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### **Gospel of John 10:22–30, ESV**

*<sup>22</sup> At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, <sup>23</sup> and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. <sup>24</sup> So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” <sup>25</sup> Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, <sup>26</sup> but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. <sup>27</sup> My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup> I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> I and the Father are one.”*

### **Shepherds.**

In the decade of the 160’s B.C. Israel was in ongoing conflict with a remnant of Alexander the Great’s empire. These people were called the Seleucids. In 167 B.C. the Seleucids attacked Jerusalem and desecrated the Israelite Temple. The Jews countered, and led by one of the Maccabees (a famous Biblical family), they were able to beat the Seleucids back. The Temple was then purified. This eight-day ceremony became established as a Jewish holiday called Hanukkah. The word Hanukkah derives from the Hebrew word “to dedicate”, which makes sense, because Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the cleansed temple. During this celebration, Jews focus on God as the shepherd of the Jewish people. In the

Gospel of John, it is during this Feast of the Dedication when Jesus is in Jerusalem, and this is where he delivers his own version of the God-is-our-shepherd metaphor. Jesus tells a crowd gathered at the Temple that he is the way to God the Father, that God loves the son, and the son loves the sheep. But there are Jews in the audience who are not so sure they believe or understand Jesus. They want to know if he is saying that he is the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus tells them that if they do not understand or believe, then they are not his sheep. He declares: *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup> I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> I and the Father are one.*" The point is this: the Jewish people already had an established tradition that God is their shepherd, and during a holiday when Jews focus on this principle, Jesus comes along and says that he, too, is the shepherd.

The interesting thing is that Jesus says that the sheep, that is, God's people – and this will ultimately include gentile Christians – know the voice of Jesus and will always follow him. He is drawing an analogy that perhaps many of you are familiar with, and I have heard many times - and I believe I have even witnessed. I was in Israel some years ago. I did indeed witness a shepherd whose sheep had

become mixed in with sheep belonging to someone else. The shepherd called out in Hebrew, and sure enough, the sheep that belonged to him extricated themselves from the larger group and followed him as he led them across a field. I of course cannot be sure it was just his voice that they recognized. Perhaps they recognized him visually. Maybe they could smell him. But either way, we see another one of those metaphors in the Bible that probably meant a lot more to the people of Jesus' day than it means to us today. Jesus' contemporaries fully understood what it meant when Jesus said that the people of God know their shepherd's voice – and that the shepherd's voice was his. They should follow Jesus when they hear that voice, and they can intuitively feel that voice calling.

Here's a big thing about being a Christian: we inherit that voice. We are the voice of God here on Earth. We believe that all people can do this if they choose to: Jesus commissioned the Apostles and all of us to spread the faith, to speak the truth, to tell the inhabitants of this world the way to live in peace. We mimic Jesus, who treated all people with dignity, no matter how poor or sick they were, or how much they were marginalized by their society. Jesus treated every person he encountered as having been made in the image of God. Jesus couldn't personally teach all of us how to live. Our job is to pass on his teachings. Someone passed them on to us. Each of us is the voice of Jesus, the voice that

the people of God all recognize. This is a big deal, a great gift. We are all, in a sense, shepherds of God's sheep. Yes, the sheep can all be shepherds.

A couple of weeks ago, Wendy and I slipped away for just one night. We went up to the YMCA of the Rockies. To be honest, it has lost a lot of its Christian feel. I guess they're trying to be attractive to a broad audience, one that includes non-believers. They call themselves the "Y" now, not the YMCA; they've gotten rid of that C, which stands for "Christian". The place is also very expensive now, and so it's not easy for middle class families to stay there. But we were there after the tourist season, when prices are lower, and Wendy got us a half price room because she was able to sell me as a "medical worker". There is one thing, though, about the Y that is still very Christian, where you can see that C shining brightly. When people are forced to evacuate their homes because of a forest fire or a flood or some other disaster, the Y gives people free room and board. Again, we were only there one night, but on the next morning, when we went to breakfast in the dining hall, we met someone. I don't remember her name.

Here's the story. The day before we drove there, the highway up the canyon to Estes Park had been closed because of a fire. Apparently, the fact that the season was over, combined with the closure of the road, as well as perhaps fear of smoke from the fire, led to there being almost no one up there. Wendy

and I, along with one other party, were the only ones staying in our building – which contained at least a couple hundred rooms. When we woke up in the morning, ours was the only car in the entire parking lot. But there are other buildings there – and there were a couple other parties at the Y. We met one of them. That morning, at breakfast, in the large dining hall, we saw exactly two other parties. The first one was a family. Sitting with them was someone whom we had thought was part of their party. She was an older woman, and she was sitting with this family. I guessed wrongly that she was the grandmother. We noticed that she was doing much of the talking. Then this family finished their breakfast and stood up. They said goodbye to this woman and then left. Clearly, she was not a member of their family and had simply been sitting at their table. This older woman then picked up her tray and walked over to our table – and sat down. She immediately began talking to us. She said that she had been evacuated from her home in a remote part of the forest because of the fire. She was 89 years-old, she said, and because she lived alone, and none of her adult children lived in the area, she had had nowhere else to go. She found free food and lodging at the Y. One of the first things I noticed about her was that she hadn't seemed to touch the food on her tray. It was full, with eggs, fruit, and toast. She proceeded to tell us her life story; it took perhaps fifteen minutes. She

