

**“Something Better Than Straight Answers”**

**Psalm 23:1–6; John 10:22–30**

**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**

**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**

**May 11, 2025**

If we are looking for straight answers, Jesus may not be our guy, but if we are looking for something better, perhaps he is.

As we join the story in John 10, Jesus is walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon, during the festival of the Dedication, when some of the people there ask him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

As is often the case, we don’t know what tone of voice they use. They are Jewish people. The text tells us this, but we could assume as much since they are attending a festival in the temple. They could have a genuine interest in whether Jesus is the Messiah. “Are you the one?” they might be saying. But they could also be skeptics who ask in sarcastic critique, “When are you are going give us a straight answer about who you are and prove it to us? Like never...”

We don’t really know. Perhaps there are people in this gathering who feel both ways. That would accurately reflect the way Jewish people respond to this Jewish teacher — some become his followers, others reject him. But either way, they are looking for a straight answer and he does not give them one.

He’s a bit like politicians who “pivot” when asked a question, which is to say they don’t answer it but rather talk about what they want to talk about. Or perhaps we might say he is like some preachers who respond to a difficult question by talking for a very long time, about what we really aren’t sure, but it isn’t about what we asked!

“I have told you and you do not believe,” Jesus says, “I have shown you through the works I have done... My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me.” What? Just give us a straight answer, yes or no, are you the Messiah or not?! Crickets... The only person he has told that he is the Messiah at this point in John is the Samaritan woman at the well (4:26). He does not give a straight answer here.

But the truth is this is not the kind of thing that can be reduced to a few words in a rational proof — I say this and you believe I am the one. Only a personal encounter with such a figure and experience of transformation can persuade anyone to believe, and this is what Jesus is talking about. He works with a theme that runs through this chapter where he talks about himself as the good shepherd, one very much like the image of God Psalm 23 presents, one who cares for his sheep. If a personal encounter is what is required, this is good because the relationship between sheep and shepherd is about as personal as it gets.

Now, those who have spent time with real-world sheep would tell you that the relationship is not quite as idyllic as we might think. Sheep are not the cutesy creatures we imagine, all fluffy and white, and ever ready to follow a shepherd's guidance. They tend to get dirt and mud all in their thick hair, in addition to sticks and various kinds of debris. In this sense, they are like our female German Shepherd, who has a long coat. We call Rika the Swiffer because she brings in debris from the yard. Sheep are like this.

Furthermore, they are not the docile, obedient creatures we might imagine. Sometimes they are stubborn or clueless and thus guiding them takes persistence and at times a nudge with a staff. They spend so much time with their shepherd that they recognize his/her voice, and this creates a level of connection or intimacy. They just don't always listen to this voice immediately.

And yet, in all these ways, the relationship between shepherds and sheep seems like a helpful way to think about our relationship to Christ. We are not the idyllic followers of Jesus we like to think we are. We don't always listen, even if we know it is Christ speaking to us. We can be stubborn or clueless. But Christ seeks to be in relationship with us and is willing to get dirty in the process. Christ speaks to us in personal ways whether through scripture, creation, prayer, or everyday life, and we know Christ's voice. This is how we discover who he is, not through any straight answer but through a personal relationship with him.

We might think this is a uniquely Christian perspective, and it lies at the heart of our faith that we are invited into an intimate relationship with our Maker. But God's relationship with ancient Israel is described

in personal ways too — I am your God, and you are my people. Hosea 11:4 presents an image of God longing to bend down and pick up young Israel like a mother bends down, picks up an infant, and holds the child to her cheek. It is a nice image for Mother's Day.

In Jeremiah 31:31-34, God says the days are surely coming when God will put God's law within each person, God will write it on their hearts. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know God, from the least of them to the greatest. And in Psalm 23, the writer says, "The Lord is *my* shepherd," not just *a* shepherd or even *our* shepherd, a Sovereign whose greatness is revealed not in coercive power but in intimate relationship and loving care, but *my* shepherd — a deeply personal friend and guide.

Jesus may not give a straight answer to the question of whether or not he is the Messiah, but he does even better. He says those who follow him have a personal relationship with him as a caring shepherd, very much like ancient Israel knows God in a deeply personal way. This may feel exclusive. Only certain people get to know God and Christ. Tough luck for the rest! But this is not the Divine intent. The God who was in Christ seeks out an intimate connection with all people. We just have to be interested in forming such a relationship.

