

Women's Bible Study Spring
So That You May Believe: The Gospel of John
March 14, 2018
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Lois' Lenten recital. Next Wednesday 12:15-12:45 at 1st Presbyterian Church downtown.

In 1981 John and I traveled to Israel to stay with his parents, as his father was then chaplain of the Garden Tomb. One of our best adventures in Jerusalem was hiking through Hezekiah's tunnel. This is a one-third mile waterway carved out of solid rock in the 8th century BC, which carried water into the city for survival during a siege. It's a clever piece of engineering which is still standing today, although by now it's probably got lights and handrails. But back in the day when I saw it, it was merely an opening in the ground that few people knew about.

As we were sloshing along in the darkest part a sudden draft blew out all our candles. The guide was well ahead of us and spoke no English. But at least he had matches! Otherwise I'd still be standing there petrified in icy water up to my calves. The reward for this cold, clammy journey was to emerge at the Pool of Siloam – the very place where today's story happened in John 9.

Chapter 9 begins with three verses which we referred to in John 5. Why, asked the disciples, was a man born blind. Did he sin? Did his parents sin? Jesus responds that his blindness is so the works of God might be displayed. They asked this because the Jews believed that physical affliction was a result of sin. Jesus then used this situation to display the work of God by healing the man they'd been discussing.

So please turn to John chapter 9, beginning with verse 4, as we see

I. Jesus Heals the Man Born Blind

Jesus said to the disciples:

⁴As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” (John 9:4-5)

In chapter 5, Jesus said that he had been sent to do the work of the Father. Now he expands this calling to us: “**we** must do the works of him who sent me.” There will come a point when we are out of time to do the works of God. During our lives we make constant choices concerning our time and money. Do we choose to do the works of the Father? Or do we work to please ourselves or to get ahead?

Jesus reiterates that he is the light of the world, and in verse 6 he lights the world for one blind individual:

⁶After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. ⁷“Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. (John 9:6-7)

We think of saliva as something we should definitely keep to ourselves – germ laden, disgusting – but spit had a long, honorable career as a medical treatment for centuries.

When we go to a doctor, we expect them to take our blood pressure, and listen to our chest. Jesus was doing what a physician in his day would have done, using saliva to cure.

But this healing is taking place on a Sabbath, a day when no one was to work. Making mud with saliva was considered working. But Jesus knew that. He wanted to show that the greater good of healing was more important than manmade Sabbath rules.

After the man washed off the mud in the Pool of Siloam he could see!

So next we read

- **The man's reaction**

Take a look at **John 9:8-12**.

Now everyone knew this guy. He was an adult and he made his living by begging, because he could do nothing else. But the formerly blind man looked much different with his eyes opened. And when they asked him he couldn't identify Jesus because, after all, his eyes weren't opened until he went to Siloam to wash, and by that time Jesus was gone.

This was big news in the neighborhood, and it was immediately told to the Pharisees, so next we see:

- **The Pharisees' reaction (9:13-17)**

It was their right to get to the bottom of any infringement of Sabbath law. So the man explained in simple terms that he'd been healed. But this touched off a new disagreement - some said Jesus couldn't be from God, because he broke the Sabbath law, and others asked, "Yet how could a sinner perform these signs?"

But then somebody wisely asked the man himself.

17 Then they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man replied, "He is a prophet." (John 9:17)

We see a progression of belief with the blind man. First he called Jesus "a man". Now, having thought about it, he calls Jesus "a prophet". And eventually he will call Jesus Lord. But the Pharisees are still fuming.

So they call in the man's parents and ask them what was going on, and we see next

- **The parents' reaction (9:18-23)**

I'm sure some of the Pharisees hoped that this was all a big mistake - a case of mistaken identity, or a fraud. The parents had to admit that this was their child, and he'd been blind from birth, but they were terrified of saying more to the Pharisees.

The consequence for heresy would be excommunication from the synagogue, which was the center of community as well as worship. So this was a powerful threat. Instead the parents replied: "**But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself.**" (John 9:21) Doesn't this sound like they're throwing him under the bus? You don't get any sense they were glad about this extraordinary miracle. Perhaps they were worried now that the blind man could no longer beg.

Just a word here about this miracle. Remember that miracles are complete, instantaneous, and permanent. Yet today when people who have been blind from birth have their sight restored by an operation, they are initially almost unable to distinguish objects. It is a mass of light and movement, because sight involves the brain as much as the eye. The brain must learn to perceive the world correctly. But when Jesus healed this man he was instantly able to see like a person who had been sighted all his life.

