

*Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf?*

A Sermon by Jeffrey P. Carlson

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St. Pauls United Church of Christ, Chicago

Text: John 10:11-18 (found at end of sermon)

In the church we are still in the midst of the Season of Easter. In December we talk about the Christmas season, and it goes on for weeks, but did you know that there's an Easter season as well? And it's really more important, for without Easter we wouldn't celebrate Christmas at all. We can imagine an Easter without a Christmas, but not vice versa. For the earliest followers of Jesus it was Easter, not Christmas, that changed everything, including their lives. And every year, on this fourth Sunday of the Season of Easter, we are asked to spend some time thinking about the idea that the risen Christ is our shepherd.

"I am the good shepherd," Jesus says. And then he goes on to talk about a wolf and a flock of sheep. I don't have a lot of experience with either wolves or sheep. I was first introduced to the wolf through stories not about sheep but about a little girl with a red hood and especially a story about some pigs, three to be exact. Our fairy tales come out of a past when wolves could still be heard howling at the edge of the forest at dusk and when they just might be prowling around outside your door or sleeping in grandma's bed in the middle of the night. They were cautionary tales for children. But today we're not afraid that a big, bad wolf will be prowling outside our door. We're afraid that one of those three little swine will huff and puff and sneeze on us.

I don't want to besmirch the reputation of wolves. Wolves are beautiful animals, at least when seen through the safety of a TV screen. Joe and I watched a documentary about wolves being reintroduced into Yellowstone Park. They had been killed off to protect livestock. But now they're forming new wolf packs in Yellowstone as a natural and important part of the ecosystem, though I'm not sure how the deer and buffalo feel about that.

It's interesting to note that the Disney Silly Symphony cartoon of the Three Little Pigs, the version that's most familiar to me, was made in the 1930's, during another time of economic stress, the Great Depression. It held up the virtues of hard work and discipline. The pig who built his house of bricks has no time to time to toot a flute or play a fiddle and sing and dance with his piglet brothers, because he has way too much work to do and, "work and play don't mix." But the third little pig shows more than just industriousness; he also shows the virtues of hospitality and compassion. After his two brothers have their houses of straw and sticks blown right out from under the hair of their chinny chin chins, he doesn't slam the door in their face and say, "I told you so. Now pay the price of your irresponsible behavior and face fangs of the big, bad wolf!" He welcomes the prodigal pigs into his home. The wolf's blustering breath is impotent against those bricks, and they all live happily ever after - until 2008, that is, when the

three little pigs fall prey to the mortgage crisis and their house of bricks goes into foreclosure. Because there are, of course, different varieties of wolves.

Whenever you come across a wolf in the Bible, which is not very often, it almost always refers to people. Wolves are predators. In his parable, Jesus says that they snatch the sheep and scatter the flock. Wolves pick off the weaklings, the sick and the aged, the loners and the losers. Those traits are perfectly normal in a wild wolf and play their role in balancing an ecosystem. A wolf is not a bad wolf for eating a sheep now and then. But in people, those traits are deadly to human community. Wolves try to trip you up, exploit your weaknesses and scatter the flock by creating divisions. Wolves prey upon other people, try to dominate, coerce and control. Sometimes that's done violently and out in the open, sometimes it's done secretly, behind closed doors.

To be a wolf, to prey on another human being, is probably the worst thing that we can do, and the ways we prey upon each other are only limited by the human imagination – fraud, exploitation, sexual abuse, tyranny; but also revenge, returning evil for evil and just the ordinary everyday gossip that destroys someone's reputation. I'm afraid there's a little bad wolf in each of us, hidden up somewhere in our canine teeth.

Children and the elderly are the most vulnerable to predators. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God tells the people again and again: take care of the widows and orphans, look after the aliens living among you - the foreign workers who don't speak your language, for they are the most vulnerable people in your community. Look after those sheep as well, not just your own flock of sheep that are just like you and baa like you, because you aren't my only sheep in this world. There is something about the God whom we worship that God's heart goes out to people who are preyed upon, people who are vulnerable, defenseless and at the end of their rope, people who are lost and left outside of the flock.

We've been walking through the Gospel of Luke in the Saturday Bible Study over the past few months, and it's in Luke that Jesus tells the story of the lost sheep. Jesus is getting criticized for the company he keeps, for spending time with the wrong sort of people. He was always getting criticized for that. And he says, "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them doesn't leave the other ninety-nine in the wilderness and go out and search for the lost sheep?" Which one of us is like that? Leave the whole flock unattended? That's irresponsible. Better to write off one lost sheep than to have the whole flock left vulnerable to wolves and risk being scattered and lost.

Jesus says that God searches for that lost sheep until God finally gets tired and goes home. No, thank God. "I keep on searching," Jesus says, "*until* the lost sheep is found. I never give up." That should be an incredible comfort to any of us who are worried about a lost sheep in our life – one of your children, a parent, a friend who is lost and who you find yourself unable to get through to, unable to reach. And that should be an incredible comfort whenever we feel lost and

alone ourselves. God does not give up on us. God keeps searching and seeking until the lost sheep is found.

