

“The Voice of the Shepherd”
from Barbara Brown Taylor’s
The Preaching Life

BACKGROUND

The cycle of liturgical readings leading up to Dedication was filled with passages concerning sheep and shepherds. The most important of these is Ezek 34, where “God denounces the false shepherds of Israel, and repeatedly says that a day is coming when he himself will be the shepherd of his people, feeding them, leading them, disciplining them. Jesus’ insistence that, so far as shepherds go, those who came before him ‘were these and robbers’ (Jn 10:8), would call Ezek 34 to mind. Then, toward the end of that OT chapter, God says that he will place over his flock one shepherd—his servant David.” [D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God*, vol. I, Mar 20.]

Read John 9:1-10:33

1. As mentioned in 10:22, the setting for this passage is the period leading up to the winter Feast of Dedication, or *Hanukkah*. This celebrated the victory of Judas Maccabaeus over Antiochus Epiphanes, the Syrian leader who had oppressed the Jews by outlawing their worship and desecrating the temple. It was also called the Feast of Lights because of “the lighting of lamps and candles in Jewish homes, ...deployed because the right to worship ‘appeared to us’ [or ‘shone upon us’] at a time when we hardly dared hope for it.” [D. A. Carson’s *John Commentary*, p. 391.]

How is this a fitting setting for the events of chapter 9?

2. John chapters 9 and 10 are paired much like a laboratory demonstration followed by an explanatory lecture. Jesus says in 10:27 that his sheep recognize his voice. How does this play out in the account of the man born blind? How does he come to believe in Jesus?
3. What distinguishes the good shepherd from the “thieves and robbers”? Who is Jesus alluding to, and why?
4. What reasons does Jesus give in support of his being the Messiah (10:11-12, 25)?
5. What three “common beliefs” about belief does BBT list? What, in her words, “is it that you hold over your own head?” What do *you* imagine belief must entail, which you also struggle with?
6. Taylor comforts us, saying “there is every reason to believe that we are in, my woolly friends, if only because we are sitting right here with the flock this morning.” She later adds,

Our belief tends to show up in our actions more than in our words. Sometimes even we have to look at what we do to understand what we believe. We are not, at heart, believers in an institution or an ideology but in a relationship that changes from day to day and year to year.

In both Matt 7:22-23 (“Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?”) and the Sheep and the Goats (25:31-46; “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you...?”) we see surprise at judgment. The

first passage warns that the right relationship is necessary, and the second that this relationship is genuine only if it leads to Christ-like sacrifice for others.

Do Taylor's words comfort you when you read these two passages, or even when you are unsure whose sheep you are? If so, why?

7. Jesus' listeners were forced to discern whether his claims were genuine—whether or not he was truly the Christ. Similarly, those in Judah before the Babylonian exile had to discern which of the prophets were speaking God's word—a task much easier in hindsight. So we read in Jeremiah 23:25-29,

“I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, ‘I had a dream! I had a dream!’ How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds? They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their fathers forgot my name through Baal worship. Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?” declares the LORD. “*Is not my word like fire,*” declares the LORD, “*and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?*”

Yet as Taylor points out, many of us “want to hear the Lord's voice but cannot quite make it out. You wind up at the watering hole at the end of the day and you do not know whom you belong to.”

Have you ever thought you heard God's voice, only to later decide you'd been wrong? When you experience doubt, is it doubt that the Scripture is really God's voice, or is it doubt of a different sort?



Meaningful fact: “Chapter 9 served as a reading [in the early Church] preparing converts for Baptism... In particular, when the practice of three... examinations before Baptism developed (at least from the 3rd century on...), John 9 was read on the day of the great scrutiny. From what we can reconstruct of the ceremony..., when the catechumens passed their examination and were judged worthy of Baptism, lessons from the OT concerning cleansing water were read to them. Then came the solemn opening of the Gospel book and the reading of John 9, with the confession of the blind man, ‘I do believe, Lord,’ serving as the climax.” [Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*.]

Fun fact: “The Greek behind [10:24] could be rendered, as in the NIV, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense?’, or, more negatively, ‘*How long are you going to annoy us?*’” [Carson, *John*, p. 392.]