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The Gospel of John **XXXII. The Song of the Shepherd** **John 10:22-42**

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

They found the music, a single manuscript copy, among the piles of unsorted paper the composer had left at the time of his death. It was clearly a piece for solo violin, but it looked extraordinary: difficult, daring, probably unplayable. Above it was scrawled, in his shaky hand: To the City Guild of Violinists.

The City Guild was honoured, but embarrassed. None of them could play the piece. Copies were made, and each member took one home to try it out. When they met later they tried to pass it off with excuses. Surely the old man couldn't have meant you to play those notes simultaneously? His mind must have been wandering. Anyway, it seemed very strange – not much tune to it, though they couldn't deny there were interesting passages. All of them declared that they'd give it another try . . . one day. Some even wondered aloud whether the old man hadn't meant it to be played at all – it was just a strange and impossible idea. And they all quietly forgot about it.

Until one day, many years later, there came to the city an old man with a long straggly beard and a battered violin case. He hardly looked like a real musician: a gypsy, people thought, or a travelling tradesman with a second line in music teaching. He took lodgings just by the main city square. Not long afterwards, rumours began to circulate of strange and beautiful music being heard after dark. Finally some of the City Guild gathered under the windows.

There was no mistaking it. They were listening to the music that had been dedicated to them. It was, indeed, almost unplayable; almost, but not quite. He was playing it, making it dance and leap and swell and fall. It was wild and strange and headstrong and sweet.

As it died away, some of the City Guild burst into spontaneous applause. But others were furious. "That was our music," they said. "He's not a member of the Guild! What right has he got to come here and play it? Trying to make us look stupid!"

The window opened, and the old man looked out.

"I'm his son," he said. "He taught me to play the piece . . .

*“Rubbish!” shouted the angry violinists in the square below.
“You’ve no business here! How dare you!”*

The next morning the violinist had gone. The music was never heard in the city again.¹

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The anger, even hatred, of the guild of religious professionals towards Jesus, the Son, reaches its crescendo in our reading this morning. Jesus has come to Jerusalem offering to all the beautiful music of His Father’s redeeming love, playing the song of joyful obedience that God’s chosen people had long ago forgotten how to play, had never really been able to play. They should have received Him with great joy – and joined in His song with whole hearts and minds and voices. But, instead, they had stopped up their ears to the music of His grace and of their own redemption. And they had railed against Jesus as a blasphemer, a misleader of the people. And this morning’s reading indicates the moment when they decided to silence Him once and for all. From here on, we are travelling towards the Cross.

How had it gone so wrong? On the one hand, their opposition to Jesus was exactly what had been foretold back in the first chapter of John’s Gospel – that, *“He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”*² But how had it happened, what lay beneath the religious guild’s rejection of Him? The setting of our passage this morning offers us a clue: *“At the time of the Feast of Dedication.”* These days, we know the Feast of Dedication better by the name Hanukkah – but it is not the name which matters, it’s what this feast meant to the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day. In the year 167 Before Christ, there was a tyrant ruling over a captive Israel – his name was Antiochus Epiphanes, king of the Seleucid Empire. He had brought the worship of false gods into the Temple itself, desecrating the Temple before God and His chosen people. He had brought hardship and suffering upon God’s people. Then arose a hero in Israel by the name of Judas Maccabaeus. He gathered a guerilla army and, in short order, routed the occupiers and reconsecrated the Temple to the One True God. And the Feast of Dedication was a celebration of this great victory, this great hero who drove out Antiochus and his corruption.

And that setting, that history, perhaps points to one of the strongest reasons why Jesus was rejected by the very Ones He had come to save. Because Jesus was playing what – to their ears – was the wrong music. Israel wanted for its Messiah another Judas Maccabaeus – a greater Judas Maccabaeus. Israel wanted a Messiah who would come and drive out the Roman Empire which had followed in the wake of the Seleucids. They wanted a mighty warrior king, like David, who would return Israel to the days of being a power to be feared. They wanted Roman blood to run in the streets, and the wealth of foreign lands to flow into the Temple treasury. That was the Messiah they were looking for, longing for. The music they were longing to hear was a stirring military march.

And, instead, here had come Jesus singing a love song. A love song, even more annoyingly, which seemed to include sinners, which seemed to include Samaritans and other unclean outcasts, which seemed even to include those hated Roman occupiers. Here came Jesus singing of a God who so loved the world – not merely Israel, but the whole world! – that He wanted all to be saved, everyone to have a place in His Father’s House, everyone to know the abundant and eternal life

He had come to impart.³ And He didn't even expect them to earn any of this, to deserve any of this – He simply was offering it as gift of grace to anyone who would believe in Him. Anyone who would enter into the music He was making.

