

# WE ARE KNOWN

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May 12, 2019

Easter 4

[Psalm 23](#)

[John 10:22-30](#)

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ASIDE: It is absolutely critical to understand - when reading the fourth gospel - that the author uses the phrase "The Jews" to describe this group of temple purists. It is a tragic and anti-semitic misinterpretation of the reality of Jesus' life and ministry to lump the entire Hebrew nation as being in opposition to Jesus. One can say with a high degree of certainty that virtually everyone who had an opinion about Jesus (for and against) was Jewish.

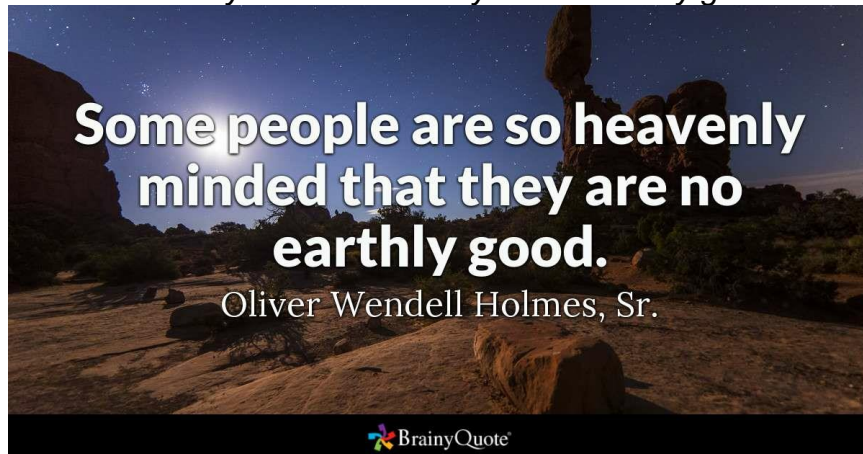
When these opponents asked Jesus to declare his messianic aspirations, this was an internal debate among different perspectives within Jesus' own faith tradition.

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(prayer)

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The nineteenth century physician and poet, Oliver Wendell Holmes (Sr.), is often credited with the quote: *Some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good.*



Holmes' turn of phrase points me to what is often referred to as the [Social Gospel](#) or *practical theology*. The Google dictionary defines *social gospel* as "Christian faith practiced as a call - not just to personal conversion but - to social reform."

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Adherents to the ideal of the social gospel (like me) believe that faith serves a purpose beyond adjusting our own personal spiritual wellbeing. Following Jesus means more than looking forward to my eternal peace.

Faith can serve an earthy good!

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Jesus, too, believed that the focus of faith is not limited to an existence beyond this life. His old prayer goes "**thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven**". *They kingdom come on earth!*

God cares about our lives right now.

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We are co-agents of God's presence in this world.

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What we do and say is important.

Within the social gospel, faith is intended to make a difference - not only for me, personally, but the whole of society, through me and my faith.

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One winter day, Jesus was talking with a small crowd of interested pilgrims in the Jerusalem temple courtyard. John chapter ten doesn't tell us directly what they were talking about. The passage focuses, instead, on the fact that the conversation was interrupted when someone asked Jesus a *big picture* question: *Enough already! Just tell us one way or the other -- are you the Messiah or not?*

It seems that this question came not from the crowd who honestly wanted to listen to Jesus, but from a group of temple traditionalists who did not appreciate what Jesus had been doing and saying.

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When "we" hear messiah language, we tend to associate it with Jesus' divinity. But to a first century audience, *messiah* was primarily a political title. The messiah was the one anointed by God to be the nation's king... someone to actually rule the people: in the pattern of King David of old.

Even some of the more zealous of Jesus' close followers hoped that he would initiate an actual political revolution that would liberate Judea and Galilee from Roman rule.

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John's account here is consistent with how the other gospels deal with claims of Jesus being the Messiah.

The claim is usually made *about* Jesus - even by some of his close disciples - but Jesus (himself) is reluctant to embrace the title. The biblical record is that Jesus more closely identified himself with the *suffering servant* described in the book of Isaiah, as well as another Old Testament descriptor: Ha Ben Adam - *The Son of Man*.

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In John ten, Jesus chose not to take the Messiah bait. Instead, he invited his opponents to judge him by his actions: *The works that I do testify to me!*

Furthermore, Jesus challenged the sincerity of their query. We're they even willing to consider that Jesus might be the Messiah. If Jesus did make that overt claim, would they open to following or would they still not believe? *Look, if you aren't convinced by what I have been doing (which I do in God's name, by the way), I doubt a messiah declaration is going to convince you. I will let my actions speak louder than words!*

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The bible makes it clear that Jesus caught people's attention in a variety of ways.

- He was an memorable speaker: he told interesting teaching stories - describing the nature of God in down-to-earth metaphors. These stories usually invited people to appreciate the nearness of the kingdom of god. More so, Jesus wanted people to believe that a real spiritual connection was possible and practical.
- Jesus was also a skilled healer. For some people, it was their potential personal physical or mental transformation that brought them to Jesus.
  - Almost always, a restoration of health was connected to a fuller re-emergence into community life. At the time, certain ailments would render a person ritually unclean and therefore somewhat ostracized. Jesus restored community as well as health.

