

THE GOOD SHEPHERD
BLC – B. HULL SOMERS – 4.22.18

Acts 4:5-12, 1 John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18

Wolves were once common in the American west. They are amazing predators, hunting in packs and able to decimate entire herds of livestock, so over time people killed them and drove them out. The hunter became the hunted.

What seemed like a win for humanity, however, quickly showed a dark side. Wolves, as it turns out, are incredibly important to our ecosystem as a keystone predator that keeps other species from bulging out of control and subsequently protects salmon habitat and more. Without them, herds of elk and deer grow out of control and destroy riverbeds and kill fish and the animals that depend on them for survival. Everything is connected in this beautiful world and even the fiercest predators have a place. In recent years, wolves have found

themselves re-entering the west – in what has been called a rewilding – to restore waterways and everything that lives and thrives from them.

While this is very good for creation – and on this Earth Day weekend on which we celebrate all conservation efforts that protect the created world and we rejoice for all the good it is doing – this rewilding does come at a cost. It is a challenge for farmers who own livestock.

To mitigate the loss to farmers while still having the overall benefit to the environment of the keystone predators, the federal government recently sponsored a study to test different sheepdogs from other continents to successfully ward off wolves and bears. Apparently sheepdogs in the United States have gotten soft over generations of not having to deal with wolves, so puppies from Turkey, Bulgaria and Portugal

were all brought to Montana, Wyoming, Washington and Oregon to see how they fared against their common enemy on a new continent. Each of the breeds gets to be about 140 pounds – about the same size as a wolf – and are bred to balance gentleness with children and sheep with a savage protectiveness against predators.

The study showed that these dogs, although far from their ancestral roots, did very well in protecting herds of sheep in the United States and successfully deterred packs of wolves from decimating sheep populations. In addition, the research noted that, in every instance where there was a strong bond between the shepherd and the sheepdog, the sheepdog was more effective at protecting the sheep. Closeness with the shepherd matters.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. The Sunday that we are reminded of the way that Jesus acts as protector, guide and provider for us all. It is day where we proclaim the expansiveness of the love of God and the ways in which the Good Shepherd will continue to call more and more into the fold.

In an obvious correlation with his own death and resurrection, Jesus reminds us this morning in our Gospel text that the sacrifice of the cross was meant to draw us all together into God's incredible Kingdom of love, justice and hope. An ever expanding and unstoppable movement of Grace.

In Acts we see Peter fulfilling the task to be a good sheepdog that Jesus invited him into. As you may recall, before Jesus' death Jesus asked Simon Peter three times – do you love me? Each time Peter was more exasperated than the last and

responded vehemently, “Yes, Lord, you know I do.” And Jesus responded cryptically, “Then feed my sheep.” These three questions and vehement answers disturbingly mirror the three times that Peter later denied Jesus on the night that Jesus was betrayed. It is not an accident. It is actually a beacon of hope.

It is a beacon of hope because it provides a real example of human faith – faltering, halting, and, at times, downright unreliable. Jesus’ message to Peter to feed his sheep and protect them like a good, loyal sheepdog and Peter’s subsequent denial and betrayal feels realistic. We also feel the tug on our hearts to faithfulness and service to the Love that has transformed us and yet we have denied Jesus with our actions and words.

After the resurrection, when the dust had settled on his betrayal, Jesus gave Peter another chance. Peter was able to

see, touch and commune with Christ again and was strengthened and healed because of these interactions. He was empowered to draw close to the shepherd and allow that intimacy to be demonstrated in his care, gentleness and protection of the sheep.

In our Acts text we see an example of this care – Peter and John were imprisoned because of the miracle of healing the man on the temple steps. They protected and cared for the sheep and put themselves in harm's way because of it. Then, with the dangerous audience of wolves having imprisoned them and waiting to destroy them, they proclaimed the goodness of the Jesus without hesitation. Fearlessly loyal to the shepherd.

A good sheepdog is gentle with the children and the sheep, loyal to the shepherd and fierce against the enemy.

I was raised in the evangelical tradition and there is a lot of talk about “the enemy.” The enemy in Christianese – that special language that only Christians can speak and understand – is simply Satan, the devil. There is a sense of this embodiment for all of evil...but I think that this understanding is too narrow.

The enemy that is represented as the wolf in our Gospel is more slippery than that. We cannot simply relegate it to one devil; we must understand that it is much more pervasive and familiar to us that we would like to admit. It is insidious sin. It is inward-turned lives that recognize the needs of others and yet keep resources to themselves. It is the dehumanization of children of God. It is racism, bigotry, war, homophobia, selfishness, tribalism, sexism, jealousy, greed, fear of the unknown, indifference, distraction, isolation... It is everything that keeps us from living in the fullness of the Grace of the

resurrected Christ through which we are emboldened to love, do justice, act in Mercy, proclaim hope and live in peace.

The Good Shepherd has claimed us as God's own. And we are invited into the proclamation of the Good News; that we belong to Jesus and that the Love of Christ will not stop until every human heart is enveloped. Living in this truth fights the enemy and brings joy to the Good Shepherd.

You know, it is interesting – every domesticated dog has wolves in their ancestry. Even my tiny little furball has wolves in his bloodline. The sheepdogs that were imported to the American west are all roughly the same size and shape of the wolves they are intended to deter.

What are sheepdogs, after all, if not reformed wolves? And that is what you are, my brothers and sisters – a bunch of wolves who have been redeemed by the love and sacrifice of

Christ. Filled with the Holy Spirit and invited to be gentle enough to care for children and helpless sheep and yet fierce enough to stand up and fight with love against evil. To have such a close bond with the shepherd that your wild heart beats in sync with His; loyal always to God's love and proclaiming the Kingdom with your lives. Amen.

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