

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

It's the Feast of Dedication, and it's winter, John tells us. Surprisingly, we probably know this feast better by the Hebrew word: Hanukkah, which means dedication. It remains a Jewish festival commemorating the rededication of the Temple after it had been defiled by Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 BC. It happens usually in December; John confirms it: it was winter, and it was surely cold.

Jesus was there at the festival, walking in the shelter of the temple in Solomon's colonnade, thinking about His sheep, when all of the sudden, a pack of "*fierce wolves*" surrounded Him. I'm not talking about real wolves, of course, but metaphorical wolves as St. Paul calls those who want to destroy Jesus' flock. Or as Jesus calls them: "*false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves*" (Matt. 7:15).

They wanted an answer to the question that was on everyone's mind: "*How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.*" This is a theme in John; we heard it again recently. John said that He wrote about Jesus' works, the signs He did, "*so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*" (John 20:31).

But it runs throughout the pages of John. Remember how Andrew first told Simon Peter, his brother, "*We have found the Messiah' (which means Christ)*" (John 1:41). And Nathanael said to Jesus, "*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel*" (John 1:49) — he's saying that Jesus is the Christ! "*Can this be the Christ*" (John 4:29), asked the Samaritan woman at the well?

Indeed, only two months earlier, it was October and the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus went up to Jerusalem, and the people were asking, "*Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Christ*" (John 7:26)? Again, "*When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man [Jesus] has done*" (John 7:31)? Some were sure: "*This is the Christ.*" But [others] said, "*Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was*" (John 7:41-42)? They didn't realize that's exactly how Jesus was born. And, with the healing of the man born blind, opposition grew. The Jews "*agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue*" (John 9:22).

Yes, the rumblings were there, but then Jesus went and did it. He equated Himself with the shepherd King, David, taken "*from the sheepfolds; from following the nursing ewes ... to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his*

inheritance”; that is, Jesus Himself laid claim to being the Christ. “*I am the door of the sheep*” (John 10:7), He said. And shortly after that, “*I am the good shepherd*” (John 10:11). Jesus was laying claim to the office of Him who would shepherd His flock with an “*upright heart*” and guide “*them with his skillful hand.*” (Psalm 78:70-72).

The Jews had their chance, or so they thought. “*If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.*” Of course, they didn’t really want to know what they asked Jesus. They had already made up their mind about Him. They just wanted to catch Him in His words that they might destroy Him. Remember in His trial, the Jews accused Jesus of blasphemy for admitting that He was “*the Christ, the Son of God*” (Matt. 26:63), and they sent Him to His death. So already here, they wanted Jesus to say it plainly, “I am the Christ, the Son of God,” so they could stone Him; and indeed, when Jesus said that He and the Father were one, they picked up the stones. You, “*being a man, make yourself God*” (John 10:33).

Jesus, filled with Divine knowledge and wisdom, did not fall into their trap and answer their question forthrightly. Rather He answered, “*I did tell you, and you do not believe.*” And Jesus pointed them to the works He had done in the Father’s name, that is, by His authority, Divine signs that moved the ordinary people to think “This must be the Christ.” That’s what Jesus’ words and Jesus’ signs are about ... bearing witness about who Jesus is and moving us to faith. That pack of ravenous Jews, though, would not believe.

It’s not that this Shepherd didn’t die for them. He did. “*The good shepherd lays down his life for THE sheep*” (John 10:11), not some sheep, not just for His sheep, but for “*the sheep,*” that is, all sheep. And the Good Shepherd laid down His life “*that I may take it up again*” in resurrection victory, again for all the sheep (John 10:17). It’s another common theme in John. Jesus “*takes away the sins of the world*” (John 1:29). “*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ...*” (John 3:16). Jesus “*is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world*” (1 John 2:2).

Yet, not all people are saved for not all believe. Although the atonement is universal, salvation is “*by grace ... through faith*” (Eph. 2:8). It’s those who believe in God’s only Son who do “*not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16). Some people refuse to believe; sheep refuse to listen to the Shepherd’s voice. The Jews here refused to believe, and so, Jesus said, they were “*not among [His] sheep,*” for “*My sheep hear my voice,*” the Good Shepherd says, “*and I know them, and they follow me.*”

As we heard Jesus say before, faith is that which receives the proffered gifts: “*whoever believes in [the Son] should not perish but have eternal life*” (John

3:16). Here, it's to those who hear Jesus' voice and follow Him that He promises "*eternal life*" and no perishing ... more than that. Eternal life is an eternity sheltered by Jesus' presence, unbothered by hunger or thirst or scorching heat; it means being guided by our Shepherd to "*springs of living water*" and having every tear wiped away from our eyes. Oh, how glorious is that to ponder!

But Jesus gives us one more image to ponder for the here and now, one more comfort, one more hope: "*no one will snatch [my sheep] out of my hand.*" This is the image we have of the Good Shepherd ... being taken up into His arms, held in His loving hands, being cradled as a little lamb in His arms. We are there, placed there by the living waters of Holy Baptism. James Gary was placed there today, set in the midst of Jesus' flock, held in Jesus' hands. And, oh what hands they are: hands dedicated enough to bear the stripes and wounds for straying sheep, hands gentle enough to comfort the troubled and distressed, hands strong enough to hold on tightly as fierce wolves try to snatch away the weak or injured, hands skilled enough to ward off the devil prowling about like a ravenous lion seeking to devour his prey and to guide us to green pastures and still waters.

He is the Good Shepherd; we are His lambs. Baptized into the Triune name, we are safe and secure in His hands, and in the Father's, for they are one. He is the shepherd King, the son of David, the Son of God. Let us confess Him as "*the Lord [who] is my shepherd,*" who cares for us in every need (Psalm 23:1). And let us rejoice:

*"Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!
Serve the LORD with gladness!
Come into his presence with singing!
Know that the LORD, he is God!
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise!
Give thanks to him; bless his name!
For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations."* (Psalm 100)

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!