

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – April 25, 2021 – Wolves and Sheep
1 John 3:16-24 and John 10:11-18**

From an early age, we are taught to be leery of wolves. During those formative years, we hear the story of the *Three Little Pigs* who do their best to escape the ruses of a wily wolf. Throughout, the predator is bold and determined, telling his prospective victims that he will “huff,” and “puff,” and “blow” their houses down.

Next, we hear the cautionary tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*. This time, the protagonist is a small girl instructed not to veer from the well-worn path on her way to grandmother’s house. Yet, temptation abounds, and she naively tells a stalking wolf where she is headed. The wolf, described as both “big” and “bad,” swiftly races through the woods ahead of her, enters her grandmother’s house, and dresses the part of the older lady in an effort to trick the child once again.

In the Bible there are a dozen references to wolves, and not one of them is flattering. These nocturnal predators lie low during the day and prowl about at night, silently creeping through the shadows. They are ravenous, savage, and unrelenting in the pursuit of prey, especially helpless sheep.

Wolves incite fear, panic, and terror everywhere they go. And, in the presence of their scheming, we are wise to remain alert, lest we become ensnared in the plot. Lived experience teaches us that those with ill intentions often go to great lengths to remain hidden. Many wolves have even dressed in sheep's clothing.

The biblical narrative is dotted with unsavory figures. There we find dishonest public officials, false prophets and teachers, selfish religious leaders, and the unbelieving world itself. Any whose motives are questionable or impure are likened to wolves and implored to see the error of their ways. They are instructed to turn and show mercy toward the poor and the needy, and to embrace the radical nature of the peaceable kingdom of God. For this is what it means to realize Isaiah's vision that "the wolf shall" one day "lie down with the lamb."

And yet, it often appears as though the wolves are winning. During Holy Week, as we entered into the most somber reflections of the Christian year, we encountered Jesus in agony on the cross. His words were chilling: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is the first verse of Psalm 22, which proclaims, "*dogs* are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and my feet have shriveled; I can count all of my bones. They stare and gloat over me; they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots."

Much like the psalmist before him, Jesus was acquainted with the ruthlessness of wolves.

We know that wolves are out there, surveying our lives and looking for opportunities to strike. But they are also in here, among us and within us. Oftentimes, *we* are the ones whose appetites for destruction cannot be satisfied. So we turn to God, confessing our failings and shortcomings. Admitting those moments when we have become mired in the pit of discord, envy, and judgment. Lamenting those occasions when we have been seduced by the promise of greed and the rod of injustice. And repenting of every form of evil that takes root and flourishes in the inner recesses of the human heart.

Recently, my five-year-old son approached me and said, “Daddy, I know what I would do if there were no adults around.” “Oh yeah, Nathan,” I said. “What’s that?” “Well,” he told me, “I would eat all of the candies and I would just do whatever I wanted to do.”

His confession reminded me of a time when my oldest son, Liam, then even younger than Nathan is now, was playing in the kitchen. He found a tub of flour, opened the lid, and, pretending that it was snow, proceeded to throw it into the air until it covered the surface of the floor. When I entered the kitchen, I was shocked.

“What in the world are you doing, Liam?” I asked, sternly. His reply? “Just whatever I want to do, Daddy.”

As my sons remind us, children have parents for a reason. We are there to steer them from harm’s way. To redirect their wayward inclinations. And to provide for their futures, even if they struggle to see the benefit of parental guidance in that moment. This is the persistent work of a good shepherd.

Phillip Keller, who has authored a popular book on shepherding, writes, “If left to themselves, [sheep] will follow the same trails until they become ruts; graze the same hills until they turn to desert wastes; pollute their own ground until it is corrupt with disease and parasites. Many of the world’s finest sheep ranges have been ruined beyond repair by over-grazing, poor management and indifferent or ignorant sheep owners.”¹

This is why the quality and character of the shepherd are of such great importance. Keller writes that a good shepherd “will go to no end of trouble and labor to supply them with the finest grazing, the richest pasturage, ample winter feed, and clean water. He [or she] will spare no pains to provide shelter from the storms, protection from ruthless enemies and the diseases and parasites to which sheep are

¹ Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, (Zondervan, 1981), 70.

so susceptible.”² A good shepherd gives all that he has, and knows “no deeper satisfaction than that of seeing his sheep contented, well fed, safe and flourishing under his care.”³

Perhaps, this is what Jesus has in mind when, in our second lesson this morning, he says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.”

Friends, we have joined our hearts and minds this morning because, as followers of Jesus Christ, we are each seeking our way in the world. Part sheep, vulnerable to attack, and part wolf, prone to stalking about in the shadows, each of us is striving to cleanse ourselves from self-deception and to rid ourselves of every devious inclination.

² Keller, 70.

³ Keller, 70.

Following the example of Christ, we do not expect to become flawless, only to trust more deeply in the promises of God, to be more truthful about who we are, and to lead a more holy life in both word and in deed. Until, when confronted with the choice between following the path of our own desires and embracing a life of service to others, we are better equipped to confront the wolf within and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. May it be so, and all thanks be to the shepherd who guides us and who lays down his life for the sheep. Amen.