

So. Wolves, hired hands and the good shepherd. We are just awash in metaphor this morning, aren't we?

You know what metaphor is. It's when something is stated to be something that it plainly is not in order to make a point.

Jesus isn't literally talking about wolves, he isn't literally talking about the help, and he of course isn't a literal shepherd anymore than we are literal sheep.

We are also in the middle of a parable as well. You remember parables? It is where Jesus uses story, just like metaphor, to make his point. And what is his point? Well, we'll get to that. But let's spend a little time on the metaphors first.

Wolves. This one I can relate to. Not that I have personally met any wolves – my acquaintance with all things lupine is limited to that which is mediated to me by Hollywood and the television screen. And while I don't know much about wolves, I do have picked up that they aren't merely big dogs that are in need of rehab. However much common DNA wolves may share with the canine species, they're different animals and they can be expected to be what they are. Whereas a dog one reaches out to pet might behave unpredictably in a human encounter, a wolf's behavior can easily be predicted. They are prepared to rip our throats out. Upon meeting a wolf, I would not recommend asking him if he wanted tummy rubbies. When behavior is predictable, it is pretty much an act of insanity to expect it to be otherwise. Don't get me wrong: I get the importance of wolves for the ecosystems in which they are supposed to live. We need predators. I'm just saying that in the event that I encounter an actual wolf, I'm going to run hell-for-

leather in the other direction until the wolf catches me and eats me. It's wise to pay attention to behavioral predictions.

Likewise, I have a nodding acquaintance with hired hands. Those are Jesus's words, by the way, not mine. I'm just quoting him. I want to make that clear because otherwise I just like a character out of The Help, and not in a good way. And also in the thread of avoiding sounding like a character from The Help, I should add that with very few exceptions all of the people whom I have hired through the years to do various things for me have worked hard and in some cases done a better job than I would have done – either because they have skills I don't have or they aren't burdened with a fear of heights.

Jesse, for example, who cleans my gutters for me does a vastly better job than I would do because he doesn't have both arms and legs wrapped around the ladder. He does a great job. But he doesn't do it because he loves my house. He does a great job because he values his reputation and he's a hard worker and everyone on the cul-de-sac knows it. In short, he does it to get paid, as well he should.

So, we can establish fairly quickly a basic common understanding of the first two characters in this metaphor. We know what wolves are and what they do. We know who hired hands are and we understand what motivates anyone working for pay.

But that third one... that's a little harder to wrap our heads around. But let's come back to it. Jesus gave us a metaphor and I'm not sure we've tortured the metaphor to death just yet. Jesus is giving us a metaphor for the life of faith, so let's stick with it.

What are the wolves? Based upon actual wolves, it seems to me that the metaphorical wolves would be that which can predictably 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 as I was writing what folks might identify as wolves in the church – I did what any astute researcher would do, I posted on Facebook about it.

On a side note, as a pastor who accepts friend requests from all over the place, I have all sorts of Facebook friends. Everybody who wants to be my friend and has even a tiny connection to me gets to be my friend. I also don't send out friend requests to congregation members because someone once very intrepidly informed me that some congregants don't *want* their pastor to see what they are up to.

The results were insightful.

Here's one from a former congregant whom I knew as an adolescent:

"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."

Here's one from a seminary classmate:

"Theologically uneducated or discriminatory pastors that make holy forms of oppression."

And here's one from a clergy colleague:

"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 the insights that my friends shared pointed to things that are absolutely destructive and life-threatening in the life of faith.

Let's take that as our lesson today from the wolves: they do exactly what they are expected to do – their nature is to be predators and 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 the life of faith too.

It's important in the life of faith to know what the wolves are. Are there any wolves prowling around in your spiritual life? Don't answer that now. Think about it.

Jesus assumed we would face wolves in our spiritual lives. Jesus assumed that we will encounter forces that want to kill and eat us. Churches and individuals both are liable to encounter predatory forces. It's important to know 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.

Let's move on to the "hired hands."

Preachers hate this one if we receive a salary from our congregations. So let me draw a line around it for the sake of myself and other folks who work in churches: we don't think of ourselves as hired hands, not if we're authentic in our calling to service. The church compensates us so we may dedicate ourselves full-time to the work of the church. That's why we don't speak of "hiring" church staff, clergy or otherwise, we speak of "calling."

Which is not to say that no minister has ever behaved like a hireling. Plenty have and generally, the results are disastrous.

I tried the same Facebook trick on this one and I got nothing. It seemed that the task of identifying wolves was much easier, but when it came to hirelings, it's not so obvious.

But hired hands are different from wolves. The wolves are predators. The hired hands are just useless.

Still, the metaphor has something for our faith lives, collectively and individually.

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. It's all about doing the job under good circumstances, but don't come calling with the wolf is on the prowl. When you need protection, support, defense and help, the hired hand is going to run away.

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

There's that behavioral prediction again. Just as wolves can be expected to be wolves and engage in wolf-like behavior, so the hired hand can be expected to do what is in his or her self-interest. They are, after all, only doing what is expected. No more, no less.

Any hired hands lurking around your spiritual life? Again, don't answer that now. Think about it later.

Christian faith assumes that we are going to try to be Christ-like. That's just part of the whole package. Jesus says come and follow me, and he means we are to behave like him to the best of our abilities and even beyond our abilities with the help of the Holy Spirit.

But before we move on to the good shepherd, I have one more spear to drive into the metaphor and it is this: if we are capable of following the good shepherd, we are also capable of following the wolves and the hired hands and behaving like them. Again, just think about that later.

The good shepherd... what does Jesus say about him? He knows the sheep. He is willing to lay down his life for the sheep.

That's pretty much it. And of course, we know that the good shepherd did indeed lay down his life for the sheep.

Shepherd imagery abounds in the Bible. We're not an agrarian culture anymore so I don't know 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. If I got us started, we could collectively finish it from memory, likely in the King James English. We wouldn't, every one of us know every word, 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...

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.

It happens that I don't hold with the idea that Jesus used the shepherd language because sheep are dumb and he wanted to hammer home the point metaphorically that we don't know sheep droppings from shinola.

Jesus thinks way too much about what we are capable of to treat us thusly. So all of the tired old analogies of Christians as sheep because sheep are helpless and stupid don't carry any water with me. Jesus chooses this metaphor because he wants us to know who he is and by extension, who God is.

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

Who is God? The 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 prejudice and bigotry and spreads out a table and invites us to quit seeing each other as enemies and sit down. The one who rubs lotion – that's anointing – who rubs lotion on to the dried, cracking feet of migrant workers, and offers an overflowing cup to all who labor in the heat of the day and are thirsty.

And it seems to follow, for the Psalmist, 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 that 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. He was, the scriptures tell us, a man acquainted with suffering who knew that we ourselves are sometimes acquainted with suffering as well. So he told us about the good shepherd.

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.

Oh yes, 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 why I am sure that if I started us off on the twenty-third psalm we could make it through together. There is a reason that we recite it when we are afraid and when we're mourning. We want to remember who God is and what God's promises are.

You know what, why don't we do it? We'll carry each other through.

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.