



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

“on Solomon's porch”
May 11, 2025 – Easter C4
John 10:22-30

A Homily by The Rev'd Jo Popham

It was the feast of the dedication of the altar, the “feast of the purification of the Temple” it was called then. We know it as Hanukkah – the Feast of Lights – that occurs in December and lasts eight days when Jews light a candle each day in observance of the victory of Judas Maccabaeus in the year 165 BC. The king of Syria, named Antiochus IV Zeus Olympias Epiphanes, believed himself to be an incarnation, an epiphany of the Olympian Zeus. Antiochus had a statue of Zeus – of himself – erected in the Temple. He attacked Jerusalem in an effort to abolish the Jewish religion and killed 80,000 Jews. The Temple courts and chambers were profaned. And swine – not sheep, not ritually clean lambs, but swine – were sacrificed, not to the God of Israel, but to the pagan god Zeus – right on the Temple altar. The Maccabaeans fought Antiochus – and won. They cleansed and restored the Temple. And they rebuilt the altar.

It was during the feast celebrating the rededication of the altar in Solomon's Temple, that Jesus made an appearance before his fellow Jews. It was winter, and our Lord had wrapped himself in an extra cloak to brace against the cold. He walked to Solomon's porch, the portico of Solomon's Temple, to Solomon's colonnade, as it was called, because the massive structure protected him from the wintry weather. Imagine with me the scene. Jesus strode onto one of the most revered and imposing portions of the Temple where the roof was supported by 40-foot high pillars, where Jews came to walk and meditate, to pray, and to teach. Solomon had built this the oldest of the columned porches on the east side of the Temple, and Jesus walked onto the portion of the colonnade that Herod had restored atop the relics of Solomon's Temple. This had to be intentional. Was his purpose to announce who he was to the Jewish authorities? That God's work and his work were and are one? I believe that that is exactly what happened on Solomon's porch

that wintery day. Jesus had chosen a place of importance on a day of importance to claim who he was – the Son of God. I believe that once and for all he wanted to settle the theological differences between himself and his opponents. He wanted to tell them what they did not want to know: that in him – in Jesus – they could experience the presence of God in the world.

When John's Gospel was written the Christian community was in conflict with the synagogue authorities. And here in the cloister on Solomon's porch, we have the last debate between the Jews and Jesus in John's Gospel. The Jewish authorities asked him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." In essence Jesus told them "I am." His actions had shown who he was, but the people wanted to know "plainly." They wanted to know if he was the Messiah, the one whom the Jews expected to come to establish a godly kingdom. In John's Gospel Jesus had only claimed to be the Christ to the Samaritan woman (4:26) and less explicitly to the man born blind (9:35-37). In answer to their questions on Solomon's porch, Jesus did not tell them directly that he was the Messiah, but he spoke of the works that attested to his identity. Jesus really could not give them a straight answer. He could not deny that he was the Christ, yet to claim that he was the Messiah would have invited misunderstanding, he was not the kind of savior that the people sought. So he answered them: "I and my Father are one." He claimed oneness with God and preexistence with God. Earlier in another antagonistic conversation with the synagogue authorities where he was reinterpreting the law, he told them that whoever keeps his word – God's word – would never see death. Jesus claimed to know God and told them that "before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). I am. That is the same name that God used. But to understand Jesus's answers required faith, which they lacked.

Being one with God, being united with God's work in the world, was not a concept that the religious authorities could grasp. The Jews alone had rejected pagan polytheism. Many Jews had suffered and died rather than disavow the one God. Every Sabbath they repeated the Shema: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is one." God is one. God is one. For Jesus

to claim to be one with God was more than blasphemy. His claim threatened their very identity. Of course, the Jews interpreted his words as a sacrilege against the one God. There on Solomon's porch in the Temple where Antiochus had set himself up as a god, Jesus claimed to one with God in God's works. What an affront this was to the religious authorities! Jesus's claim was not a concept that the Jews could understand, but more than that, it was so offensive that it would lead to his death on the cross and to his resurrection. The incident on Solomon's porch would lead to our being saved.

To be clear, Jesus did not claim to have made himself divine, as Antiochus and other Roman leaders and Emperors had. Jesus's claim was that he preexisted with God. His story in John is one of God becoming human to save humankind – to save us. Jesus was no Antiochus, he was no Caesar. He was incarnate – God made man, not man made god.

So often we hear the 'Jesus is the good shepherd' message from today's reading. And indeed it is there, quite plainly. When I was a child this Sunday was called 'good shepherd Sunday.' But if we look deeper at the meaning of these verses in John, we will hear plainly what our Lord was saying to the people on Solomon's porch and to us. The shepherd figure runs throughout John's Gospel, but it is prevalent throughout the Old Testament, as well, as a metaphor for the restoration of the rule of God – the Messianic message. But as we know the religious establishment expected the Christ, the Messiah, to be a political liberator who would restore Israel. Instead, if they had ears to hear, they would have heard of the power of God through this man Jesus, God's son, God incarnate – the power of God to work hand in hand with God's self to have power over life and death. In Jesus's claim we hear the promise of eternal life that was impossible for the synagogue authorities to understand. We hear the beginning of the concept of the Trinity. John's first century believers, the first Christians were monotheists who did not grasp completely who Jesus claimed to be. While we 21st century Christians have a more full understanding of monotheism, I think that the Trinity is hard for us to fully understand even today. We know that there is one God – a triune God which includes the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in unity as one – three separate persons who are in essence one –

working together in unity to accomplish God's work in the world. But imagine Jesus trying to explain this to 1st century believers who struggled to hold onto their belief in one God. It must have been even harder still to convince the Jewish authorities. It is a hard sell even today. There is a billboard not far from here on I-10 that reads "Are you practicing Idolatry? The Scripture says: 'God is One.' Not Three in One." The Trinity is a hard concept to grasp, yes, but I will leave that to Jim to preach on Trinity Sunday, June 15th. Suffice to say that Jesus is of one being with the God the Father, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son. So Jesus the Christ and the Holy Spirit are united with God, the one God, in three persons.

And Jesus is united to us in his humanity. So then we too are united to God in the work that we do in God's name in the world. If I may be so bold, when Jesus claimed his identity as God's Son by saying "I and my Father are one" he was also claiming that we are one with God, too. Jesus the Christ and the Holy Spirit cannot be separated from God the Father. And my friends, we cannot and will never be separated from God, just as Jesus could not, and cannot. No one and nothing can take us away from God. No one can "snatch" us "out of the Father's hand" (John 10:29). We are his because of Jesus's sacrifice for us. God gave us to Jesus just as God gave Jesus to us, and that relationship cannot be broken. Jesus tried to explain this to the Jews and Jesus's followers alike. But until after the resurrection they had no possible way of understanding him. Jesus wanted to redeem the Jews. That was his mission. But his work was even larger than that. He reached out "on Solomon's porch" and "beyond the Jordan" to all people (John 10:40) – to us – and claimed us as his own, as his father's, as God's. As God's own, being one with Jesus the Son, we are to go about God's work in the world with the help of the Holy Spirit. We, the church of St. Andrew's By-the-Sea, have to discern what we are being called to do. And I think that will drive where we are to do it, where we will reside, as people united to God through Jesus's work among us empowered by the Holy Spirit to be Christ to the people here and beyond.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.