So the Pharisees are getting nowhere. They cannot punish the parents, so they call in the man a second time. Look at verse 24:

24 A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God by telling the truth," they said. "We know this man is a sinner."²⁵ He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

26 Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"²⁷ He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?"

28 Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses!²⁹ We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."³⁰ The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes.³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will.

32 Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind.³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."³⁴ To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out. (John 9:24-34)

I love this guy. This man clings to the facts: he was blind, and now he sees. A miracle of that proportion could only come from God. He will not be shaken by the Pharisees. And this is a wonderful example for us. Sometimes we think we cannot stand up for Christ to someone we think is more educated or smarter than ourselves. Yet like this blind man all we need to do is to speak the truth about what Christ has done for us. Like the Pharisees, some who hear us will be scornful, but others will hear and believe.

They end with the taunt, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!". But truth prevails. And all their threats cannot change the fact that Jesus has performed a miracle. Miracles come from God. The Pharisees cannot explain it away.

The chapter ends with a lovely interlude between Jesus and the formerly blind man, as we see

▪ **Jesus' Response (9:35-41)**

Jesus knew what had happened, so he searched out the man and introduced himself as Jesus, the Son of Man, the One who had healed him. Now we see again the progression of the man's faith. First Jesus was "the man who healed me", then he was "a prophet", and now he says, "Lord, I believe".

Scripture gives us the example of Jesus giving sight to a blind man to show that he is the Light of the World. And scripture shows us this man's transition to faith as an example for us as well. Maybe we think Jesus is just a man. Or maybe we concede that he's a prophet – a man sent by God. But when we recognize Christ as the Son of God, then we must call him Lord and worship him.

So Jesus ends his conversation with this man by explaining:

39 “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.”⁴⁰ Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?”⁴¹ Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains. (John 9:39-40)

The blind aren't those who can't see. They are those who are willfully and spiritually blind. And because the Pharisees had the testimony right in front of them and yet refused to accept truth, they will be judged as guilty. This means us, too. We have sat in worship and we have read scripture. We see the truth of Jesus' words in changed lives and answered prayer. So if we continue to reject the truth that Jesus is Lord, we're blind too. In that case our sin guilt remains and Jesus is unable to take it away. So we need to be concerned if we have hardened our hearts against him.

But we are looking at both chapters 9 and 10 today. And while chapter 9 illustrates who Jesus is by what he does, we see in chapter 10 how

II. Jesus Describes Himself

In chapter 10 we see who Jesus is by what he says.

Some of us are visual learners. Some are auditory. And some of us have to see things for ourselves in order to understand them. Jesus in these two chapters has something for all of us – first by doing, then by describing himself in four different ways.

But to really make this live we need to understand a bit about sheep and shepherds in the ancient middle East.

Most of my experience of sheep comes from walking through rural England and Scotland. Sheep are everywhere, and many times we have to wait patiently on a road while a flock of sheep crosses. This picture shows a modern Scottish shepherd driving his sheep before him. He's using an ATV, which makes sense on rough ground. Often his collie is with him. Between the dog and the shepherd, the sheep are driven in the desired direction. Although they shear the sheep, in the UK, sheep are primarily raised for meat, and are sent to slaughter while they are quite young.

It's different in the middle east. The shepherds lead the flock, rather than drive it from behind. For centuries being a shepherd meant that you grew up in a family whose occupation was shepherding. So from a small child you would be around sheep. They were kept primarily for their wool and milk, not for their meat, so sheep became part of the family. They were individuals to the shepherd, who named them and knew them. And because each shepherd kept his own flock, the sheep knew his voice and followed him.

The shepherd was also the protector of the flock. He kept them from wild animals, as David did when he looked after his father's sheep. He usually slept with the flock to protect them at night, which was why the shepherds were in the fields the night of Jesus' birth.

So when Jesus says,

- **I am the Gate (10:1-10)**

He means that he is like the shepherd who sleeps across the opening to the sheep's enclosure at night. By sleeping there, nothing can get by without going through him – literally. Here is a picture of a sheepfold. The sheep don't wander off, because the shepherd's body forms a physical barrier. Thieves and robbers cannot enter. By the physical gate of the shepherd's body, the sheep are protected from wandering and from marauders.

