

## A Storytelling Commentary on John 10:22-30

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The dialogue between Jesus and the Jews in John 10:22-30 raises the question that is most pervasive throughout the Gospel: the issue of the Jews. Are the Jews "us" or are the Jews "them"? My conclusion is that in the Gospel as a whole, Jesus is always addressing the audience of the story as Jews. The Jews are "us" not "them". The Gospel is addressed to Jews, and the invitation of the story is for every member of the audience to identify themselves as Jews.

Now that matters a lot with regard to how this story is told. When you say "the Jews," these words should not be pronounced with any degree of distance or tone of alienation. It is very important in terms of the dynamics of the story that you introduce this story as one that is addressed to us, the Jews. Therefore, *our* ("the Jews") initial question to Jesus—"Are you the Christ?"—is not a hostile question. Rather, it is a question with which every listener can identify. That is its function.

This dialogue comes immediately following the good shepherd discourse. It is connected, as we will see, thematically with that discourse. That discourse follows the healing of the man born blind in which Jesus, after an incredible miracle and transformation of a man's life, addresses the Pharisees. The audience, then, is being addressed as the Pharisees.

In this preceding dialogue, Jesus makes an appeal to the audience to become symbolically his sheep. He is addressing the Pharisees (and the listening audience as Pharisees) as he describes his sheep. His relationship to the Pharisees is a highly sympathetic relationship in which the audience is invited to identify themselves as Jesus' sheep.

The question that has been present throughout the whole gospel is, "Is Jesus the Messiah?" Here the question is explicitly asked because previously every time that Jesus is asked that question either indirectly or directly he talks around it. In this instance he is more direct. This question is not an alienating question for the listeners. Its function is to ask the question on everybody's mind.

Jesus' initial response is, "I've told you in various ways that I am the Christ and you've not believed." Once again this is a statement to the listeners as ones who have not believed earlier in the story. The audience is addressed as those who have not believed that Jesus is the Christ. This is a sign of the identity of the audience and of where they are at this point in the story. Once again, it is not a description of "them," of somebody else. It is a description of the identity of Jesus' audience in the story *and* of John's audience of story listeners. The invitation is for every listener to consider the ways in which he or she has not believed.

The next reference is to "the works," which point to Jesus' identity as a sign. The most immediate sign is the work of healing a man born blind and of transforming his life. But there are also all the stories that have preceded about the miracles Jesus has performed—the signs of his identity. This, then, is a reference to all those signs.

The reason that Jesus identifies them as the reason that "you have not believed" is that "you are not one of my sheep." This once again raises the question of the audience's spiritual identity. It is negative rhetoric and it is an implicit invitation to the audience to change their identity and to become one of Jesus' sheep. It is the same invitation that was present in the earlier shepherd discourse.

Jesus' description names what it means to be one of Jesus' sheep. It describes the benefits that accompany such relationship: intimacy and eternal life, which Jesus offers and gives to his sheep. That's the promise for every believer; everyone who believes in Jesus will be held in Jesus' hands and protected.

The motif of their not being snatched away is a reference back to the motif of the wolves coming and snatching away the sheep. This happens when the sheep are abandoned by their shepherds, a clear reference to the leaders of Israel who have abandoned the people of Israel. It may well be a reference to what happened at the time of the Jewish war when many people were killed or taken into slavery in Rome. It may also be a reference to what happened when the chief priests disappeared after the destruction of the Temple, through no fault of their own. The Romans destroyed the temple and the place where the priests had their life.

But there were some very painful things that happened during the time of the war regarding the leadership of the religious community. These leaders led the people into the war, the disaster that ended in the destruction of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and significantly the destruction of the people. The country was decimated.

For the people who are hearing this story in the 90's, Jesus' promise transcends the dynamics of the war and of all wars. Jesus' promise of eternal life is a promise that resonates with the needs of the people of Israel who have lost so much as a consequence of war.

Jesus' promise to protect and care for his flock, his sheep, is based on the power of the Father. The concluding statement—"I and the Father are one"—is the next step in belief in Jesus as Messiah, Son of God, One who is one-with-the-Father and therefore has not just the role of Messiah but the role of being a divine presence. The invitation at the end of this story is to consider seriously this relationship between Jesus and God: that Jesus is one with the Father.

This story is addressed to everyone who is searching for understanding of the character of Jesus, for life, wholeness, and protection. I invite you to tell this to your listeners as persons who are invited into intimate relationship with God through Jesus. This

relationship transcends every political and economic situation in the world, and provides a place of spiritual security and peace that will last forever.