Psalm 23 says, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” That word “follow” in Hebrew literally means to pursue. Goodness and mercy don’t follow us; God’s goodness and love pursue us, chase after us. Like a lover running after his beloved. Like a mother chasing after her giggling little girl and catching her and taking her up in her arms and showering her with laughter and with kisses, that’s how God’s love pursues us. The wolf preys. God pursues - with undying and unrelenting love.

But there’s another thing about this good shepherd, something that’s troubling and offensive to us. Jesus said that when the good shepherd sees the wolf coming, he doesn’t pick up and run, leaving the sheep alone. He also doesn’t pull out his rifle and blast the wolf to kingdom come. The good shepherd, Jesus says, lays down his life for the sheep. The shepherd actually becomes the prey himself.

Last Saturday we read the story of Zacchaeus, the man who has been immortalized in that children’s song as a wee little man. Luke says that Zacchaeus, a tax collector, was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. The Methodist bishop William Willimon points out that it’s not at all clear who that “he” is who was short in stature.<sup>1</sup> It might be Zacchaeus, but it could just as easily be Jesus – Zacchaeus was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he, being Jesus, was short in stature. Jesus was hidden by the crowds because he was short. Imagine that - a diminutive, shorter-than-average Jesus. I like that idea. We have a shepherd who comes down to our level.

At any rate, Zacchaeus climbs up into a tree so he can see this Jesus (who happens to be short and is hidden by the crowds) and Jesus looks up and sees him. “Zacchaeus, come down out of that tree! I’m going to your house for dinner today.” And then there’s a twist in the story. The crowd becomes offended and is full of righteous indignation. (The flock of sheep around Jesus can apparently grow fangs of their own.) They say, “Of all the people that Jesus could have had dinner with, he’s going to eat with this sinner!”

Zacchaeus isn’t just a tax collector, but a chief tax collector. He practices extortion on his own people, defrauds them in order to fund the terrorism of the Roman Empire while getting filthy rich at the same time. Wee little man? Cute little munchkin? Hardly. Zacchaeus is a big, bad wolf if ever there was one, and the good shepherd chooses his table – out of all the worthy, respectable, church-going, tax-paying, upstanding tables in town – that’s where Jesus goes for lunch.

The outrageous love of Jesus still offends us. What do we do with a shepherd like this? What do we do with a shepherd who doesn’t just hold his sheep in the palm of his hand, but who also pursues with goodness and mercy the wolves that prey upon the sheep, because the shepherd

wants to save them, too? I've got to admit, I sometimes find that God's love is just too radical for me; and I then realize that I don't know this shepherd nearly well enough, and that the good shepherd is also pursuing the wolf inside of me.

In a poll released last week, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that if you attend church regularly you are more likely to support torturing terrorists than if you don't go to church. I wonder where that comes from? Does it come from a view of God that sees God as sometimes being a torturer? A God who smites the sheep who have gotten just too far lost, too far gone? That's not the God that we see in Jesus Christ. Jesus says to his disciples, "See, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves." It's not easy to know exactly what that means for us, how we're to live like sheep among dangerous wolves and remain faithful to the good shepherd. Sometimes we find that we become wolves ourselves.

Well, the wolves finally get to Jesus. The pack circles around him at dusk while the sheep scatter and leave their shepherd standing all alone. Before Peter flees with the rest of the sheep into the night, he takes out a sword and cuts off the ear of one of those wolves, but Jesus tells him to put his sword away. He will not have his sheep do violence, not even against wolves. And then the shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The God we see in Jesus is a God who has been preyed upon by the big, bad wolf even to the point of death, but who did not return evil for evil. If it were not for Easter, we would not have the courage to follow a shepherd like this. The resurrection is our assurance that we can trust this shepherd, the shepherd who lays down his own life for the sheep. Death and the fear of death are the ultimate power of the big, bad, wolf. Easter assures us that even the power of death has been defeated and we no longer have to live in fear.

In the church calendar, the Season of Easter ends in a few weeks on the day of Pentecost. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes upon that scattered and fearful flock of sheep who have abandoned their shepherd. And the Spirit huffs and puffs and blows the life of the shepherd right into those startled sheep and they become the church. As sheep, our job is to keep on joyfully following our good shepherd who lives and walks among us, to listen for his voice and to become like the shepherd ourselves - to seek out the lost, to care for the weak, to learn how to return to no one evil for evil and to have our own canine teeth become a little less sharp day by day.

The prophet Isaiah paints a hopeful picture of our future; it's a vision of God's dream for our world. Isaiah paints a picture of the future where wolves have become as harmless as puppy dogs and where children are safe and secure. We don't live there yet, but in following the good shepherd we learn to live into God's future and to make it a reality. Isaiah writes: "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the snake, and the little child shall put her hand on the adder's den. They shall not

hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”

That is God’s dream for the world – to form us into people who are not ruled by our fear of the big, bad wolf, but who are ruled by the shepherd of love. Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue us, all the days of our lives - sheep and wolves alike - until we all dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

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<sup>i</sup> From William Willimon, *Who Will Be Saved?*, Abingdon Press: 2008.

John 10:11-18

“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. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”