²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.” (John 10:2-5)

In some villages there was a communal sheepfold, a walled enclosure with a locked door where all the sheep were kept at night and were guarded by a gatekeeper. In the morning their own shepherds came for them and they were separated by following the familiar voice of their shepherd. Jesus is probably referring to this practice in verses 2-4.

Now for any animal to recognize its owner's voice, they must have spent lots of time together. When I return from being away, my cat Boots always appears as soon as I walk into the house, because we've been together for 11 years. Usually he will not let us out of his sight for the first 24 hours. Cats have excellent long term memory for their caregivers. Interestingly, sheep are now the subject of memory research as recent reports confirm that sheep can be trained to recognize the faces of up to 50 individual sheep and retain that memory for a couple of years. So it makes sense they would recognize the shepherd, whom they saw and heard every day.

Look at verse 7:

⁷ “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. ¹⁰They will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:7-10)

What a lovely thought, that we might go in and out and find pasture. We can lay down and sleep in peace, because Jesus is the gate that guards access to our bodies, souls and minds. We cannot wander out of his presence; he will not let marauders near us.

So Jesus is the Gate. But next he says:

- **I am the Good Shepherd (10:11-18)**

Look at chapter 10 verse 11, where Jesus says:

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. (John 10:11-13)

You see, there's a difference between the hired employee and the owner. The owner has a great stake in the survival of the flock. But his motive isn't just economic – they are his

family. He knows them by name. He has suffered to keep them safe and well fed. He has laid down his life to protect them. The hireling doesn't have that same motivation, so he disappears when things get tough. It's the difference between the way a parent would give their life for their own child, in a way that a stranger or employee might not.

Jesus goes on in verse 14:

14 "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. (John 10:14-16)

Jesus is not just speaking metaphorically. He will lay down his life, quite literally, for his sheep. And it's not just to save the Jewish hearers in John 10. There are other sheep from other flocks who belong to him – the Gentiles, and those who come later, like you and me. He will bring them to himself and make all of us one flock. The believers during Jesus' ministry were mostly Jews. When Gentiles began to hear and believe, the early church understood that Jesus didn't just come to be the Light of the Jews, but the Light of the World.

By calling himself the Good Shepherd, Jesus is drawing in Old Testament imagery. Several passages of scripture stated that Jewish leaders and kings were to be shepherds of the people. They were to have integrity. They were to lead in worship and govern in a God-honoring way. But sadly, though the standard was clear, the reality was often different. So the prophet Ezekiel spoke harshly to Israel's leaders, saying

"Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? 3 You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. 4 You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally." (Ezekiel 34:2-4)

The concept of shepherding carried over to the New Testament church, where pastors are described as "undershepherds". So Paul says to the Ephesian elders:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. (Acts 20:28)

And Peter says to all pastors and elders:

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve... (1 Peter 5:2)

The English word "pastor" is from the Latin noun "pastor" which derives from "pascere" – "to lead to pasture, set to grazing, cause to eat." That is why Jesus said to Peter at the end of John's gospel "Feed my sheep." The pastor is to be a shepherd, and the shepherd is one who truly cares for the sheep and does not exploit them. So we must look for those qualities in pastors – they should be one who obeys God, one who lays down his life for the flock, one who is not in it for dishonest gain or greed, one who does mislead others but who feeds them with the Word of God.

In verse 17 Jesus goes on to explain how he will protect us – by laying down his life:

17 The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.” (John 10:17-18)

I am currently enjoying rereading books I read long ago. In many cases I've forgotten enough to make it be surprising again, but in most cases I remember, "Oh yes, so and so was actually the murderer!". I can see the clues so obviously leading up to it, because I know the end of the story. In effect, we have that hindsight with scripture. Jesus gave clear warning of what was to happen in passages like this one. He intended to lay down his own life; no one would take it from him nor force him to give it up. And if the disciples had been paying attention they might not have been so despondent at the crucifixion. It was a voluntary act of atonement. Don't ever make the mistake of thinking that Pilate killed Jesus, or the Romans, or the Jews. We should not be surprised by his death. Jesus warned repeatedly that he would voluntarily give up his life as part of his and God's plan.

