

Signs and Sheep

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Preacher: Vijay Henderson

[0 : 00] For many of us, Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Easter. It's the first day of Holy Week. I know lots of you have been doing things for Lent in preparation, but for the majority, Palm Sunday is the real beginning of Easter.

For us, Easter is the most significant event in our calendar. But out there, I think Christmas still has better marketing, doesn't it? So at Christmas, there's lots more for the retailers to get behind. There's the presents and the decorations. There's summer holidays and, of course, the food. But Palm Sunday is basically just these palm branches and Easter eggs.

There's not much David Jones and Maya can do with that. But here's the thing. God being such a forgiving chap and all, is it okay for Easter to just be about chocolate eggs and some days off work? Or is God allowed to disrupt people's view? That's the question we're going to ask today that'll thread its way through the passage. Is God allowed to disrupt people's view?

[1 : 03] On Palm Sunday, we remember Jesus entering Jerusalem. The people waved the branches at him. Hosanna, Hosanna! Save, save! They cried.

And that's exactly what Jesus does. By dying on the cross, He takes the judgment that we deserve. He saves us. But is that really the Hosanna that people want?

Is that really the salvation people want? Or is God allowed to disrupt their view of salvation? Now, of course, God is allowed to do anything He pleases because He's God.

But everywhere Jesus goes in Israel, the Jews reject Him. They try to kill Him, as we heard. He's performing miracles. He's performing signs that prove who He is, that He's God's or the Jewish Messiah.

But they refuse to allow God or Jesus to disrupt their worldview, their tradition. Occasionally, we've seen that occasionally people believe here and there, but for the most part, the Jews reject Jesus.

[2 : 08] And actually, His own ministry in Israel hasn't really progressed very far. For example, two weeks ago in chapter 9, Jesus healed a man born blind.

And He said, Look, look what I did to His eyes. I am the light of the world. And then last week, He said, I am the good shepherd. But by the end of the episode, on the screen, thanks, Wolf, the Jews who heard these words were again divided.

Many of them said, He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to Him? But others said, These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?

Is it okay for the Jews to be so divided about Jesus? Or is the Father allowed to disrupt their tradition? Today, as Easter approaches, we Christians, we say that Jesus' death and resurrection are the only way to God.

But out there, everyone says, Well, Jesus is just one of many equally valid ways to the Father. Is God allowed to disrupt people's casual view of Jesus and religion?

[3 : 21] Chapters 5 to 10, they are the who is Jesus chapters, the identity chapters. That's actually John's goal for us to see who Jesus is. He documents certain miracles that prove his identity.

After all, who is able to feed 5,000 people with just a lunch? Who is able to walk on water at room temperature? Who is able to heal a paralyzed man?

Who do you think can do that? Who is able to heal a man born blind? Not by putting water in his eyes, but by putting mud in his eyes. Would that be someone who's demon-possessed and raving mad?

Or as John says, see the big purpose statement there on the screen? These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in his name.

Actually, what John has done, and I've put this on your handout, if I could have the next screen. John has taken that purpose statement, and he's structured his whole book around it. I asked my wife, Rachel, if this was clear, and she said, I think the color coding helps you a bit.

[4 : 31] But you can see the purpose statement at the top, and then you can see how it corresponds to what John has been doing through the book. So chapters 2 to 4 are about belief.

Chapters 5 to 10 are the identity chapters. Chapters 11 to 21 are about the life we can have. The first thing Jesus does in chapter 11 is raise Lazarus from the dead.

It's about the life we can have in his name. So John has wrapped his gospel with that purpose statement, knowing who Jesus is. Today, we're in the pink section. We're wrapping up identity. And so what John does to wrap up the identity is he has two questions in the passage we read today. Verse 24. Have a look down at verse 24. How long will you keep us in suspense if you are the Messiah?

If you're the Christ, tell us plainly. And then verse 33. End of verse 33. You, a mere man, claim to be God. Is Jesus the Christ?

[5 : 34] Is Jesus God or the Son of God? They're the points on your handout, as you can see. But today, for the first time, the Father is going to weigh in to the discussion.

And so the points are, are you the Christ? The Father has given me the people. Are you God? The Father calls me Son. And so they're the points that we're going to spend the most time with today. Let's read from verse 22. Then came the festival of dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple courts, walking in Solomon's colonnade. The festival of dedication, it's not actually found in the Old Testament of the Bible, because it occurs in the 400 years between the Old and the New Testaments.

It's about 170 BC. What happened was, Jewish religious leaders, led by the high priest called Menelaus, they outlawed Jewish worship in their own temple.

Menelaus, he allowed Greek worship of Zeus and other gods in God's temple. So he defiled God's house. And a few years later, a Jewish man called Joseph Maccabeus, he said, I'm not having any of that.

