10:11). "I AM, the resurrection and the life" (11:25). "I AM, the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6). "I AM, all those things! I have told you several times! I AM"!

Remember back in Exodus 3:13-14 when Almighty God calls Himself “I AM”? Moses had said, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is His Name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” God answered Moses by saying, “I AM WHO I AM”! “This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you’”! Jesus has told them, repeatedly! Numerous times! He said, “I AM”!

Just as an aside, did you know that the word, “Believe”, like in the famous John 3:16-17 passage, doesn’t mean to simply acknowledge, or give intellectual assent to Jesus’ existence? Even Satan does that! No, the Greek word there, and the Hebrew equivalent, both mean “to have confidence in, place your faith in, to remain faithful to, to rely on, trust in, or be established with”! “Whoever believes in me, shall have eternal life,” says Jesus! Is that plain enough for you?

“I have told you”, says the Lord! “And I have shown you as well, in some truly amazing ways! But just to be clear, let me tell you again, right now! So, listen up! Verse thirty! Are you ready? ‘The Father and I are one!’ Got it? No more excuses, people! Like I told Thomas, “Stop doubting and believe”! And that, I’m afraid, brings them, and all of us of course, to the crux of the matter!

“You have heard what I said,” declares the Lord! “You have seen what I have done! You now know the answer to the Great Existential Questions of life! So now that you know, now that you are sure, what are you going to do about it?

Will you accept the truth and follow me, or pick up a rock and stone me? Will you, to paraphrase the words of Shakespeare, ‘Believe, or not believe!’ Because ‘that’s really the question!’”

A couple of weeks ago, I quoted C.S. Lewis telling us that we need to make a choice? Either Jesus is who He says He is, or else He is a lunatic, or a liar! He is either the Son of God, the Messiah, One with the Father, the Only Path to Salvation! Or, He is someone you want no part of! The folks in the crowd that day, like the folks in the crowd here today—in fact, like folks in every crowd, everywhere, in every time and place, need to make a choice! Either take Jesus at His word, and do what He says, or run away just as fast as you possibly can! Believe, or not believe! That’s really the only question!

It’s heavy, I know! Deep, and serious! In fact, there is nothing more serious! This has Eternal Ramifications. And it’s not real popular! In fact, it’s getting less popular every day! The folks that day, wanted to stone Jesus! Oh, I’m sure there were some in the crowd, as in any crowd, who were sincerely seeking the Truth. But there were also some in that crowd, as in any crowd, who just wanted to trip Jesus up. “If I can just discredit Him somehow, or make Him out to be crazy, then I can ignore everything He has to say and continue on my merry way! If I can do that, I won’t have to take Him seriously! I won’t have to obey what He says! I can overlook His teachings, and ignore all of His miracles! I can completely disregard His Word! I can set aside all this talk about accountability and Judgment, and feel absolutely no remorse at all!”

I am also sure that there were those in the crowd, as in any crowd, that didn't want Jesus' answers to be that clear, or wanted to pretend that they weren't that clear! Because if that's the case, then they'd have a built-in excuse to pick and choose what they want to believe, right? "Oh, I wish I had known, Jesus! If I had only known, I would have...changed! Crowds can be pretty fickle, can't they?"

So where are you in the crowd? From where you stand, "Who are you?" And who is Jesus? What is the relationship between you supposed to be like? Are you shuffling about, with a stone in your hand? Or kneeling, with your hands clasped in prayer? What's your Theology? What is your Worldview? What do you believe? We know who Jesus says He is! That question has been asked and answered! But what did you hear?

Is this Rabbi just another pretty face? A powerful teacher maybe? Or a great humanitarian? Is He the ultimate role model for some kind of Works Righteousness? Is He a "nutcase", like so many other religious nutcases down through the centuries? Does He point you towards God, or away? Is He "god", but with a little "g", a "god" you have created in your own image? Or is He the Messiah, the Promised One of Israel—exactly who He says He is—the Lord and Savior of the world? Because if He is, what does that mean? What does it mean for you? Is it plain, or are you still confused?

I wonder if Jesus' patience is "wearing thin"? It almost sounds that way, doesn't it? He says, "I did tell you, but you refuse to believe!" The miracles I do in my Father's Name should speak for themselves, but you refuse to believe them either! You're not listening!

Maybe it's because you are not my sheep? Or maybe it's because you refuse to be my sheep! My sheep hear my voice, you know, and follow me! My sheep listen to what I say and come when I call. My sheep know me! And I know them! And I give to them Eternal Life! I lead my sheep beside Still Waters! I allow them to lay down in Green Pastures! I restore their soul! So, do you want to be part of the flock, or not? Because that's really the question!

The phrase, "Hardening of the Heart" comes to mind! The Greek translation for that phrase means, "Refusing to know what you know". That seems rather appropriate here, doesn't it! "To believe, or not to believe, that is still the question!" Or as Jesus puts it; "My sheep, hear my voice, and follow me." Can you hear His voice?

