

1 John 3:16-24 *Love One Another*

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

John 10:11-18 *Jesus The Good Shepherd*

“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.”

Fourth Sunday of Easter / May 7, 2006

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1 John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

When the Wolf Comes

When most people think of the Good Shepherd, iconic pictures of Jesus and the flock come to mind. Whether he is cradling a lamb or leading the herd to greener pastures, we have a clear notion of Jesus as protective shepherd. In spending time on Google, I ran an image search for Jesus and good shepherd. Naturally there were pages and pages of results. Just for the sake of comparison, I then added the term wolf to the search. Without hesitation, the screen came back with a bold ERROR message. Perhaps you were confused oh faithful internet user. Though unsurprising, these results point to the largely untrod pastures within Christian art and likely beyond. In thinking of today's reading from John, do we get the full picture through reverence of Jesus cradling the baby lamb? More specifically, if we are the flock of Jesus, what happens when we do not feel cradled, lead, safe or sure? Is there space for the wolf in this landscape? Or does the wolf simply disappear once Jesus is on the scene?

Let's begin by considering the story. In characteristic style, John's Gospel wastes no time in framing the immediacy of Jesus in the lives of believers. Rather than prophesizing about the coming glory, John's words serve as a *witness* to the glory that could already be seen in Christ. We are presented with a contrast between the hired hand who gives the appearance of protection to the sheep, and the good shepherd, who offers ultimate security.

When the wolf approaches the flock, the hired hand flees and leaves the sheep to fend for themselves. In contrast, the good shepherd, Jesus, has true command and protection of the sheep. His own know him, and he knows them. Unlike the hired hand, the good shepherd lays down his life for the flock. This self sacrifice came as a surprise to those around him. Even more surprising is that he does this on his own accord, and without hesitation.

Though Palestinian shepherd relations are likely not in the forefront of our minds, it is not difficult to feel the sense of promise and commitment in this passage. As a New England native, I find myself relating to this imagery after spending summers on my grandparents' sheep farm in Vermont. I remember being struck by how much work goes into keeping them nourished and safe. What was most amazing was the care the sick lambs received. If there was a complication at birth, the baby lamb would stay indoors and be bottle-fed, a chore I relished. I would end my visit by asking the same question each time—can I just take one home? No was always the answer... My grandmother would explain that the sheep need to be able to roam free and stay with their flock. But...I would take such good care of him... Nope again... he has all he needs out there amongst the flock- we're just helping him to get his strength back. Disappointed, I would return home and wait eagerly for the next Easter when the new generation of lambs would be born.

In trying to understand what shepherding could mean for us today let's imagine ourselves as part of the flock. Unlike the sheep on my grandparent's farm, we have a choice in who we regard as caretaker. The hired hand is the presence which leads one towards assurance but whom will ultimately abandon us when the wolves come. Many people infer from this gospel selection that the good shepherd somehow takes the wolf out of the equation. Upon a closer reading, John leaves this ambiguous. It only says that Jesus

lays down his life for the flock—we don't actually know how things turn out. Ultimately, we realize that the wolves come regardless of who is giving them care. The real difference is that the good shepherd's care of the sheep springs from an unqualified love, one which needs no reciprocation or payback. In contrast, the hired hand is always related in a transactional manner. If we can imagine ourselves as the flock, who or what might be the hired hand in our lives?

The distinction between the hired hand and the good shepherd can only be fully known when the wolves enter the picture. As you think of your life, are there comforts, caregivers, and beliefs that have seemed safe and abiding until a point when a wolf entered the picture? In other words, have you thought something would provide solace, assurance, security, and yet it turned out to be misleading? Whether its in our professional or personal lives, we seek out these quick fixes in the hopes of running from our wolves or fears. What are we really afraid of?

When we think back to the images of Jesus as good shepherd, it is easy to assume that the wolves and hired hands are no longer present. However, the "good" in good shepherd suggests authenticity and sincerity over and against others who are 'bad' or careless shepherds. In his fixation upon the forces of light and darkness, John is offering witness to the light and truth found only through Jesus. The question is, are we able to abandon our reliance on hired hands and join his flock? In the short run, it is scary to let go of our desire for those protections which are presented at each turn. In our all-to-easy culture of materialism, we are particularly distracted by hired hands who seek out our alliance. In advertising alone, we are made to believe that buying into something will protect us from that which we fear. In the political forum, our fears are manipulated to leave us scrambling for the government's protection. The threat always changes, but the message is the same- swear your allegiance to me and the

wolves will vanish. Pursue democracy at all cost and terrorism will retreat. Get plastic surgery and you can stave off the aging process. Get a mate and you wont have to confront your own neuroses and fears. Take this or that medication and you will be a new person. The bombardment of hired hand promises is often staggering. How might we find our way to the greener pastures of the good shepherd?

It is exactly at this moment where the classical images of Christ's benevolent shepherd role fall short. It is only when we are let down by the hired hand that we really come to seek more. It is only when the wolf comes that the flock is left alone. Though suffering should never be valorized or sought after, we must admit that it is simply a reality. We will all encounter wolves along the way--- wolves that can help to show us that we indeed can overcome even the most insurmountable of challenges. Whether this comes in the form of losing a loved one, one's job security, romantic relationship, or simply confronting our finitude and fallen nature, it is certain that we will be tested. Luckily, the good shepherd knows his flock so well that he is ready and willing to protect just as the hired hand lets us down. Following him does not mean that our canvas will turn to pastels and a cradled existence, but rather that we will have a transformed perspective on the wolves and hired hands. Once we have run up against wolves and gotten through it, or when we have been abandoned by the promises of the hired hand, we begin to understand that we do not need the fleeting protections offered at every turn. We are already protected and cared for if we simply trust in God's shepherding. Much like the sick lambs at my grandparents farm, it does not mean that we will be whisked away from the challenges of life, but rather that we will have newfound strength and resources with which to meet these hurdles.

As we ruminate on how we might be led as a flock, let's not forget the other part of John's message. It is not enough to simply

receive the care that Jesus can give. Rather, we are asked in First John to “lay down our lives for one another”. Not in word or speech, but love through truth and action. In and through this gesture we will “know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything”. In and through the unwavering love we receive from the good shepherd, we can relate to others with the assurance that we already have the protections we need. Not those that are offered by the hired hand, but those from he who lays his life down with no hesitation.

When John says we are loved by God, there is something lost in translation. The Greek language has three distinct terms for love—*philia* or the love of friendship, *eros* or romantic love, and finally *agape*, the Christian form of love. Unlike the love of friendship and romance, *agape* love seeks no benefit, but is rather an everpresent and unqualified shepherding. For Christians in John’s time, *agape* was a revolutionary form of loving. It called God’s people to follow Christ’s example and lay down their lives for others.

When we listen to the readings today, we can emerge with both the assurance that we are all invited to be part of the good shepherd’s flock, but also with the command to practice this selfless love in our relationships. The power of this message is not to be sought with the mind, but calls us to live and practice it. As we run into more and more wolves, we begin to feel the insecurity of the hired hands and the security of God’s love in altogether new ways. Let us go forth with courage that the protection we need is already present, regardless of the wolves we encounter along the way.