

“Shepherds, Wolves and Sheep”

Date: May 3, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

Occasion: Easter 4, Year A

Themes: Trust, Faith

On the fourth Sunday of Easter, every year, the Lectionary gives us a scripture passage in which Jesus is compared to the Good Shepherd. Some pastors refer to this particular Sunday as “Shepherd Sunday.” It comes around every year like clockwork. When I see it on the calendar, I think to myself, “Ah, its *Shepherd’s Sunday* again.” It’s a favorite theme for many pastors, including this one.

In our passage today we hear Jesus say, “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” *Here* we see the shepherd at his best – giving his life for those under his protection. The true shepherd, as opposed to the hired hand, is willing to give his life protecting the sheep; nothing else matters. Jesus, we are told, is our Good Shepherd.

The premise of my message this morning is simply this: It is the shepherd’s job to take care of the sheep. The wolf is not the sheep’s problem. The job of the sheep is to stay near the shepherd, in the shadow of his protection. Jesus is our shepherd; it is our job to stay near Him.

In our world today, you and I are not threatened by wolves, or any other wild animal, unless we travel someplace that has them. For most of us we live in pretty safe places – at least from wild animals. But there are certainly a lot of things that threaten us.

Right now, many people are living in fear and anxiety because of the Coronavirus – either fearful for their own health, or someone they love, or fearful for their economic future. How will they survive financially if they’ve lost their job, or their business has shut down? Indeed, there is a lot to fear.

So, let's try to use this image of the wolf as a metaphor for those things that frighten or that threaten us. *Death* is certainly something that scares a lot of people. Getting sick, being put on a ventilator, suffering; all are certainly things that frighten us. Death is the great unknown; it is scary.

But, many people lived with fears even before the pandemic. For people living in poverty their daily lives are frightening. Some of our children were beginning to live in fear of going to school, for fear for being shot like they had seen other children killed in school shootings.

Some people listen to the news constantly, and it has created a steady drum-beat of bad news, and they live in a state of heightened fear. Worry about terrorists or immigrants ruining the country; worry about politics – whether there is a Democrat or a Republican in the White House; fearing that **they** are destroying our country.

Sometimes we create our own fears – fear of failure; fear of rejection; fear of losing control. Sometimes, well maybe a lot of the time, the wolf doesn't live out there. Many times the wolf lives inside our head; we can be our own worst enemy. Our thoughts can tell us that we're no good, we're not loveable; or, that we haven't measured up.

The wolf can even enter our churches – creating in-fighting about issues that aren't that important, dividing churches and even denominations. The wolf is on the prowl and is seeking to devour.

Now, the truth is you and I, we are not sheep. We *do* have the capacity to fight evil when we see it. We *are* smarter than sheep, in some ways. But sheep do have something to teach us. The sheep don't go out and fight the wolf; they huddle closer to the Shepherd.

You and I should not try to fight the evil in the world, or deal with our fears, **on our own**. We need to stick close to the Shepherd, who loves us.

We have a Shepherd who is willing to lay down his life for us; indeed, he already has. How foolish we are for not trusting him more, for trying to live outside of the fold, for wandering far from the Shepherd's care.

Yes, I am making the case for going to church regularly, going to God in prayer, searching the Scriptures, and gathering with other believers. These are the ways we stay close to the Shepherd. Close by his side, he not only guards us and protects us, but he begins to impart to us his personality, and we become the like the Shepherd. How amazing is that?!

Now listen to this. It is the job of the Shepherd to not only protect the flock from outside attackers, but also to protect the sheep from harming themselves. Whether the attack comes from the without or from within, the sheep would do well to stay close to the Shepherd.

The shepherd's job is to handle the wolf; it is the job of the sheep to stay near the shepherd; to learn his voice; to listen for his voice; and to heed his voice. The wolf is not our problem, not our issue. Our primary concern is to be near the shepherd.

Maybe that explains why so many of us feel spiritually weak, unable to resist temptation, or troubled by anxious thoughts. We have wandered off by ourselves; we have strayed from the watchful care of the shepherd.

In the 23rd Psalm it says, "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." The shepherd's crook was used to fight off the wolf. It was also used to lift the lambs out of trouble when they wandered away. Maybe they fell off a cliff or fell into a ravine. The staff, with its curved hook, would lift them up.

Jesus lifts **us** up, and out, of the predicaments we get ourselves into. Jesus protects us *and* he guards our souls, from enemies both within and from outside of ourselves, *if we will stay close to Him.*

Friends, there is a lot going on in the world right now. It would be easy to become agitated or anxious, allowing the wolf to threaten you. Stay close to the Shepherd. Many of you have told me how you're doing that during these times. Some are doing yoga and prayer. Others have told me they are going for frequent walks, noticing God's handiwork as they go.

Many of you are staying connected through these weekly worship services. Others are listening to Christian music to soothe their souls. Some are reading or re-reading some of their favorite Christian authors.

A lot of you have told me you have found this time of social distancing to be a **great** opportunity to deepen your prayer life; that you're spending more time in prayer now than you ever have. Others have said they're spending more time in the Bible; some have even told me they took me up on my suggestion last week: to read and pray through the psalms.

It's going to be a long time until things return to anything like what we used to call *normal*. The wolf is threatening us – both with physical disease and with troubled thoughts. I encourage you to stay close to the Good Shepherd. He loves you and he wants what is best for you.

Trust him with your thoughts and your feelings. Perhaps you might like to try journaling, a spiritual practice where you put pen to paper to record your thoughts and feelings; hopes and fears; and your prayers.

When the wolf threatens us, in whatever disguise he wears, let us "Take it to the Lord in prayer. O what peace we often forfeit, o what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer."

Beloved in Christ, it is the job of the Good Shepherd to deal with the wolves that threaten us. It is our job to stay close to the Shepherd. Amen? Amen!