

# Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Fourth Sunday of Easter: May 8, 2022

Returning to God

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church and the fourth Sunday in Easter. I have to tell you; we are such a wonderful community. This Easter has been just one long string of events from plant sales, Gospel theatre, memorials and now we return to our regular Sunday program including a Happy Mother's Day.

So, I thought I would begin by giving you some history into our Gospel story of Jesus during the time of the Dedication. What you may not realize is that this reference to the time of the Dedication is what we commonly refer to now as Hannukah - taking place sometime in the calendar year from late November to early January, much like it does today. Hence our scripture reference to the winter.

Hanukkah, often called the "Celebration of Lights", is the Jewish festival that reaffirms the ideals of Judaism and commemorates in particular the rededication of the Second Temple of Jerusalem by the lighting of candles on each day of the festival. It is also considered a time to rededicate oneself to the study of scripture and law, and to focus on a personal return to God.

Some people wonder why the story of Hanukkah is not in the Bible. However, the event that occurred: the miracle of having enough oil to burn in the menorah a whole eight days, allowing the Hebrews to renew their supplies to keep the Temple cleansed and Holy before God (after the Temple had been desecrated) happened after the Hebrew

Torah had been standardized. Some of the story is told in the Apocrypha, in the books of the Maccabees, which is the story of the Jewish uprising.

If you were living in First century Palestine and if you were a Jew, it was a time and place offering a triple threat of oppression. First, Rome is everywhere, soldiers are needed to keep order and tax collectors are extracting wealth. Second, Herod is everywhere, using a network of spies and favors to keep his people subdued so that the taxes and sacrifices flowed according to his own personal agenda. Third, the Temple authorities are everywhere, controlling the daily lives of people through a system of payment and rituals that further left them hungry. But the people who believed that God would love them through these processes continued to struggle on. There are at this time, no institutions in place to protect anyone.

So, you can understand why someone would just ask Jesus to identify himself plainly. It is very probable that when Jesus is asked to reveal whether or not he is the Messiah, in the back of their minds they are thinking this may be a continuation of a miracle to claim their inheritance back. For these people, being the Messiah was often confused with being King and an overlord of the people. How perfect would it be if the Messiah were to claim his inheritance on the same day that represents the rededication of the Temple to God! Was it Jesus who would free them from the yoke of oppression?

But Jesus is not giving them the answer they want. Or is he? It seems he explains that not only has he told them, but his miracles and works speak for themselves, clearly showing he is sent from God. For in the previous few chapters, he was accused of being sent by the Devil.

But the age-old adage is at play here: you only hear what you want to hear. Or maybe you only see what you want to see, because clearly even on the cross, one thief recognized Jesus as the Messiah and one did not. Some people were healed, others were not.

The question for today is, what are you hearing? What are you seeing? Who is Jesus to you, and what does a Messiah look like? If you were standing in the portico after following Jesus, seeing and hearing the stories, would you believe? Do you believe?

For instance, there are many voices that would like to tell us how to grow closer to God. Some of them include having a prescribed religious experience, by believing the correct doctrine, by reaching a higher level of knowledge or a higher level of morality.

By contrast, the Good Shepherd tells us that everything depends on belonging to him. Never does our status before God depend on how we feel; or on having the right experience; on being free of doubt; and not even on what we accomplish. It depends on one thing only: that we are known by the shepherd: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish”.

The voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice that liberates rather than oppresses. It does not say, “Do this, and then maybe you will be good enough to be one of my sheep.” It says, **you** already belong to me. “No one can snatch you out of my hand.” Secure in this belonging, we are free to live the abundant life of which Jesus spoke earlier in the chapter: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly”.

This Gospel calls us today to ask the question of who Jesus is to us? Do we hear His voice? Or are you only hearing what you want to hear; maybe words or thoughts about fear come up that you are not good enough, not worthy enough. Maybe in the back of your mind you wonder what eternal life means, and whether there is a heaven or if there

is heaven, do you deserve it? I know I have said this over and over again this Easter season, but God has already done the work for you, it's your turn.

God removed the stone prior to the women needing that done. Jesus offered his wounds up for proof prior to the asking. And now Jesus is telling us, if you hear my voice, it is only because God has already opened your ears, you only need to listen.

The abundant life of which Jesus speaks is not necessarily about abundance in years, or in wealth, or status, or accomplishments. It is life that is abundant in the love of God made known in Jesus Christ. Love is that cup that overflows to others. It is eternal life because its source is in God who is eternal, and in Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life, allowing us to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amidst all the other voices that evoke fear, make demands, or give advice, the voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice of promise — a voice that calls us by name and claims us as God's own. A recognition that to God we are worthy. We are worthy of being led, cared for, and loved, because this is what the Good Shepherd does.

Maybe this Easter is your time of rededication and returning to God, of lighting the lamp inside the Temple of your faith, and listening to how God wants to work in your life, to bring you that abundance and most of all that peace that surpasses all understanding.

Amen