So no wonder so many of His own people rejected Him. He was playing what, to their ears, was the wrong song and singing it in the wrong key to all of the wrong people. The very sound of it grated upon their ears, their hearts, their hopes. And so, says our passage, “*They picked up stones to stone him.*” They didn’t succeed, this time – He slipped through their hands. But the day when they would succeed was soon approaching. He was not the Messiah they were looking for, longing for. He was not at all like what they thought their God was really like. And I can’t help but wonder if maybe we don’t often struggle with the same mistaken expectations and understandings – that one of the chief obstacles in our own reception of Jesus is that He is not the Messiah we want either, and that He is not God the way we want and expect God to be.

He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.⁴

“*But to all who did receive Him*” – and to all who receive Him still. “*To all who believed in His name*” – and to all who believe in Him still. To all who receive Jesus Christ as the One sent from God; who receive Jesus Christ as the Messiah they desperately need, even if not the One they think they want; to all who hear and believe and join in the music of God’s love that Jesus made then and is making still today – to all who receive Him still, He is music to our ears, and the sweet sound of amazing grace to our bruised hearts and wounded spirits:

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

“*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me*” – right there is the refrain of the song Jesus had come to sing. Not the military march of Judas Maccabaeus, but the shepherd song of Ezekiel 34. “*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.*” God, speaking through His prophet Ezekiel centuries before, had spoken of His coming redemption of Israel, and of all peoples, in just that song of the shepherd. Listen to one of the stanzas God, through Ezekiel, wrote down:

For thus says the Lord God: “Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered . . . And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountains heights of Israel shall

*be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak . . .*⁵

And that was the song our Good Shepherd, our Savior, had come to sing over them. And the very song He is singing over us still today, in this very moment today.

“*My sheep*,” says Jesus – “*My sheep*,” sings our Good Shepherd to His flock – “*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*” Listen to what He is saying of us, offering to us, promising to do for us – our Good Shepherd. “*My sheep hear my voice.*” In a world so filled with noise, with shouting and name-calling and advertising and political sloganeering, He enables us to hear His voice above all the noise – the One Voice we long to hear, the One Voice we most desperately need to hear. That Voice saying to us, over and over, “*For God so loved the world . . .*”⁶

A city friend was showing his country friend the sights and sounds of New York City. When, amid all of the chaotic noise of that bustling place, the country friend suddenly stopped and said, “*I hear a cricket!*” The city friend had heard nothing, and dismissively said, “*You can't possibly hear a cricket over the noise of Manhattan!*” The country friend bent down, moved a few leaves around a small shrub in a concrete flower box – and, sure enough, there was a cricket. The city friend, amazed, then asked, “*How did you do that?*” The country friend said, “*It's not so amazing. It just all depends on what you are listening for.*”⁷ “*My sheep hear my voice.*” “*My sheep know the song of my love for them.*”

“*And I know them.*” “*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them*” – Jesus inviting us into friendship with Him, deepening relationship with Him. He knows us better than we know ourselves, and so invites us to know Him in an ever-deepening awareness of His presence in our lives, through our ever-deepening personal relationship with Him borne of prayer. “*And I know them.*” In the words of St. Patrick’s prayer:

*I arise today through God's strength to pilot me:
God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me,
God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to guard me.
Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise.*

“And I know them.” And so we are invited to spend the day in His company, in His friendship, in a close and deepening companionship all the days of our lives. He knows us – and He wants us to know Him. Personally and deeply and daily.

“And they follow me.” *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me”* – in a world of uncertainty, He shows us how to live and what to live for. *“They follow me”* – in an age of great moral confusion, His Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, keeping us from losing our way in darkness. *“They follow me”* – in a world of anxiety, fear and trembling, we know that He is leading us, safely and securely, to our forever home with Him.

And all along that climbing way, we are given this profound and unshakeable assurance: *“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”* Nothing, no one, can separate us from the love of God. And all things will be brought round to good for those who belong to Him. In all things, we are more than conquerors through Jesus Christ our Lord. Profound and unshakeable assurance. He will not let us get lost from Him. He will not let death take us away from Him. He will never let us be taken from out of His loving and omnipotent hands: *“The eternal God is our dwelling place, and beneath us always are the everlasting arms.”*⁸

“What is your only comfort, in life and in death?” asks the very first question of the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the greatest of the creeds to come out of the Reformation. *“What is your only comfort, in life and in death?”* And the answer is this:

That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.” That is the song Jesus came to sing. That is the song Jesus is singing to us still today. And that is the song He is inviting us to sing along with Him – every day of our lives, and with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. For it is the song of our salvation. It is the Song of our Good Shepherd.

¹ N. T. Wright, John for Everyone, Part 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 158-159.

² John 1:11.

³ John 3:16-17.

⁴ John 1:11-13.

⁵ Ezekiel 34:11-16.

⁶ John 3:16.

⁷ I don’t know the origin of this story.

⁸ Deuteronomy 33:27.