had raised four kids in a small town in Texas. They lived up on a hill, and her husband had had to build the road up the hill to their house. She had loved living away from other people. Then, her grown kids all moved away from Texas, and one of them talked her into moving to Colorado, which this woman hadn't really wanted to do. Then, after she moved to be near her daughter north of Denver, that daughter promptly moved away - to south Denver. This woman then decided that since she was going to be living alone anyway, and she had enjoyed living in an isolated place in Texas, she bought a small house in a very tiny town in the forest. She told us that she had a bird named Sunshine and the bird was with her at the Y. While Wendy and I ate, we listened to her. That's almost all we did. We listened. She was clearly nervous about her house. We offered some verbal support, saying that we heard they were successfully fighting the fire and her house should be okay. We told her that her life was clearly very fruitful and that she was far more independent and adventurous than most 89-year-olds. But mostly, we just listened. She said that while staying at the Y she missed her neighborhood, which was apparently very tightknit. She was lonely. She talked and talked and talked. We barely had the opportunity to mention that we live in Boulder, and that I'm a pastor of two churches. Then, Wendy and I were done with our food, and we had to leave so that we could take a hike before going back

to Boulder. We told her that we hoped that she would be able to return safely to her home soon. We left. She had not yet eaten any of her food. We felt sad that there wasn't any other table of people for her to go sit with.

Here is an abbreviated version of what happens right after Jesus tells the people gathered at the Temple that he and the Father are one, that he, Jesus is the shepherd:

*<sup>31</sup> The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. <sup>32</sup> Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?" <sup>33</sup> The Jews answered him, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God." <sup>34</sup> Jesus answered them, "<sup>37</sup> If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; <sup>38</sup> 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 am in the Father." <sup>39</sup> Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands.*

*<sup>40</sup> He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing at first, and there he remained. <sup>41</sup> And many came to him. And they said, "John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true." <sup>42</sup> And many believed in him there.*

We see that they didn't believe Jesus. They were not impressed with him saying that he is the shepherd, and the sheep follow him. They accuse him of blasphemy for claiming to be God. He repeats that he is one with the Father, with God. They try to arrest him, but he gets away. Then, poetically, he retreats to the area along the Jordan River where John the Baptist had baptized him at the very beginning of his ministry. Jesus doesn't change the minds of the people who

attack him. But he makes his point. He puts into Scripture an important message for us to read two thousand years later. It has to do with a fundamental principle of Christianity – that he is the shepherd. That is who we emulate. The shepherd.

In the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> chapters of the Gospel of Matthew, near the end of his ministry, Jesus delivers a very unusual speech, compared to what he has said up to this point. It's called "apocalyptic". Jesus is predicting the End Times – and he is telling us what we must do after he leaves this Earth. We have a job that will last until the end of all human life. Here is what he says. I have compressed this:

*"See that no one leads you astray. <sup>5</sup> For many will lead many astray. <sup>6</sup> And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. <sup>7</sup> Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. <sup>8</sup> All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.*

*<sup>9</sup> "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. <sup>10</sup> And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. <sup>11</sup> And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. <sup>12</sup> And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. <sup>13</sup> But the one who endures to the end will be saved. <sup>14</sup> And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.*

The last part of this is very important: *this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations.* We are the ones who must pick up where Jesus left off. We must be the voice of God on this planet. We must be the shepherd. All of us. This is the ultimate final job of the faithful, something that we pursue until the end of time. But you don't always do



it by preaching. You don't always do it by even talking. Sometimes you represent God on this planet by mostly listening, by giving other people a Christian ear to listen to. Indeed, often, you can just be someone who listens. That can lift up another human during a time of anxiety or fear or sadness or loss. Ours is an evangelistic faith. We echo the life of Jesus in our lives. It's very easy to touch someone else. Often, it only involves patience and a willingness to give a little of your time.

In the real world, sheep have a complex relationship with their shepherd. They know that person's voice. They know the look of that person, the way they stand and walk. The sheep are impacted by the way that person behaves. We must emulate Jesus the shepherd. If we are out there, treating all people with grace, giving them time, listening when they need a sympathetic person to talk to – that is when we can all be shepherds. Even if people don't know that we're Christians, we are still showing them the way to live like a Christian. We are still leading them away from greed, anger, and cruelty - and toward the gentleness and grace of Jesus Christ. Please pray with me.

*God, let us be recognized by the people around us. Let them see in us how a child of God should live. Let us lead them to a life of peace, empathy, and kindness. Let us lead them to God. Amen.*