

When I was teaching, it was always just about this time of the school year that a few of my students finally learned two important things: first, they learned what the syllabus that they'd had for the last 165 days said about class requirements, and second, they learned how many percentage points were between the grade they had and the grade they wanted. Now, I always let them retake tests, and I made it virtually impossible for them to fail as long as they turned in all their work, but I tried not to give more work than I thought they needed to do, so I didn't give too many opportunities for extra credit. Still, at this time of year, I'd always have some requests: *just tell us plainly what we have to do to get a better grade...* and I may have quoted Jesus in today's gospel: *I have told you, but you do not believe...* How often have we been told what is right and good and true yet we look for another way?

Jesus visits the temple during Hanukkah, the festival commemorating Israel's liberation from Seleucid occupation and the rededication of the temple that Antiochus Epiphanies had desecrated. That independence won through the Maccabean revolt was short-lived: by the time Jesus and these Jewish leaders have this conversation, Rome had been occupying the region for generations; by the time John wrote this gospel, the Jewish revolt had failed and the temple had been destroyed. But in this scene Jesus' contemporaries were waiting for the Messiah to deliver them from their enemies, which at this point was Rome, and then Jesus, who has performed miraculous signs and begun to attract followers, shows up in the temple during the holiday that celebrated Israel's freedom. So we can see why the people wonder if Jesus is the hero for whom they've been waiting and why they're impatient for him to confirm or deny it.

Jesus very rarely gives straightforward answers to the many questions he's asked in the gospels. More often than not, he answers questions with questions. Here, Jesus answers the way a parent might answer child or a teacher might answer a student who is trying to wear them down through repetition to get the response they want. *I have told you, and you do not believe* Jesus says. When Jesus talks about believing and disbelieving, as he does often in John's gospel, he means trusting what he says by acting in ways consistent with his example and teaching. In other words, if people believe Jesus is the Messiah, then they will adjust their values and priorities and behavior to follow his teaching and example. If we say *Jesus is Lord* and then say and do things that contradict what Jesus said and did, what we're really saying is that Jesus is *not* our Lord, but something or someone else is.

When Jesus speaks about himself as a shepherd his contemporaries would have recalled the twenty-third psalm, as well as the origin story of Israel's most beloved king, David, who was literally out tending the sheep when the prophet Samuel came to anoint him king. In the ancient near east, kings portrayed themselves as shepherds as a sort of early form of political propaganda. They wanted people to think of their protection and provision in the same way sheep trust their shepherd to provide green pastures and still waters, to lead them through dark and deadly valleys. When Jesus uses the sheep and shepherd metaphor, he is alluding to his identity as king, but a king who lives up to the ideal. As is generally the case with propaganda, the ancient kings who *said* they were good shepherds didn't always *act* like good shepherds. But Jesus takes such good care of his sheep, they'll never perish and no one will snatch them away. In that promise, the crowds would have heard Jesus claim to be a very different kind of shepherd-king than those who had so often exploited them, their ancestors, and their neighbors.

What they would *not* have heard is a message about heaven and hell, which were not part of their theology. Jesus talks a lot about eternal life in John's gospel, but not in reference to what happens to us after we die. Eternal life is about the kind of living we're doing now—a life that reflects Jesus' own words and actions. The sheep are those who hear and follow Jesus, and therefore live a very different life *now* than if they followed some other leader. Jesus doesn't say he *will* give them eternal life: he says, *I give them eternal life...* that is, *now* those who are following Jesus are living the good life that God intended for them to live. They are being pursued by goodness all the days of their lives; but it is *God's* goodness that is pursuing them, which is not always the same as what the culture calls *good*.

This short exchange in John's gospel hints that the people have already heard Jesus tell them plainly how to live according to God's eternal values...they just don't like what they've heard. They'd rather have Jesus say he's *not* the Messiah than have to follow what he's been teaching. They don't want Jesus to repeat himself for clarification, they want Jesus to change his answer, to tell them what they want to hear, to assure them that they are already thinking and saying and doing what God wants and that they don't have to change. That's not how God works, for them or for us. We know the kind of life that Jesus calls his disciples to live: loving one another, loving neighbors, loving enemies; serving others; forgiving 70 x 7 times, showing mercy, welcoming the least and lowly, feeding fellow lambs. That life overflows with the goodness of God. *He has told you what is good and what the Lord requires of you: to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.* He *has* told us; it's up to us if we believe.