Then Jesus goes on to describe himself in an even more extraordinary way. Look at verse 25, where Jesus explains that

- **I and the Father are One (10:19-30)**

The Jews continued to be divided by Jesus' words and actions. We are told in verse 22 that it was winter, and that it was the time of the Festival of Dedication – Hanukkah. At Hanukkah the Jews traditionally studied the passage from Ezekiel that we have just read, so Jesus' claim to be the Good Shepherd would have been very timely. Some thought he was mad. Others suggested that his miracles made his words believable. But they all wondered if he was Messiah, and some asked outright. Look at verse 25:

25 Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, 26 but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. 27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all^[b]; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one." (John 10:25-30)

If we are his sheep, we will hear his voice and respond. And here is an extraordinary promise. No one, no power in earth, heaven, or hell, can remove us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, once we belong to him. We will never perish. No person and no power has the ability to snatch us out of Jesus' hand, because with Jesus stands our Heavenly Father, and Jesus and the Father are one Person. What an amazing promise, and what an amazing fact. For those who were truly listening, this answered the question, Are you the Messiah?

People today are still hearing Jesus' voice, because he is still calling his sheep out of every generation. All around us people need to hear it, and like the blind man, all we have to do is simply state the truth regardless of the opposition. Once I was blind, but now I see.

However, the Jews considered it blasphemy to say "I and the Father are one." Disregarding their reaction, Jesus goes on to put this same truth another way. He says,

- **I am God's Son (10:31-39)**

As you can imagine, this enraged them even more, and his audience picked up stones to administer the Old Testament penalty for blasphemy – death by stoning. When Jesus asked for which of his good works they were stoning him, they responded that it was his blasphemy they wanted to punish.

In verses 34-36 Jesus trounces them with a theological argument that was very relevant to the Jews, but perhaps not so much to us. Their issue was with Jesus saying he was one with God. So Jesus pointed out that Psalm 82:6 referred to their judges and leaders as “gods” – lower case – because those leaders were responsible for conveying God’s will to the people. Jewish scholars loved scripture and would have recognized the quotation. Typically Jesus not only quoted scripture but interpreted it. He said, If scripture calls gods those who stand in the stead of God the Father, then how much more can the one whom God the Father set apart as his very own can be called God? But while they were still chewing over that remark, Jesus finishes with a plea to based their views on the evident works of God he had done:

“Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’? ³⁷ Do not believe me unless I do the works of my Father. ³⁸ But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.” (John 10:36-38)

So through this chapter Jesus makes more and more clear who he is and what his purpose is on earth. He is the Gate of the sheepfold, who protects the sheep with his body. He is the Good Shepherd, whose sheep know his voice and follow him. He is One with the Father, obedient to the work that God has set for him to do here. And he is the Son of God – not just Jesus from Nazareth, but God veiled in human flesh. But most of these sheep were not part of Jesus’ flock. They did not recognize his voice, but hardened their hearts and turned away. So John 10 ends with a bittersweet

III. Postscript

In these last two verses, we see that

- **Jesus returns to the place of his baptism**

⁴⁰ Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days. There he stayed, ⁴¹ and many people came to him. They said, “Though John never performed a sign, all that John said about this man was true.” ⁴² And in that place many believed in Jesus. (John 10:40-42)

You would think that the people who knew Jesus would be the most likely to believe him. Yet, as we saw at the beginning of chapter 7, even Jesus’ brothers did not believe in him. They wanted him to leave Judea for his own safety. Eventually one of those brothers, James, not only believed but became one of the great figures of the early church. He wrote the book of James. So eventually at least one sibling believed.

At this time Jesus returned to the place of his own baptism, the Jordan River. This was where God had spoken from heaven and the dove of the Holy Spirit had appeared over him. And in this place where few knew him, many people believed.

So here’s a message for us. First, we should not be discouraged if our faith is mocked or belittled by our family, friends or colleagues. Jesus knows all about this. He had to leave his home town and neighborhood to reach those whose hearts were not hardened. Because it is very difficult to witness to unbelieving family members day after day. They are

in such a great position to see if our lives measure up to our words. But it isn't impossible, and James' conversion shows that.

Second, sometimes we need to return to the place where our Christian life began, to revisit the events and feelings that led us to accept Jesus as our Lord. Do we love Jesus as much now as then? Just as Jesus longed to return to the Jordan, which was a place of peace for him, so we need to find a place of peace to reflect on our commitment. Don't let the daily crush of activity crowd out the truly important in our lives. Don't forget where we came from. Perhaps it is time to go back to that first love we had for the Lord.

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