[6 : 50] And so he led a successful revolt against Menelaus. It's called the Maccabean Revolt. And what they did is cleanse the temple. And every year since, what the Jews do is they rededicate the temple back to God.

And so they have this feast of dedication. And with all that background, verse 24 happens. The Jews who were there gathered around Jesus saying, how long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, if you are the Christ, tell us plainly. It's obvious the type of Christ or Messiah they wanted. A Maccabeus, a Judas Maccabeus type character who would rescue us from the Romans.

Is God allowed to disrupt their view of rescue? Jesus says, I did tell you who I was, verse 25, but you do not believe.

The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. Last week, Jesus told us he was the good shepherd.

[7 : 53] Today, he talks about sheep. He says, there are two types of sheep in the universe. There are, and they are verse 26 and 27. But you do not believe because you are not my sheep.

In contrast, verse 27, my sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me, but you are not God's flock. That's the emphasis of those verses.

You see, when it comes to telling people plainly about Jesus, we always wish there was another miracle. Do you ever think that? Think, what I really need, all my family and friends really need is another miracle, a modern one, one caught on video or CCTV, not a huge one, just a little one between me and my family.

Do you think that would help your family and friends believe? Miracles are great, aren't they?

They're really hard for people to put away or to explain away because seeing is believing.

Jesus agrees, verse 25, the works I do in my Father's name testify about me. Do you think a more miraculous modern sign would speak plainly to your loved ones?

[9 : 06] Jesus says, the problem isn't the lack of miracles. The problem isn't the lack of evidence. The problem is people refuse to listen because ultimately they're not his sheep.

Ultimately, they will not allow God to disrupt their view of Jesus. Belief always comes down to which type of sheep you are, whether we listen to the shepherd's voice as good sheep do.

In verse 28 and 29, we see what sort of shepherd Jesus is. He says, I give them eternal life and they shall never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hands. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all.

No one can snatch them out of my Father's hand because, verse 30, I and the Father are one. You see, the comfort for a sheep comes down to how big his shepherd's hands are.

Jesus and his sheep are always safe because nobody has bigger hands than the Father. That's what he's saying. No one can snatch them away. And we often worry, don't we, whether we will make it, whether we can hold on to God for the rest of our lives until we die.

[10:17] But the real issue is whether God can hold on to you. Here is a comfort. Nobody can snatch the person who believes in Jesus out of the Father's hands.

Not even dementia, not even sickness, not even death can snatch the believer out of the Father's hands. That's the sort of shepherd Jesus is.

That's the sort of Christ he is. They're really comforting verses actually. But in the context about who Jesus is, the answer is verse 29. My Father who has given them, given the people to me.

What that is, is a Christmas illustration. See, what happens on Christmas is Jesus goes downstairs, he wakes up, goes downstairs, and he opens his presents. And he opens his big presents.

He says, wow, thank you, Father, you've given me the nation of Israel. You see, Israel belonged to the Father, the Old Testament makes that clear. But the Father gives Israel to the Son.

[11:27] Now, we all know that you never snatch presents away from a child. That's terrible. But verse 28 and 29 are addressed to Jewish religious leaders and their man-made religion that are trying to snatch Israel out of the Father's hands.

Why? Because they will not allow God to disrupt their traditional view. Jesus, if you're the Christ, tell us plainly, my Father seems to think so.

He has given me the flock. He's given me the nation. And nobody can snatch them out of my Father's hands.

If people oppose this, if people reject this, it tells us which type of sheep they are. The Jews do oppose him. Verse 31. Again, his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him.

This is our second point. The question in the second point is, are you God? The answer is, the Father calls me Son. Let me read from verse 32. I've shown you many good works from the Father.

[12:35] For which of these do you stone me? We're not stoning you for any good work, they replied, but for blasphemy because you, a mere man, claim to be God. See, they think a mere man is trying to be God, but John's Gospel says, no, no, God is trying to be a man.

It's not just that God has spoken, it's that God became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus is visible, Jesus is touchable. These religious leaders, they're professional blasphemy hunters.

But what happens on the day when God himself actually shows up? What are they supposed to do? What's Jesus supposed to do? Stop pretending or pretend to be someone else? Stop doing God-only miracles which come so naturally to him?

Tell lies about who he is? It was a capital crime in Israel for a mere man to claim to be God. So they picked up the stones to give Jesus the death penalty and so what he does is he calms them down in verse 34.

Have a look down, verse 34. Jesus answered them, is it not written in your law, I have said you are gods. If you call them gods to whom the word of God came and scripture cannot be set aside, what about the one whom the father set apart as his very own and sent into the world?

[13:56] Jesus says don't get angry about vocabulary. Don't get angry that I use the name gods. He says, is it not written in Psalm 82, which is our first reading, is it not written in your own law that God called human beings little gods once?

It's good to be gods, good to be called gods. He says, don't get upset if I use that same title about myself. But there's another contrast, verse 36.