Do you know how many times sheep are mentioned in Scripture? Over four hundred times! And in the vast majority of cases, they are an illustration for us! Now most of us don't have any problem with Jesus as the Good Shepherd, do we? I mean, He leads us, and tends to us, and provides for our every need! Jesus takes care of us, and keeps us out of harm's way! We're okay with Him as the leader of the flock! It's kind of comforting actually, and somewhat easy to visualize! He is dressed in white, right, carrying one of those shepherd's crooks, with His long wavy light-brown hair gently cascading down his shoulders, just like in the photographs!

It's all very peaceful and tranquil. It's all very clean and neat. It's great, right! We are good with it! Right up to the point where we become sheep! We fight that part, don't we?

Sheep get sheared, don't they, butchered and eaten! Sheep stink, right? Sheep are lazy, and kind of dumb! Sheep don't really have a clue! You can't herd sheep? It's like herding cats! Any loud noise or quick movement will send the whole flock scattering! Sheep won't even head to the barn on their own at feeding time! How dumb is that? And sheep won't stay put either, or come in out of the cold, or the rain! It's actually kind of sad!

No, sheep need a shepherd—someone to guide them, someone to feed them and protect them. They need someone to 'make' them lay down in green pastures, and to "lead" them beside the quiet waters. Sheep just aren't worth a lick on their own!

They are, however, hard-wired to follow. And they do become quite fond of one another over time. Oh, they butt heads every now and then, or get into the occasional turf war over some particular piece of grass that they feel is their own. But all-in-all sheep really do enjoy being members of the flock! And they usually become quite attached to their Shepherd too!

Did you know that a Shepherd can walk right through the middle of His sleeping flock, without disturbing a single one of them? A stranger could never do that! Just stepping near them would create pandemonium! Shepherds and sheep develop a language of their own as well, one that outsiders are simply not privy to! A Good Shepherd can distinguish a bleat of pain, from one of fear, immediately! And sheep, over time, come to recognize that a certain gesture means food, and that a special whistle means it's time to go home. "My sheep know my voice," says Jesus, "and follow me". Can you feel the image?

The Scribes and the Pharisees are demanding some kind of proof, something that they can take to the bank! They want to be convinced! “Who are you?” they ask. But Jesus responds, “I’ve already told you! But you refused to listen!” I’ve invited you to follow me, numerous times, to safety in the Promised Land. But you, instead, have chosen to stay in the muck and the mire of the Chaos Sea! I have given you every opportunity to hear my voice. Including, again, right here and now! But you, for some reason, still choose to listen to all of the other competing voices!

Several years ago, at a Spiritual Retreat, Lynette Williams shared story of a frog that climbed a tree. All of his friends said, “you can’t climb a tree, you’re a frog”! “You are not capable! That’s not who you are! You can’t do it!” But he did! Do you know how he accomplished it? He was deaf. He couldn’t hear all the nay-sayers, all the people saying he couldn’t do it. None of the distractions could turn his heart from the task at hand!

So, stop and ask yourself, if you will. Am I listening to the distractions, rather than concentrating on the Lord? Can I hear that single voice, that Still, Small Voice, the Voice of the Shepherd, telling me “Who I am”, and “Who He is”? Can I hear it now? Am I quiet enough, and listening intently? Am I familiar enough with His Voice, so that I recognize it when He speaks? Do I have that personal relationship? That’s the “Why”, you know! The relationship! Can I distinguish His Voice from all the rest? Will I follow the Shepherd to safety, and be fed? Or am I willfully choosing not to, ignoring the Truth that is right in front of me? Because that’s really the only question that matters! And all of God’s flock said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

We have heard your voice Lord, and have come in response as members of your flock. We are here this morning to study your Word Lord, and to sing your praises, and to pray as your people. And we do this, not because of “who we are”, but rather, because of “who you are”. We have heard your Voice, Lord. We recognize you. And so, we realize the claim that you have upon our lives!

Draw us close Father, even now, and hold us there. Continue to reach out to us, even when we find it difficult to reach out to you. Continue to love us, Lord, even when we do not love you back—even when we are being quite unlovable—even when we are being stubborn old goats—or simply not even loving ourselves! Keep lifting us up Father, please, and keep forgiving us when we stumble and fall. For our legs are weak, and our eyes are dark, and we often stray into places where we do not belong.

Lord, you have heard our silent prayers. You know of our darkness, and our pain. You see the needs that are troubling our hearts, and know of the great joys that are buoying us up right now. So, each of these, Father, we place before you, thanking you for our blessings, and releasing the cares and concerns. We need your help, Lord. And we need your guidance. And so, we come before your Altar of Grace.

Father, we ask you to be with those on our prayer list, and with each person here, as well as with each member and friend of this congregation. Please be with those who are silently on our hearts right now, and especially with..... Move in each of our lives, Lord, in ways that will make us move into yours. And hear us now, as we pray together in the way that Jesus has taught us saying, Our Father...