

“More than Words”

4th Sunday of Easter – Year C

April 29, 2007

Hope Lutheran Church

Good morning. It is good to be with you this morning as Joel and Wendy are away at the Synod Assembly. 8:00AM: Dream. 10:30 AM: It’s nice to see all the kids in from prom this morning. It means a lot to me that they are here. Please pray with me. Father, we ask you to give us eyes to see and ears to hear your word speak to us this morning. *May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

We have quite an interesting text before us this morning. I’d like to explain how I go about reading and studying a biblical text. I believe that if we can read this text in John, not as 21st century Americans, but initially as first century Jews, I think we will arrive at a more proper understanding of the text. So, we are going to be a little heavy on history today because this text has a lot of historical context behind it that we as 21st century Americans will miss if we are not careful. So, here we go. I am pretty much going to exposit the text in the order it appears, so you may find it helpful to follow along.

Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade. The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

The first question that comes to mind is, “What is the Feast of Dedication?” The Feast of Dedication is what we know of today as Hanukah. Most of you are probably saying, “Well, I have no clue what Hanukah celebrates.” Well, let me tell you.

In 167 BC, so Hanukah is older than Christmas, Antiochus Epiphanes was the ruler of Syria and wanted to create a buffer zone between his country and Egypt. Israel was in the middle. So, he did what any good ruler of the time would do. Epiphanes decided that he would change the

function of their religion in order to serve his interests. So on December 25, 167 BC, Antiochus Epiphanes and his army walked into the Temple in Jerusalem and slaughtered a pig, an unclean animal, on the altar of the Lord and tried to establish worship of himself.

Obviously, this event was devastating to the Jews. Their temple had been defiled by sacrificing an unclean animal on the altar and was being controlled by pagans. The Jews wanted their temple back in order to set up proper worship and sacrifices to God.

On December 25, 164 BC, a group of Jews, the led by Judah Maccabee, organized and accomplished a revolt to drive out Epiphanes and his armies. The temple was rededicated and the proper Temple worship was resumed. Thus, they commemorated this event with the Feast of Dedication, or Hanukah, which means dedication.

To do such a thing, liberate the temple from the enemy and reconsecrate it, was as close as you could come to doing what King David and Solomon had done. So, with that act Judah Maccabee started a dynasty that ruled Israel for a hundred years. When it ended, the Romans made Herod the Great king by marrying a princess from the family line of Judah Maccabee. The Jews did not like being oppressed under this new Roman rule and wanted a true King of Israel.

So, every time they celebrated the Feast of Dedication, or Hanukah, they not only thought about God and liberation from the Romans. They not only thanked God for having the temple back again. They also thought about kings, and how people become kings. They were looking for a modern-day Judah Macabee.

Here we have Jesus, walking through in the Temple, during the Feast of Dedication, when national pride, nostalgia and revolutionary thoughts are already high on people's minds, and a group of Jews asks "Are you the Christ?" We have to remember that this is a pre-Easter question. In post-Easter, 21st century America, when we hear Jesus Christ, we think that Jesus is his first name and Christ is his last name. That is incorrect. We must understand that Christ is not a name. Christ

is a title. "President" is not George W. Bush's first name. It is a title. And in America, we all know that when someone has earned the title of president, they have certain powers, responsibilities, and roles.

Likewise, "Christ" is not Jesus' last name, but a title that within first century Judaism carries with it a certain presupposition about the certain powers, responsibilities, and roles that the "Christ" will assume. This person is not asking if Jesus is God incarnate, the one who will save humanity from their sin and set the universe to rights. No, he is asking if Jesus is God's modern-day Judah Maccabee who will drive out the Romans and become king of the Jews.

As we see multiple times, Jesus is in what appears to be a trap. He can't say "yes", because the preconceived ideas that the Jews have in their minds about the Christ are not true to Jesus' mission. He's not the "Christ" in the way they are asking. But, he also can't say "no", because, well, he'd be lying! He *is* the Christ, but not in the way that everyone was expecting him to be.

So how did he answer?

Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe.

Jesus says that he did tell them. But, if you look at the rest of the Gospel of John, he never told anyone that he was the Christ except for the Samaritan woman at the well. And if you know anything about the woman at the well story, you know that the Jews and the Samaritan woman didn't do any talking. So, Jesus must be talking about more than words here.

He continues:

The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

Instead of answering with words, Jesus points them to the works he is doing. He gives them more than words as his answer. If we peruse John's gospel we find that Jesus turned water into wine, healed a man born blind, he fed five thousand with five loaves and two fish, he healed an invalid, he healed a man's son. These are the works he is doing. He is doing a work of re-creation, of restoration, a work of love, not a work of violence. The Kingdom of God is found in things such as these rather than things such as power struggles and hostility. Jesus is saying that if you look closely at his works, if you rely on more than words, you will find that he is indeed the Christ, but not only will you realize that he is the Christ, but also that your idea of who the Christ is and what he will do needs to be broken down and rebuilt according to the truth of who Jesus really is.