What about the one whom the father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy? Because I said I am God's son.

You see, Jesus is on a totally different level from all other human beings claiming to be God or good men who's given the title God. Jesus was set apart by the father as the father's very own, sent into the world as his son.

At the feast of dedication, they would set the temple apart to God again. Jesus stands up there and says, yes, I too have been set apart. Very deliberate language.

[15:06] I too have been set apart by the father. The reason why is because Jesus is the new temple. Jesus is the place where the world comes to meet the father from now on.

Jesus, are you God? The father seems to think so. He is happy to call me son. He says, verse 37, don't believe me unless I do the works of the father.

But if I do them, even though you don't believe me, at least believe the works that you may know and understand that the father is in me and I in the father.

Seeing is believing, says Jesus. At least believe the works. Surely they prove, verse 38, that the father is in me and I am in the father. That's the language of sonship.

Verse 39, but again, they tried to seize him. Why? Because they refused to let God disrupt their view of the son.

[16:07] Can Jesus really be the son? Can Jesus really be God's temple? Aren't all religions equally valid? Aren't they all equal ways to God? People out there always think that.

But to do that is to get between the father and the son. Have you ever been to the woods? I don't know. Have you been to the woods? You know that they say never get between a mother bear and her cubs?

Because that's when the claws come out. My mum has got three sons. Never get between a mother and her son too. Just ask any of my ex-girlfriends.

They'll tell you. Never get between a mother and a son. Similarly, never get between the father and the son. If we say that Muhammad or Buddha or some other prophet are also equal ways to God, we are getting between the father and the son.

That's when the claws come out. When it comes to religion, people always say that. They always want to say all religions are equal ways to God. Because they will not allow God to disrupt their view of the son.

[17:16] Are you the Christ? The father thinks so. He has given me the people. Are you God? The father thinks so. He calls me son. Finally, let's finish by asking some questions about ourselves.

Are you, are we, Israel? This is verse 40 to 42. Speaking of Israel, Jesus seems to be done with this nation now.

He did his miracles there. He told them who he was, but they tried to stone him. They tried to seize him for all his efforts. So, verse 40, then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days.

There he stayed, and many people came to him. They said, though John never performed a sign, all that John said about this man was true, and in that place many people believed in Jesus.

Here he is on the other side of the Jordan. He's in Gentile lands, unclean for Jewish people, but still, verse 41, many people believed. They didn't even need a sign, we're told.

[18:22] Verse 42, in that place many people believed in Jesus. You see, there's nothing wrong with this shepherd. There's nothing wrong with the miracles, the works that he does.

This shepherd will have a flock. The shocking thing is that not all of the flock will be Jews. The country of Israel, that was God's flock, but by opposing the son, they have de-Israelled themselves. By refusing to listen to Jesus, they show which type of sheep they are in the universe. That was the warning for the Jews then, it's the warning for religious types today.

Trying to get to heaven without Jesus, trying to approach God through man-made religion is to get between the father and the son.

The warning, this shepherd will find other sheep. The feast of dedication, it remembers when the religious leaders defiled the temple, they allowed other gods to have an equal place there.

[19:32] Today, when people do that, saying all religions are the same, they are defiling the temple all over again. When people say, Jesus is just one of many religious figures, they are getting between the father and the son.

The warning is, this father, this shepherd, will find another Israel. Do you notice that he started the passage in Solomon's colonnade in the temple, the very centre of Jewish life.

He ended the passage across the Jordan in unclean Gentile lands. God's shepherd will find other sheep. The other sheep will be the true Israel, even if they're not Jewish.

So here's the question, are you part of the true Israel? Israel, because you believe in Jesus? Do we listen to Jesus when he says things we absolutely disagree with?

Will we follow Jesus even or especially when life is tough, as good sheep do? Are we willing to let God disrupt our view of who his son is?

[20 : 45] God is God is God to finish our time with a positive. Here's the positive. Anyone, anyone, whether they are unclean Gentiles from across the Jordan, whether they are religious Jews, whether they're religious Anglicans, religious Catholics, whether they're Australian, Chinese, Malaysian, South African, Singaporean, even Indians, anyone can be part of the new Israel, the special people of God.

No matter who we are, no matter what we have done, if we obey the voice of the shepherds, if we believe Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, he will hold us in his cosmic sized hands and no one can snatch us away.

As we approach Easter, we will see again how Jesus carries us from death to life. These things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God and that by believing you may have life, eternal life in his name.

Let's pray together. Father God, we declare as one people that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God. And Father, thank you that you would have sheep like us in your flock.

Thank you that all it takes to be part of your people is to believe in Jesus, to follow his words.

Please help us when that is really difficult.

[22 : 35] Please help us when it's really hard to listen to Jesus. please help us to resist the pull of our culture that says all religions are equally the same.

Help us to stand firm on Jesus, the only way to the Father. We ask it in his name. Amen.