

**Acts 9: 36-43
John 10:22-30**

**April 25, 2010
Bakersfield, CA, USA**

“Relief in the Plain Truth”

“If you are the messiah, tell us plainly,” they asked Him during the Feast of Lights - known today as Hanukkah. Don’t we all ask that question at some point? We want proof, or at the very least some assurance, that Jesus is the One. There are so many voices calling us from this side or that in the political realm, in the realm of pop culture, in the religious arena; so many voices that it can be confusing. Who has the *one* voice we should follow?

Discerning who is the One to listen to can take time – maybe more time than we want to give. Do we seriously check what political leaders tell us? Do we consider carefully what messages the pop culture – through TV, movies, music, fashion, and bestsellers is telling us? If we are really seeking God’s direction, if we are really checking out Jesus, then shouldn’t we give him the time he deserves?

He reveals himself as we discover what he does in the lives of people, including our lives. Last week you heard me speak of the apostle Peter and his meeting with the risen Lord there on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. When Jesus asked him three times, “Do you love me?” Peter was forced into his past when he had denied Jesus three times. He had to face his past before he could be completely healed. When Jesus forgave his past he directed Peter, “Feed my sheep.” This is what the risen Lord does: he challenges us to look at ourselves in complete honesty, he heals all our iniquities, and he gives us a mission.

Don’t most of us carry a lot of stuff from our past? I like the way Max Lucado puts it in his book *When God Whispers Your Name*. He says we drag our past around like a big old sack of rocks. It’s full of stones, boulders, pebbles, all sizes, all shapes, all unwanted. Some are rocks of rejection: didn’t make the tryout, didn’t get the job, got a poor grade or evaluation, never get paid what you’re worth. All the little “no’s” add up and soon the sack is heavy with stones of rejection, stones we don’t deserve.

Then there is the stone of regret. Regret for the time you lost your temper; for the day you lost control; for the moment you lost your pride; the years you lost your priorities or decisions made or not made; regret for the words you spoke or didn’t speak at the crucial moment. With so many stones the sack gets heavy, and we get tired. How can we have dreams for the future when all our energy is required to shoulder our past? No wonder some people look miserable; they’ve got this god-awful, uncomfortable sack and just want rest from it.

Oh sure, we try ways to get relief. Go to work early, work so hard you forget about it; use alcohol and drugs or promiscuous sex to escape the pain. Some drag their sack to a therapist, pour out all the rocks and name them one by one.

The therapist listens, she empathizes, she offers some advice on how to bury some of those rocks, or at least pound them into pebbles. But when your time is up, you must pick up the remaining rocks, put them back in the sack, and shoulder it again.

Others take their sack to church, hoping for relief. Some well-meaning preachers and churches just add to the load. It's hard to be affirming when you feel affirmation-starved. It's hard to be forgiving when you still feel guilty. Some have been in church for years and haven't found peace. Others say, "I tried that. I read the Bible, I sat in the pew, I said prayers - nothing." So then, how do you get relief?

There is a voice that speaks to us who carry those sacks of stones. He says, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." (Mt. 11:28). Jesus says, "Come to me . . ." Could it be that some with heavy sacks went to religion and didn't go to Jesus? Could it be that some went to church but never saw Christ? "Come to me," he says; he himself is the solution for weariness of the soul. He says it pretty simply, quite plainly . . . do we listen, do we genuinely hear?

Most people want to be sure that the solution they seek is the right one, the truth, with a capital "T." (Some don't believe there is any truth - sadly, they will never find a solution). It happens at a deep place in our lives: we want absolute, ironclad assurance that we are on the path of truth. We wish Christ would tell us plainly.

We're not so different from those who were at the Temple in Jerusalem during the Hanukkah celebration. They wanted him to step out of the shadows and be recognized. They asked "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

And he responded, "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." He had already shown them by the deeds he had performed in God's name that he was the Messiah. Now he is saying that some cannot recognize him because they do not yet belong with him.

Even though they were right there in the Temple, the house of God, they didn't get it. That's a problem not confined to the first century. We too want Jesus to "tell us plainly" because our prosaic minds are perhaps unable to handle present ambiguity and have not the patience for time to clarify or reveal what is truth. We don't always recognize truth that comes through spiritual power. Is it that we want Jesus on our own terms - not for who he really is, but for what fits our desires or plans? Are we true believers in him and his power to do works in his Father's name? Or do we insist on doing it all ourselves without him? [John Wesley was ordained, set out to be a missionary, was doing good works but had not yet heard the Lord's voice. It wasn't until his Aldersgate experience, when his heart "was strangely warmed," that he heard the Lord's voice and he knew for

sure that Christ was the One of God *and* that he, John, belonged with Jesus. Then, then Wesley really began to feed Jesus' sheep.] I wonder if we do not understand him, even though we name him in church and our lives. Perhaps that is because we still make ourselves, or maybe our church, the center, rather than Jesus and the kingdom of God.

"My sheep hear my voice," He says. His disciples know him as their shepherd; the Lord is my shepherd. In English the word "Lord" is used as a title by which both God and Jesus are addressed, signifying in each instance the most significant way in which God is perceived as active in history. In the Old Testament the personal name of God was too holy to pronounce aloud so the title "Adonai" was substituted. When Christians say, "The Lord is my Shepherd!" most of us are probably thinking almost entirely about Jesus the Risen Christ. But his title "Lord" is the same as Adonai in Psalm 23. The risen Jesus is our shepherd who finds green pastures for us and leads us beside still waters; who restores our "soul." Jesus as the Risen Christ is our Lord and God just as for Israelites and for Jews Adonai is, was, and always will be Lord and God.

The last book of the Bible, Revelation, speaks of this truth: he is the Lamb who was slain and in whose blood are the robes of the saints made white. Now he sits on the throne of God, in power, having put all enemies under his feet. He is Lord because he is Christ the Victor – the Lord of power and might. He has defeated death, the consequence of sin, and all works of the Evil One. He will lead us through the valley of the shadow of death and we will fear no evil for his rod and staff – his weapons – provide security. But it is not just about you and me. It is about Jesus and the Kingdom of God. He is the rightful king who has landed to take back the nation and people who rightly belong to him. He will equip us to join him in the campaign to liberate people for his sake.

Back there at the Temple in Jerusalem Jesus had answered those who questioned him by simply saying, "The Father and I are one." You can't get more plain than that. Jesus said his sheep listen to Him and that he knows them and that they follow him. He has called you, with a voice that calls us from beyond where we are now. Go to him. Take down your combative defenses, to wait, to listen again for His voice. Admit your soul secrets, that he already knows, and he can heal you. Don't stop short at church or religion; go to Him. Put down your sack of rocks. You'll be glad you did. Your family and friends will be glad too . . . it's hard to throw stones when you leave your sack at the foot of the cross. You, your sack... me, my sack of stuff... all of us and all that we have can be washed in the blood of the Lamb –as it says in Scripture. Come to him, ease your burden; those who wait upon the Lord will not be lost. He has the power to do mighty works, like carry away your sack of burdens, then equip you for a great mission.

He is able to be Lord and shepherd in rough times and uncertain times – in times like we're in now. Hear his voice, know his power for you, even you. Join Him and take up his great mission.