I wonder if Jesus might be saying here that the Jews asking the question do not recognize him as Christ because they do not follow him; that in following Jesus we recognize him for who he really is. Oftentimes, we think that we need to convince people with words that Jesus is the Christ, and they need to acknowledge him first, and then begin to follow him. What if, it is within the context of following Jesus that we learn who he really is, and that to expect people to accept, trust, and then follow Jesus, we are really doing things backwards?

Jesus goes on to say that those who follow him, who recognize him as God's anointed one, God's Christ, that they have nothing in this world to fear. Nothing can take them away from the grasp of the shepherd. Not even death. Our Psalm tells us today that because we have a good shepherd, we can walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil. We know in this post-Easter world that the power of the cross also has power over death. In fact, as we see in today's reading from the book of Acts that God has invested his resurrection power within the church. We are to be a life-giving, restorative community.

What might all of this mean to us? Does this story that comes to us from a pre-Easter, middle Eastern world speak to those of us in 21st century America? I think it does.

First, like the Jews in the first century, many of us have followed Jesus for so long, or maybe it hasn't been so long, regardless, we think we have Jesus figured out. But the fact is some of us need to look again into the scriptures and get to know Jesus all over again. Perhaps your idea of Jesus needs to be broken down and rebuilt according to Jesus' standards. And as Jesus suggested, I invite you to simply follow him, and along the way, through the miracles he performs in your life and those around you, he will make himself known to you.

Second, we see the danger of labeling. The Jews had this label, "Christ", and they had in their mind what all was entailed with that, when in fact they were very wrong. I believe that we as Christians, must avoid labeling people at all costs. Republican; democrat; poor; rich; middle-class; white; black; Mexican; single-mom; old; young; teenager. The problem is that for almost all of these labels, each of us has a preconceived idea of what such a label entails. If you listen to any sort of political talk-radio, you should know what I'm talking about. We've got to stop interacting with people according to their label and begin to treat them according to who they are. We must use more than words in the way we interact with people.

Third, Jesus, in answering the Jews by pointing to his works, gives them more than words. We as a church are called to do the same thing. And here is what I mean. When people hear the word Christian, they think they know what you are talking about. The majority of people in America claim to be Christian and/or to believe in some supreme being. If you throw in the way mass media tends to portray Christians, I would say that the vast majority of Americans have some preconceived notion of what a Christian really is. They are very much like the Jews in this passage who, when they said the word Christ, meant a very specific thing. When popular culture thinks of "Christians", they may think of protests, political lobbying, large buildings, televangelists, money scandals, suits and ties, homophobia, and uncompassionate people who would rather talk than listen.

I would say they are wrong. But, in the model of Jesus, we must give them more than words as our answer. We cannot simply say, “no, we’re not like that. That’s not what following Jesus is about”. We must instead say, “The miracles we do in Jesus’ name speak for us”. Miracles of restoration, of re-creation, miracles of redemption. The one hundred and fifty or so of us who gather here every Sunday morning do not exist simply for the sake of ourselves. We exist for the sake of the thousands of people who we know that are sitting at home right now, or maybe who are sitting in this room, who need a miracle. The people we know who are wondering if their husband is ever going to come back; the people we know who are hoping that there will be money left at the end of the month; the people we know trying to decide what to do with the baby that is growing inside of them; the people we know who escape away from their families for a bottle, a needle, or pill. We exist for those who think that the only way they are going to make it is if they get some sort of miracle. We must give people more than words. We as followers of Christ, must be that miracle.

You might think this is being a little arrogant and prideful. But look back at at least two of the miracles that John tells us about in his Gospel, turning water into wine and feeding the five thousand. When Jesus turns water into wine, he tells the servants to go fill up these huge jars with water and then draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet. And in the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus takes the loaves and fish and tells the disciples to distribute it among the people. In both of these miracles, Jesus was the *source* and the *authority* behind the miracle, but *he was not the instrument of* the miracle. The servants were the ones who filled the jars and drew the wine, even though it probably made no sense to them what they were doing. Likewise, the disciples were the ones distributing the food, even though they probably were wondering what Jesus’ plan was for after they ran out of food. *What if real miracles are simply when people just do what Jesus has said to do, even if it doesn’t make sense?*

Marck Yaconelli, a youth worker, says this about words “If you go to a seminary or step inside a Sunday morning worship service, we’re immersed in words. A newcomer to these settings might easily assume Christianity is about words. It’s reading, memorizing, lecturing, preaching, [discussing] and writing. It’s books, newsletters, worship bulletins... Words, words, words” (Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry* 19). We here at Hope are especially at risk of this! Have you looked at our bulletin this morning? 25 pages!

While the Christian faith contains words, it is about more than words. It is about a person and a people. John’s Gospel does have something very important to say to us about words. John begins his whole Gospel with these words: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” He continues in verse 14, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Jesus offers us more than words. Similarly, we must offer more than words. I will leave you with this quote from Eugene Peterson. "There is no word of God that God does not intend to be lived by us. All words are capable of being incarnated, because all words originate in the Word made flesh." May it be so in our lives. Please pray with me.

Heavenly Father, as you gave more than words to us, you gave yourself, we ask that we would give ourselves wholly to you and to those you’ve placed in our lives. Help us to be a part of the miracles you are working, even when it doesn’t make sense. Amen.