The question is — how do we pursue such an interest if we do not know God? How do we find God or listen for God's voice? There are certain things that can help — reading scripture, attending worship, developing prayer habits, working with a spiritual mentor, becoming more open in all of life. But rather than us finding God, it may be more a matter of allowing God to find us. God has been described as the Hound of Heaven who seeks us out. A shepherd seeking the sheep is gentler image of the same concept. We may or may not seek out God, but God seeks us. We just have to be willing to be found.

I think of a story Robert Fulghum tells about children playing sardines in which one child hides too well and none of the others can find him. Finally, Fulghum yells, "Get found, kid!" startling the boy, but he needs to get found. So do we. There are many ways we hide from each other, ourselves, and God, but God will keep looking for us until we are found. The Good Shepherd will keep speaking to us until we

recognize God's voice. Like young Samuel hearing God in the night for the first time (1 Samuel 3), we may need help in realizing it is God's voice, but once we do, we find our place in the fold.

But there is something else to note in our reading from John. While not giving a straight answer to the question about his identity, Jesus not only talks about establishing an intimate relationship with his followers; he also talks about offering protection from harm, or at least companionship in hardship or danger. "My sheep hear my voice," Jesus says, "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."

Wake Forest Divinity School New Testament Professor Katherine A. Shaner notes that the Greek word translated as "snatched" here, *harpazo*, is a nasty word associated with the violent possession of a person or thing, sometimes connected with sexual violence and war (*The Christian Century*, May 2025, p. 25). Jesus is saying he will protect his people from the worst harm, like a shepherd fighting off a hostile predator of sheep, risking his life to do so, giving his life to do so.

We know we are not shielded from all harm. Some of the best people suffer and all people die. Jesus ends on a cross. But this life is not all there is, there is eternity to experience. And Jesus says no one can snatch us away from him when it matters most. Or as the Apostle Paul puts it while writing to the church in Rome, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, not any principality or power, not even death itself (Romans 8:35-39).

It is worth noting that we find this same assurance in Psalm 23. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies, you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows (vv. 4-5)." In the darkest places of life, in the presence of hostile parties, the psalmist fears nothing because God is with him, providing for his need. Nothing can snatch him away.

It is fascinating to see how similar the two testaments are here. Jewish and Christian experience are not always the same. I remember talking with Lexie Nuell, the Director of Music and Community at

Temple Beth Or, just before she and I went onstage to perform a play at Burning Coal Theater. Something we were talking about led me to reference Walter Brueggemann, and Lexie replied, “Oh, Uncle Walt?” “*Uncle Walt?*” I said in astonishment. “Yes,” she said, “He is my great uncle. Christian clergy make a big deal over him, but those of us in the family thought he taught religion at some Bible College.” The preeminent prophetic scholar of our time, from a Christian perspective, is viewed as an ordinary Bible College teacher in many Jewish circles...

We don’t always view things, even things we have in common, in the same way, but apparently Psalm 23 is a sacred gift we do. Homiletics professor William F. Brosend says he wondered about this until an experience he had while serving a parish in Rochester, New York. While sitting in a steam room with Jewish friends at the Jewish Community Center, he asked his companions what Psalm 23 meant to them. They immediately recited it in Hebrew or Yiddish. Of course, these men had numbers tattooed on their arms. They were Nazi prison camp survivors. Yes, the psalm meant something to them, God was their shepherd who was with them through the valley of the shadow of death (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C. Volume 2, p. 433).

Jesus may not give a straight answer to the question of whether or not he is the Messiah, just as God does not give Moses a straight answer to his question recorded in Exodus 3 about what God’s name is. But as God is with Moses, Jesus is with us offering shepherd care and holding on to us amidst the greatest threats we face.

In normal times, I might wrap this up by pointing to the shepherd image over the choir loft... but since that is not possible, and since this is Mother’s Day, I might note how similar all of this is to the love of mothers. Not all mothers are loving, and fathers are capable of love too, but most of us think of mother love as one of the highest forms — self-giving, sacrificial, protective, relentless. That’s what Jesus is talking about, that’s who he is, and that’s better than a straight answer, much better.