

<sup>22</sup>At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, <sup>23</sup>and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico 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 Messiah, tell us plainly." <sup>25</sup>Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; <sup>26</sup>but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. <sup>27</sup>My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup>I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. <sup>29</sup>What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. <sup>30</sup>The Father and I are one." The word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God.**

It was the philosopher Rene DesCartes who said, "I think, therefore I am." For Christians in our day and age, perhaps we have our own adaptation. Perhaps the saying for us is, "I think, therefore I believe."

In this passage from the gospel of John, it is winter, the Festival of Dedication, which we now know of as the festival of Hannukah. So, as you and I know, come early December, while the Jews were in the midst of those eight days of Hannukah, the rest of the world was, of course, getting ready to celebrate Christmas. Oh wait, except there was no Christmas yet because right now, they are still trying to figure out if this man, Jesus, is the Christ.

So they do what any and all of us would do if we had Jesus before us: they ask him. Jesus, could you just spell it out for us? Could you just tell us? We're tired of the suspense. Make it plain. Tell us who you really are. If you are the Messiah, just say it." It's not a far cry from another scene in the gospels of Matthew and Luke--a scene where a couple of disciples approach Jesus and say, "Hey John the Baptist is in prison, but he sent us to ask if you are the one we've been waiting for, or if there is someone else to come..."

But there is a difference in this scene today from the Gospel of John. See, in the other story that appears in the other Gospels, the question is genuine. It is posed by those who are really seeking what to believe about Jesus. Here in the Gospel of John, the inquiry may not be so genuine. "If you are really the Messiah, tell us plainly." More than likely, they are trying, once again, to entrap Jesus. To get him to say the words that will justify their desire to kill him. They are, more or less, looking for a sound byte.

I can relate. Maybe not so much with the murderous intentions of these guys in this scene, but I can definitely relate to the desire, the wish, for Jesus to just wrap

it all up in one quick and pithy phrase--for Jesus to just say the thing that we long for him to say, the thing that no one can argue with, the sound bite that I can memorize and reproduce for anyone who doubts him. C'mon Jesus, just make it plain--say who you are, drop the mic, and walk away.

We long for this kind of clarity about who Jesus is, to know exactly where he's going and to know that we are not crazy for following him. It shapes the way we use scripture--we like to reduce scripture down to the couple of verses here and there that we've managed to memorize, the things we can roll out that give us clarity about who God is and what God does, and what God asks of us. But the truth is, it's a false clarity because by taking just bite-size pieces, sayings, proverbs, and punchlines, we distort the full witness of what it means to live under the shepherd's care. We stretch out the parts we like and we fold up the parts we don't--we try to sum Jesus up, to sum God up, to pack all of this God into a little nugget of knowledge or understanding that will give us everything we need in life.

Anthony DeMello was an influential Jesuit thinker through the mid-to-late 20th century. He told the parable of the explorer, who left his home and travelled halfway across the world to explore the Amazon. DeMello writes, " The explorer returned to his people, who were eager to know about the Amazon. But how could he ever put into words the feelings that flooded his heart when he saw exotic flowers and heard the night-sounds of the forests; when he sensed the danger of wild beasts or paddled his canoe over treacherous rapids?

"He said, 'Go and find out for yourselves.' To guide them he drew a map of the river. They pounced on the map. They framed it in their town hall. They made copies of it for themselves. And all who had a copy considered themselves experts on the river, for did they not know its every turn and bend, how broad it was and how deep, where the rapids were and where the falls?"

Tell us plainly, Jesus. Draw us a map. Give us something we can memorize so we can know you.

Jesus gives us no such response. Instead, Jesus says, "Listen for my voice." My sheep know my voice. I know them, and they follow me.

Gary Jones reminds us that "The trouble with talking plainly about the things of God is that the things of God are anything but plain. When a person begins speaking with...certainty about God, this is a sure sign that the person is no longer speaking about God. We can speak with...certainty about things our minds can grasp, but God is not one of those things. God grasps us; we do not grasp God."

Jesus' corrective to the Jewish leaders that day is an invitation to us. What they needed to know about Jesus could not simply be spoken--it had to be seen, to be soaked up, to be experienced. Just like DeMello's townspeople who thought they could explore the amazon from the comfort of their armchairs, we sometimes think we can read our map, our travelers guide to following Jesus, and become experts. We get tangled up in words about God, debates about God, controversies about God and we never get around to actually following God. We forget that just because you've seen the map doesn't mean that you've experienced what it is to be deep in the Amazon; no, the map is only the guide, the lens through which you yourself might find your way to the river.

When we look to the earliest Christians, to the spread of Christianity throughout the whole Mediterranean region, there was dramatic growth, not because thousands and thousands of people were convinced by the empirical evidence that Jesus was God's son, but because thousands and thousands experienced the promise and the presence of the living Christ. They didn't just learn what he said long ago--they themselves learned to hear his voice, calling their very own name. They learned to be his sheep.

"My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish." Can you hear the shepherd's voice today? He calls your name today. And his invitation is not to know--it's not to be sure--it's not to understand beyond a shadow of a doubt. His invitation to you is to listen, and to follow--to join his flock. To learn his voice. To belong to him. And what that means, well, you'll have to learn as you go. You'll have to follow other sheep and learn the roads and pastures he leads you on. You'll have to learn the dangers and stay with him when you are afraid. You'll see the beautiful places along the way, the stuff that can't be put on the map or in the guidebook. And somewhere along the way, you may just discover who the shepherd really is.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.