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- That is similar to another hallmark of Jesus' identity. Jesus not only spoke about the sovereignty of God and healed to restore community, Jesus, also led by example to show what a full community near to God can look like.
  - Jesus blatantly ignored socially accepted boundaries and systems of exclusions in favour of welcoming the forgotten and vulnerable, even the outcast and ostracized.
    - Let the little children come to me.
    - I will be dining tonight with Zaccheus: the local roman tax collector.
    - Don't criticize this woman for anointing my head - **she** is as valuable to what we're doing as you are. And **what** she is doing is as valuable as our deepest charity.

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The temple opponents of Jesus may have wanted Jesus' political aspirations to be the issue. But what the fact that Jesus was sometimes called "messiah", the reason why he had followers?

And yet, for the most part, people followed Jesus not only because he spoke about their value within God's realm and worked miraculous healings, but also because he lived out what an inclusive community can look like.

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Jesus did not initiate this attitude. He comes about it honestly because it is founded in the Hebrew scriptures.

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We heard today (perhaps the most well known biblical psalm) Psalm 23 -- only six verses long, but filled with hope and wonder and inspiration that far exceeds its word count.

Within those brief sentences, a compassionate ever-presence God is presented by painting three distinct easy-to-relate-to images:

- God is a shepherd who leads me to safe places of nourishment and rest.
- God is a comfort in uncertain times and places who takes away any need to be afraid.
- God is a generous banquet host who shows even my most fervent opponents that I am worthy of honour.

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The 23rd Psalm's theme is summed up in its last verse: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.*

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Around that same time (during the reign of King David), another ancient Hebrew poet wrote this prayer:

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
 you discern my thoughts from far away.  
 You search out my path and my lying down,  
 and are acquainted with all my ways. ...  
 Where can I go from your spirit?  
 Or where can I flee from your presence?  
 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
 if I make my bed in [the resting place of the dead], you are there.*

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*If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me.*  
(Psalm 139:1-3,7-10a)

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God is not just a future heavenly companion for us. God is with us in this life. Goodness and mercy follows us... *here and now* (as well as *then*)!

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Part of Jesus' mission/message is there is no one who escapes God's attention and care.

As the apostle Paul would phrase it a couple of decades later: *there is no Jew or Greek, no male or female, no slave or free: all are one in the messiah.* (Gal3:28)

And over the centuries since then, followers of Jesus throughout the ages have been challenged to justify other divisions. We ask: who would Jesus include?

Over and over again - we find ourselves echoing Simon Peter's line: *I now see that God shows no partiality.* (Acts10:34)

And so the circle's edge moves out wider and wider.

As followers of Jesus, we are on the side of welcome.

As it says in the third chapter of John: out of love for the world, Jesus was sent into the world, not to condemn, but to save!

In this way, we get glimpses of God's kingdom on earth (as it is in heaven).

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There is one more interesting tidbit from today's gospel reading I want to highlight today.

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In many ways, the teaching that Jesus offers in the reading from John 10 exists beyond its precise context.

The text tells us that this conversation took place in winter during a festival celebrating the [re-dedication of the temple](#) that took place about 200 years earlier.

The [Festival of Dedication](#) may not have directly related to what Jesus was saying, but it provides an interesting backdrop to the confrontation that Jesus had with the temple purists who were concerned about Jesus' politics.

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Two centuries before Jesus, before the Roman empire had expanded as far east as Judea, Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside were located between the Ptolemaic Kingdom (based in Egypt) and the Seleucid empire (based in Syria), monarchies which had formed following the death of Alexander the Great (323 BCE). Judea had initially come under Ptolemaic rule, but fell to the Seleucids around 200 BCE. Judea at that time had been affected by the Hellenization initiated by some Jews, mainly those of the urban upper class, wished to dispense with Jewish law and to adopt a Greek lifestyle.

The Seleucids treated Jerusalem as a greek city-state: hand picking high priests for the temple, who served a gubernatorial function within the empire.

Beginning in the outlying Judean villages, a group of Hebrew revolutionaries engaged in a guerrilla insurgency. This group (which became known as The Hammer: Maccabee), under the leadership of Judas (the son of rural priest from the village of Modi'in) eventually overran the

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Seleucids and regained control of Jerusalem.

The festival of dedication (aka Hanukkah) commemorates how the Macabees worked to reclaim their society from a foreign Empire.

It may not have been lost on Jesus' audience that Jesus, too, was standing up to the priests of his day who had grown complicit with Roman rule.

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Reflecting on Jesus *lead by example* teaching during Hanukkah, we (too) can be inspired to advance the kingdom of god, as others have advanced it before us, by living out a practical theology in this world, in this time.

If we are looking for things to work for, we can start with the advice in the Lord's Prayer.

God's kingdom on earth includes:

- access to (and appreciation for) our daily bread,
- the giving and receiving of forgiveness,
- resists the temptation to let the evils of greed and selfishness distract us from the truth that each of us are invited to God's peaceful banquet.

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And so... find comfort in the old poem: God guides, protects and honours, not just in a realm to come, but in this world.

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Moving forward, even in the unknown, dark valleys, know that we are known and not alone.

All the way, opportunities and challenges will present themselves where we can choose to re-dedicate ourselves to Jesus' vision for this life in practical, relational ways.

Jesus showed us - in word and action - that our God intends for goodness and mercy to be our companion forever!

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Let us pray:

Holy God, we are deeply grateful for mentors in the faith who show us how see you neighbours and strangers as beloved children of God. Amen.

#320VU "Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth"