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One of our late Bishops, Bp. John Cahoon, used to always say that he could not think of today's Gospel passage without thinking of Little Red Riding Hood. Jesus implies that it is harder to recognize a false prophet, or a wolf in sheep's clothing, than it should have been for little red riding hood to recognize a wolf in her grandmother's clothing. However, Jesus' concept of a false prophet, or a wolf in sheep's clothing is more in line with that of Aesop's Fable from 600 BC. In the fable the wolf in sheep's clothing is so well disguised that he even fools the shepherd. And so, when the shepherd decides to butcher one of the sheep, the "wolf in sheep's clothing" is taken and butchered instead.

We understand the moral of the story, the "wolf in sheep's clothing" can be hard to identify, and after all, he even fooled the shepherd. We see also that as so often happens the "wolf in sheep's clothing" had intended to harm, and yet paradoxically what he so wanted to do to the sheep was done to him. But Jesus gives us an easier way to find them out rather than cutting them open to see what's on the inside. In fact, Jesus gives us the ultimate test, a test that extends far beyond just false prophets and wolves, for all shall be known by the fruit they produce. *Do men gather grapes from thorns? Or figs from thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit...every tree that produces evil fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. The false prophets, the wolves in sheep's clothing will be found out. Jesus says, not everyone that says unto me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.*

We must beware of false prophets, of false teachers. God deemed false prophecy so serious that in the Book of Deuteronomy He says, *any prophet*

*who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.” You may say to yourself, “How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?” If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.* Rather than being the mouthpiece of God to their generation, the false prophet attempts to put words in the mouth of God. They follow their own will rather than God’s will. We might think that this warning about false prophets is no longer relevant for us today, but these “wolves in sheep’s clothing” are their effects are still a threat to the true faith today. Take for example Jim Jones, or David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, or Joseph Smith the self-proclaimed prophet of Mormonism, or Charles Russell and the Jehovah Witnesses. We do not have to look very far to find false prophets today, in fact they will even occasionally show up at our doorstep!

One example of the temptation to proclaim our own will rather than God’s will, and that even in spite of this God can be merciful, is found in the story of the prophet Baalim. We encounter Baalim in the book of Numbers where he seems to be a prophet for hire. He appears at first like a false prophet, a wolf in sheep’s clothing, because he is concerned more with money than with God’s will. And so, as the Israelites march through the land of the Moabites on their way to Canaan, Balak the King of the Moabites sends emissaries to hire Baalim. It takes some convincing because God has already told Balaam not to agree to curse Israel. Three times they come and beg Baalim to go and prophesy against the Israelites, offering larger and greater rewards each time. When Balaam finally relents, just when it seems that he

has committed himself to be a false prophet and curse the people of God, the donkey on which he rides refuses to walk in a straight line, eventually just lying down in the road. As Balaam hits the donkey, the donkey speaks, which seems not to be all that surprising to Balaam, and it is revealed that an Angel of the Lord is blocking the donkey's path. Baalim was more stubborn than his donkey, and so it took a talking donkey to get his attention. The story ends with Baalim courageously standing before King Balak and prophesying blessings on the children of Israel, not once, but three times, from three different overlooks as the children of Israel passed through the land of the Moabites. His end proves the opposite of the end for wolf in Aesop's Fable, he blessed the children of Israel, and God blessed him. Baalim returns to his home a changed man, no more a false prophet but a prophet of the one true God.

The Gospel we have heard today Jesus delivered as part of His Sermon on the Mount. It was important to Him that all the adopted sons and daughters of God the Father hear His words. So, this morning's Gospel applies not just to prophets or pastors or teachers, but to us all. We shall be known by our fruits, we shall be known by our desire to do God's Will and not our own. We each can choose to be a good tree bearing good fruit, or an evil tree bearing evil fruit. And we each are called to be in our own way a Prophet of God, our lives are supposed to be signs, encouragement to all around us to live in submission to God's Will. We can choose to live as the prophets of old who stood before the world reminding all of God's commandments and blessings, or we can live for ourselves and our own wills and be just as bad as the false prophets of old. But God is merciful, and He has given us another day to work on surrendering our wills to His.

C. S. Lewis summarizes what this so often looks like in our lives so well, he writes, *the terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self- all your wishes and precautions – to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are all trying to do instead. For what we are trying to do is to remain what we call “ourselves,” to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be “good.” We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way – centered on money or pleasure or ambition – and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly. And that is exactly what Christ warned us you could not do. As He said, a thistle cannot produce figs. If I am a field that contains nothing but grass-seed, I cannot produce wheat. Cutting the grass may keep it short: but I shall still produce grass and no wheat. If I want to produce wheat, the change must go deeper than the surface. Amen.*