

Wolves, Hired Hands, and the Good Shepherd

This story is just awash in metaphor, isn't it: *Wolves, hired hands, and the good shepherd*.

You know how metaphor works. Jesus isn't *literally* talking about wolves or hired hands, and we know Jesus was a carpenter by trade, not a shepherd. We are also in the *middle* of a parable. Jesus uses *story*, just like *metaphor*, to make his point.

So, why don't we spend some time with those metaphors?

I'm not a lupine expert, but I know wolves aren't just big dogs who need rehab. However much DNA they share, wolves and dogs are different animals and they should be expected to be what they are. Whereas a dog one tries to pet *might* behave unpredictably in a human encounter, wolves' behavior can easily be predicted, and it is not to snuggle. Upon meeting a wolf, I would not recommend asking if she wants tummy rubbies. *When behavior is predictable, it is unwise to expect it to be otherwise.*

We need wolves in our ecosystems; but we aren't going to pet them. We know what to expect.

The term *hired hand* sure sounds elitist in our era, but let's take it the way Jesus meant it. I know an excellent carpenter who has done first-rate work on our house. He does beautiful work and he's a hard worker, but he doesn't do it because he loves our house. It's not a favor to us. He expects to be paid, as well he should.

We know what wolves are and what they do. We know who hired hands are and we understand people *generally* work for pay.

That third one, though, there's a little more going on with that. Let's come back to it in a minute.

Jesus is giving us a metaphor for a life of faith, so let's explore it.

What are the wolves? Based upon actual wolves, it seems to me that the metaphorical wolves could be expected to be *predatory* and *life-threatening*.

I realize that this is not exactly a feel-good approach to preaching this text, but there is no doubt that in the life of faith we do and we will encounter forces that are life threatening and destructive... and indeed even predatory.

I began wondering this week what folks might identify as *wolves* in our lives of faith.

I asked some folks, and the results were insightful.

Here's one from a youth I mentored when I was an associate pastor:

“The wolves in the church today are people who aren't willing to stand up for the prince of peace... people that unwittingly support perpetual war and tyranny at home and abroad while hiding behind the gospel in an attempt to absolve themselves.”

A seminary classmate said, “Theologically uneducated or discriminatory pastors that make holy forms of oppression.”

A clergy colleague wrote, “Those who pine for the past to repeat itself.”

I have to confess I was expecting something more akin to fangs and yellow eyes, but there's no question all of these are absolutely destructive and life-threatening in a life of faith.

Let's take that as our lesson today from the wolves: We know what they will do. Their nature is to be predators; to kill and eat. To expect anything other than that from a wolf is to set yourself up to be eaten. It's true in a life of faith as well.

It's important to know what the wolves are.

Are there any wolves prowling around in your spiritual life?

It's worth thinking about.

Jesus assumed we would face wolves in our spiritual lives. Jesus assumed that we will encounter forces that could harm us. It seems inevitable we will encounter self-serving forces. It's important to recognize them for what they are and not to confuse them with something harmless. There is a difference between a predator and a poodle. Knowing it is the difference between life and death.

What about the *hired hands*?

They serve a different purpose in this metaphor. The wolves are predators, but the hired hands in this story *just don't do anything worthwhile*.

Just as Jesus seemed to expect that wolves would behave like wolves, he expected exactly the same with the hired hands: the dedication isn't there. They won't give of themselves. They don't have any skin in the game. They will do the job under good circumstances, but don't expect much when the wolf is on the prowl. When you need protection, support, defense and help, a hired hand is going to run away.

Jesus talking about those who are in it for themselves, purely and simply. When there is threat to themselves, they will run away.

We can predict their behavior as well. Just as wolves can be expected to engage in wolf-like behavior, so the hired hands can be expected to do what is in their self-interest. They are, after all, only doing what is expected. No more, no less.

What does that suggest to us about those who influence our spiritual life?

I read somewhere recently that friends come into our lives for a reason, a season, or a lifetime. That's a great observation about how we relate to one another. But when it comes to a

life of faith, we should strive for the latter: for deeper, enduring relationships. Indeed, we should strive to *be* the latter.

Christian faith assumes that we will try to be Christ-like. That's the deal. When Jesus says "come and follow me," he expects us to emulate him to the best of our abilities, and even *beyond* our abilities in the power of the Holy Spirit.

But we must be forewarned: If we are capable of following the good shepherd, we are also capable of sliding into following the wolves and the hired hands and behaving like them.

But the good shepherd?

He knows the sheep. He is willing to lay down his life for the sheep.

That's pretty much it, because we know that the good shepherd *did* lay down his life for the sheep.

Shepherd imagery abounds in the Bible.

We're not an agrarian culture anymore so I don't expect that we pick up all of the cues of the text, but we get the point. There is a reason that the 23rd Psalm remains the best known and best loved Psalm – indeed one of the best known and best loved passages of the Bible. I have a strong suspicion that I could walk into any group in the church, and if one of us got us started, we could collectively finish it from memory. There's a better than average chance that it would be in the King James English. Every one of us probably wouldn't know every word. We might invert a verse here or there, and the recitation would be a continuous crescendo and decrescendo until we reached the end as some know some words and not others, as some in the community carried others. But we would get through, wouldn't we?

You know the words, don't you:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: For thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

That is *who* God is!

In the midst of a world full of wolves and hirelings, Jesus came as the good shepherd.

Some folks like to say that that Jesus used the shepherd language because sheep are not the most intelligent animals, that they wander around aimlessly and he wanted to hammer home the point metaphorically that we don't know sheep droppings from shinola when it comes to our own good.

It's true, sheep do have their limitations and at times those limitations even look like our own, but that's not what Jesus is driving at here. He has higher expectations for us.

Jesus chooses this metaphor because he wants us to know who *he* is and by extension, who *God* is.

And who is God? God is the holy one, whose chosen reason for being is caring for what, out of the overflowing of love, God has made.

Who is God? The holy one who knows us by name – which means there aren't any strangers to God: no one is unrecognized.

Who is God? The one who makes all things and restores all things. The one who walks with us when we're death's shadow. The one who sees our racism and bigotry and *still* spreads out a table for us. Who is God? The one who rubs lotion – that's essentially what anointing is – who rubs lotion on the dried, cracking feet of exhausted refugees, and offers an overflowing cup to all who labor in the heat of the day and are thirsty.

And the Psalmist says that when you follow this God, goodness and mercy will follow you.

Jesus knows we are going to encounter wolves and hired hands. He seems to know that there are folks who are going to get caught in the claws of predators and that there are folks who are going to be failed by everyone they have trusted to help them. He knows that when death's dark pall falls over us, that we need to know that we are known by name and that no one is unrecognized.

Jesus was, in the words of scripture, *a man acquainted with suffering* who understood that we are all sometimes acquainted with suffering.

Nor is this an accidental metaphor. Jesus reached back into the faith of his family and his community and pulled up the image that would tell us all we need to know about how to face the ravenous wolves and the feckless hired hands.

There is a reason why Jesus chose the image of the good shepherd. There is a reason why Psalm 23 is best known and best loved. There is a reason that we recite it when we are afraid and when we're mourning.

It's because need to remember who God is and what God's promises are. We all need to remember this, to be reminded – to be *grounded* in the reality of who God is.

You know what, why don't we do that right now? Since we aren't together now, let's do *this* together. You say along with me at home, in whatever way you know it, and don't worry if you don't know all the words, we'll get through it together:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: For thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.