

“Somehow ...”

I think you will find hearing the gospel helpful, if you know a little of the historical context. John gives us both the date and the place. The date was the Festival of the Dedication, sometimes called The Festival of Lights, which we know by its Jewish name “Hanukkah,” and corresponds to our December 25th celebration. The origin of the Festival of Dedication lies in the greatest times of heroism in Jewish history. There was a king in Syria who reigned from 175 to 164 B.C. He was a lover of all things Greek. He decided that he would eliminate the Jewish religion by introducing Greek ways and thoughts, Greek religion and gods into Palestine. At first, he tried to do it peacefully but there was great resistance. In 170 B.C. this Syrian king attacked Jerusalem; it became a capital offense to possess a copy of the law, or to circumcise a child. The Temple courts were profaned; The Temple chambers were turned into brothels; and finally the great altar of the burnt-offerings was turned into an altar to Olympian Zeus upon which a weekly pig roast was held!

This ignited a revolution and Judas Maccabaeus and his brother rose to lead the epic fight of freedom. In 164 B.C, the struggle was won; the Temple was cleansed and purified; the altar was rebuilt; robes and utensils were replaced. To commemorate the purification of the Temple, the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah) was instituted which was to be celebrated each year for eight days. Eight lights were set in the windows of many homes thus given the holiday the name Festival of Lights.

These lights had two significances. First, they were a reminder that at the first celebrating of the Festival of Dedication, the light of freedom had come back to Israel. Second, it reminded the people of a miracle; that when the Temple’s great seven branched candlestick was re-lit, there was only enough purified oil for one day; however, God saw fit to have the candlestick remained lit for eight days.

Now keep in mind this historic context, because this is the time and the place Jesus is walking about teaching a Roman occupied people ... a people oppressed and feeling their nation is once again in a dark place. To this setting Jesus proclaims: “I am the Light of the world.” Essentially Jesus is teaching that he is the personification of The Festival of Light ... he is the personification of Hanukkah. That got people’s attention especially the Jewish religious authorities. Is Jesus mocking the work of Judas Maccabaeus ... mocking the sacred miracle of light ... deifying himself in public?

[Hear now the Gospel Lesson according to John]

Why must Jesus antagonize the crowds? Obviously in today’s lesson, Jesus has irritated the faithful and his critics have had enough! Though questioned straightforward, Jesus can be fairly evasive, ambiguous, and just plain hard to understand. Who is this Jesus anyway? Who does he think he is? Because when asked such a question Jesus says things like, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” Or, “I am bread, I am life, I am the way, I am the Good Shepherd,” and on and on. What is any of that supposed to mean? When asked to identify himself, Jesus speaks symbolically, metaphorically, and figuratively. This exasperates his critics who confront Jesus, “Show us plainly, directly, and clearly who you are. Stop acting like you’re running for Congress!”

Jesus is also exasperated with people. For three years he has been telling and showing them, but they refuse to see and refuse to hear. Then Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice and they follow me.” Sheep! Jesus is back on the metaphorical, symbolic, and figurative. ... Or ... is he? I wonder! I think on some level, somehow you and I know what Jesus is talking about. Why else are we here this morning? Why are we, despite all of our weaknesses and misunderstandings ... why are we here following Jesus?

I think it’s because ... somehow ... you and I have heard his voice. We may not know everything about Jesus, may not know much about the Bible, much less about theology. But we do know Jesus. Somehow ... in some way or another --- maybe not as clearly as we might like, but clearly enough for us to follow --- somehow Jesus has revealed himself to us. He has spoken. And we have heard his voice as the very voice of God. In other words, when we have seen and heard Jesus, we have seen and heard as much of God as we ever hope to see and hear. This is verified when Jesus says, “I and the father are one.”

The world may not know Jesus. His critics may not him. But we know him because like sheep that know the voice of the Shepherd, we know the voice of One who came and lived and died and lived again and claimed us as his own. This is why Jesus says, “My sheep know me.” We are here ... though at different levels and degrees of faith ... but

we here because by the grace of God (and make now mistake, it is by the grace of God alone we are here) ... by the grace of God we know Jesus. The very faith we have in Jesus ... the very knowledge that we have of Jesus is a miracle! The belief we have, as great or small as it is ... the faith we have is a miracle ... a miracle that has happened to you ... to me.

This is good news to us. The risen Christ has come out to us ... somehow out of our doubts and misgivings ... somehow out of our misunderstandings and unanswered questions and somehow has called us even us ... and we have heard ... and we have followed ... somehow!

Fredricka Matthews-Green, a Christian writer, received an email from a friend who was struggling with the question of how it is that Jesus died for our sins. The friend briefly summarized his life in his note. Raised in a nominally Jewish home, he moved first to atheism and then to non-theistic Eastern religion before he came to consider the Christian faith. He wanted to believe the claims of the Christian faith, but it just didn't make much sense to him. He wrote: "How could the Father send the Son, if they are one? How could God the Son died? Why was it necessary that his body be resurrected? Please don't take this as being argumentative: I would really like to find some way to understand. As much as I love Jesus' teachings and person, no matter how I turn it around in my mind, no matter how much I read, I cannot understand what it means to say that Jesus died for our sins."

Matthews-Green answered his email letter graciously and honestly. She wrote, "It seems that what happened (and continues to happen) is that people somehow began to sense that Jesus Christ is still alive and in some inexplicable way present to them; along with this, they find that their burden of sin is lifted, and that this is somehow because of his death on the Cross and Resurrection. Plenty of 'somehows' in that sentence; we're dealing with something (amorphous), but nevertheless insistent."

Matthews-Green then makes a helpful comparison in her response to her friend. She remarks that farmers have always known that light makes plants grow. They knew this many millennia before the complicated processes of photosynthesis were discovered by scientists. Similarly, even though Christians struggle and stammer to give precise explanations of how salvation works through Jesus' death, they still know it. Somehow.

C. S. Lewis once described this "somehow" of Christian accounts of salvation. He wrote: "The central Christian belief is that Christ's death has somehow put us right with God and given us a fresh start. Theories as to how it did this are another matter. A good many different theories have been held as to how it works; what all Christians are agreed on is that it does work."

I have often referred to the church as people and used the term "the Body of Christ," a common place term in the New Testament. The church defined as the living Body of Christ implies that, if people are going to see plainly who Jesus is, then they must see who he is in his body ... incarnate ... in the flesh of ordinary people like you and me in this church. Perhaps one reason why people have difficulty believing in and seeing Jesus is that they see so little of the bodily Christ in today's church. The wonderful missionary bishop, Leslie Newbiggin, speaks of the church as the "primary reality" of the Christian faith, the major means whereby the world will encounter Christ. He writes:

I confess that I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it ... Evangelistic campaigns, distributions of bibles and Christian literature, conferences, even books such as this one ... all are secondary, and ... have power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community. Jesus ... did not write a book but formed a community."

We live in a time when everyone feels they need to write a book, their memoirs in order to tell their side of the story ... to explain themselves. Jesus saw no need to write down words to explain himself. Jesus was the Word ... the Word that was flesh. Jesus was God's love in the flesh ... God's love in action. Jesus lived his teachings. He did not come to conquer the material world. He came to win over the human soul. The risen Christ comes to us, reveals himself to us, and call us, but not always in ways that we can comprehend and understand. If we ... somehow ... believe and we are able to follow Christ and to worship him as Lord and Savior, it is because of his gifts to us of presences ... revelation ... and love. Somehow I know this to be true. And I hope also you, too ... somehow ... know it's true! Amen.