

## **John 10:22-30**

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. 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." 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, because you do not belong to my sheep. 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. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."\*

## **Unsnatchable - May** 8, 2022

*John 10:22-30*

Jesus is exasperated -- with good reason. Once again, he is being asked to identify himself. His questioners in today's passage apparently want Jesus to say the magic words, "I am the Messiah." He refuses, simply declaring to the crowd that they have had many opportunities to listen to what he has said and witness what he has done. In other words, Jesus is saying, "If you haven't figured it out by now, there is nothing I can say to you that can possibly change your mind."

Funny, isn't it, how nothing has really changed? From one perspective, Jesus essentially failed in his mission. He died horribly on Good Friday, mocked by the people, abandoned by most his followers. Yes, he was a nice man, said some interesting things, and helped heal some people, but so what? On Good Friday, he was dead, dead and buried. Bye Jesus, nice knowing you!

Last week we explored why the risen Christ appeared only to his followers, bypassing the opportunity to present himself to his enemies. It's clear, isn't it? This incident from scripture while Jesus was doing his ministry proves many or most people couldn't figure out who he was. Do you think they would have now suddenly changed their minds after Easter? As the old saying goes, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink."

And that is the nature of faith in Jesus Christ. You either have it, or you don't.

But where does faith come from? During Jesus' ministry, he met thousands of people. He travelled all over Israel, even out of Israel. The gospels point out how many non-Jews believed in Jesus. Many of his healings were directed at people who were rejected by Jews: Roman soldiers, Phoenicians, Samaritans, not to mention Tax Collectors, Prostitutes, Lepers, widows, blind people and people with hearing loss, people with paralysis.

These people believed in Jesus because Jesus saw past their outside situations: physical, mental, birth circumstances, and loved the human being on the inside. In short, people believed in Jesus because Jesus believed in them.

As you know, I work as an elementary school teacher as my day job. I also spent several years as an Uber driver. I have therefore been privy to a lot of conversations, conversations in the staffroom and conversations in my car. As a teacher, most of my colleagues know I am a pastor. They are mostly OK with that, especially because I seldom take the initiative to share my faith or jump into discussions to offer my expert advice. On the other hand, I am always available to listen and help, if they want help. Most people just need someone to listen to them. Faith comes later.

As an Uber driver, I learned early that passengers quickly forgot I was present with them. As such, anything and everything went. A few years ago, I even wrote a book about the conversations I overheard. Again, they had no idea that I was a pastor and I never offered my opinion unless asked.

All this explanation is to help you understand how sad I feel some days. I hear so much and can say so little. And what I hear is the pure desolation many people, too many people feel in their lives. Every day I've heard the phrase, "I don't know what to believe," or "I don't believe anything, anymore."

It is too true. Does any human institution have the approval of half, or even a quarter of people these days? I've read polls that suggest the US Military is the most trusted institution in America. I can believe that. After all, it's probably the only organization that is not under constant attack or scrutiny by the media or the internet.

Consider the status of our government and politics. Is there any person, any policy, any agency, any party that does not face withering, negative attacks on a daily basis? If you watch TV at all, you've seen the political ads in the Pennsylvania primaries. When you listen to them for any length of time, an experience I do not recommend, all you hear is ceaseless attacks on the candidates and by the candidates. How is it possible to cut through all the noise? How is it possible to have any confidence in truth?

Of course, can we truly be surprised at the collapse of churches and synagogues? There has been so much abuse: abuse of members, abuse of money, abuse of power that the hypocrisy is as thick as a stone wall. Why should anyone believe in any church of any kind? Some people nowadays even feel uncomfortable calling themselves "Christians" and prefer the term "Christ-followers." I'll be honest, at my school, it has taken years for some of my colleagues to even speak to me because they automatically assumed I was some kind of judgmental fanatic.

We only need look around this sanctuary to know that this particular congregation has literally lost hundreds of members over the decades. Were these people believers who lost their faith at some point? Were these people more faithful to the pastor than the congregation? Or were they never believers in the first place and left because belonging to a church was no longer fashionable?

There are some people, and their numbers are dwindling, who feel church is church is church. Even if the pastor is boring or is guilty of embezzlement. Even if the denomination makes strange pronouncements from time to time. Even if I can't stand the person who sits behind me. Church is church is church, right or wrong.

There was a time in our nation when there was a loyalty to institutions: government, leaders, companies. We might disagree at times, but there was a feeling that even when we disagreed with the president or didn't like a company's product, or thought a court ruling was wrong -- there was still an underlying assumption that the people in the institutions were basically decent folks trying to do the right thing even if we differ sometimes. There was the idea that while the pathway differed, we all agreed that the goal of government and society was to make a better life for people. Now we may disagree as to what a "better life" meant, but we all kinda pulled in the same direction.

But now we find ourselves surrounded by so much hatred, mistrust, and suspicion. We are soaked in conspiracy theories. There are news outlets that cater to your every idea about life and living. There are religions who will preach exactly what you want to hear. As President Obama said, "I think right now one of the biggest challenge we face is how do we start a common conversation around common culture."

That presumes, of course, that we want to have a common conversation or a common culture in the first place. Do we have anything in common anymore?

And that friends, is exactly the dilemma Jesus faced when confronting his opponents. Yes, both sides agreed there was a God. Both sides agreed God had a plan and a way for interacting with God and with other humans. However, they profoundly disagreed with regard to what God's way was.

It would be very easy to caricature the world view of Jesus' opponents. However, even Jesus told his listeners to follow the teachings of the Jewish leaders. He had no problem with what they were teaching. He often said that his mission was to fulfill the Law, not overturn it. No, Jesus' complaint was that the actions of the leaders did not match their teachings. They were hypocrites. Jesus felt the same way about the society of his day the way many people feel about the people and institutions of today's society.

In short, Jesus offered people then and offers us today a clear alternative to how we should live our lives.

People who believed in Jesus back then were attracted to him and had faith in him because everything he said and did was so radically different from the society in which they lived. Jesus loved and respected everyone as long as they admitted they wanted a better relationship with God. Jesus also had no time for anyone who felt they had it all figured out or did not believe they could have or needed a closer relationship with God.

Have human leaders in Jesus' or our century truly earned our respect and trust? Yes, there are always a few people in every generation who prove to be extraordinary examples of faith and leadership. But by-and-large, human governments, human businesses, human churches, human beings in general have failed to bring about God's world and God's vision for a humanity of equality, justice, and sharing. Instead, what do we have? Wars in many places, with the war in Ukraine possibly becoming much larger and more fatal than it is today. We have allowed ourselves to badly hurt our planet, polluting the atmosphere to the extent that the temperature of the Earth is rising every year. Our water is full of plastics and pesticides while in the seas float the remains of all kinds of marine life strangled by bags and six-pack rings.

In many ways, the goal of gender and racial equality is in full retreat. Women's rights are in jeopardy. Hate crimes are rising. Gun violence is rampant. The more and more of the world's wealth is controlled by fewer and fewer people.

Does anyone think for a moment that Jesus would be pleased with our situation? Sadly, there are many so-called Christians who firmly believe Jesus wants us to live in the world of "The Handmaids Tale." There are many who deny science when they don't like the conclusions it offers, but are happy to use it when it is convenient for them.

Yes, the world of Jesus, the world of which he is the good Shepard is a very different place from the world around us. The question is whether you embrace the way things are or embrace Jesus and his message — because they are very different.

Faith is having the spiritual eyes to see life from Jesus' point of view. It is not merely nodding to Jesus at Christmas and Easter. It is not "trying to be good" or saying, "too bad such and such church is closing." Faith is embracing the whole thing — that the way we are currently doing things on this Earth will ultimately lead to us destroying ourselves. We should be crying out, "there has to be a better way!" and summoning the internal courage to follow Jesus wherever he goes.

If that is where you are at now, if that is where you would like to be, then you have been blessed by God with faith. If and when you have faith, you are not alone because Jesus is with you. He declared that those who believed in him could not be snatched away but would have eternal life. We have all been given a choice and God in Jesus Christ has called us all to make the choice that leads to a better world for everyone. Will we listen to Jesus? Will we be un snatchable?

I say these words in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.