



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

---

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 12, 2019  
ACTS 9:36-43; PSALM 23; REVELATION 7:9-17; JOHN 10:22-30

## QUESTIONS IN TROUBLED TIMES



**John 10: 22-30** *[At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. 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. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."]*

My high school chemistry teacher was something of a trickster—his name was

ironically, Mr. Edge. I went to an all-boys high school, so it was commonplace for the

teachers to contend with adolescent banter by dishing it right back. Mr. Edge took it a little further...but always with some intent to teach us. So, for example, to teach us about pressure change, he would stand at the teacher's table and heat up corked test tubes with water until the corks fired in our direction. (No student was hurt in the course of this experiment.)

He would mix up his concoction of fertilizer and soap (that is, nitrogen and glycerin) and place small amounts on filter paper, strategically positioned on his desk—a declaration of don't touch, lest the nitroglycerine compound would pop like a firecracker.

He was painstakingly evasive when one of us asked him a question, usually offering some reply that required some sleuth work on our part before we could discover the answer. So I once asked:

*“Mr. Edge, should I use toluene or methyl alcohol to dissolve this compound?”*

*“What's the boiling point of water?”*

His question was not directly applicable, but boiling point was the hint that would lead one to the answer.

Or his favorite answer to an either-or question—*Mr. Edge, should I answer this question in units of moles or grams?* He would grin and simply say, “Yes.”

Decades later, I can see he was offering a different form of wisdom to teach us, rather than just giving a direct answer.

The people crowding around Jesus wanted a clear and convincing answer, a direct answer to their question: Are you the messiah, the one who is to come? But Jesus answers them with cryptic words. A different wisdom that they did not readily understand.

Now to catch the significance of this interaction it helps to know the setting.

We're told it's the festival of the Dedication, and where is Jesus standing? —the portico of Solomon in the temple. Huge implications here, you see, because nearly two hundred years earlier another hero, Judas Maccabeus, stood in the same spot and rededicated the temple following his victory over the Greeks. Everyone standing around Jesus knew that in the year 164 BC, the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes had desecrated the temple by killing innocent Jews there, spilling their blood and spreading it on the altar, while also placing pagan signs all around. It had been rendered unusable for their worship of Yahweh.

But then a miracle occurred, and the outnumbered Jewish rebels resoundingly defeated the stronger Greeks. The Festival of the Dedication is known as Hanukkah today, and so Jesus is standing where another hero once stood, and people are asking him, are you the one who will defeat the Romans as Judas Maccabeus did the Greeks? They wanted him to help them make sense of their situation in which the Roman oppressors were crucifying people by the thousands, the burden of their taxation left many hungry

even to starvation, and there seemed to be no end in sight.

Help us, Jesus. Can you hear their plea in the question?

But Jesus does not answer forthrightly, does he? My ways are not your ways; my thoughts are higher than your thoughts...the Father and I are one. Scandalous words which surely caused a collective gasp in those gathered that day.

My friends, in our own time, there is enough unsettling news to draw the comparisons and let their questions become ours today. Saber rattling seems to be moving us precipitously close to another war in the Middle East; homelessness and hunger bear down on countless souls here in our own city; innocent people killed in senseless shootings (111 school shootings in this country in the last fifty years!), and the list could go on.

Amidst all this suffering, I will tell you I make my prayers daily for peace in the world, and wisdom for our leaders, and relief for those hurting and oppressed, but little seems to change. I will confess to you that I fight against succumbing to cynicism in the face of such tragedies, and I will admit I sometimes find myself numbed and disengaged by the weight of it all. I am haunted by that. I do not want that for myself or for you.

And then I read these passages appointed for today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, and they help me refocus. Did you know that two of the readings appointed for today—Psalm 23 and the passage from Revelation—are

prescribed for use at burials. Comforting words for a time of loss, and yet we also get them in this Easter Season of celebration that all is not lost, resurrection triumphs over death in the most surprising ways—resurrection wisdom that is not completely understood on this side of the grave.

We are invited to read these passages from scripture with those who are suffering this day in mind, knowing that they are hurting deeply and trying to make sense of it all.

Psalm 23 conjures up images of serene pastoral scenes with green grass and gently rolling streams of water. This shepherd is the stuff of children's Sunday School, right? Peaceful, tender, reassuring...and yet it also makes no attempt to shy away from the valleys of the shadow of death.

Life with the shepherd is real—and even in the darkness, people are treated to the transcendent, the holy, and the goodness and mercy of God. But it never answers the question, “Why.” Why do awful things happen—why are lives so often tragically and suddenly lost? Why do we live in a world where people die regularly and senselessly? Why?

My friends, I don't believe there is a direct answer to that question that will satisfy people who are hurting. Psalm 23 offers great consolation, but nowhere in it does it explain “why.”

So how do we do this—this life? How do we hold the space in such a hurting world? How do we do this as people of faith?

Well, I believe anyone who spends much time with those who are ill or in crisis will testify to what comforts them and what does not.

Comfort does not come from assurances that everything will be alright; comfort does not come from simply waving the pain off as somehow being attributed to God's will.

No, comfort comes when one chooses to sit alongside that person in her darkest hour; comfort comes when a friend agrees to walk through the darkness with you; comfort comes when two or three gather together in the darkness and make that time and space holy, and hold the space till a glimmer of light shines in as a gift. That is the Easter promise around which we gather here week by week.

This messiah of ours chooses not to take shortcuts, because he knows about the darkness. He has seen it, he has experienced it, and he has agreed to walk through those dark valleys with us.

This messiah of ours is the same Lord who was crucified and who rose again; this messiah is the same Lord who promises to redeem the world, to relieve its suffering, to restore it to wholeness, to inaugurate a new creation. I am willing to lean into that hope. I don't know how else to do this...

*So which is it, Teacher, are you our Shepherd in darkness or in light?*

*And the Shepherd smiles, and says simply, "YES!"*



*Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!*