

April 25, 2021

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, one of my faves!

The bible has a lot of sheep and shepherd stories... Abel was a keeper of sheep, Jacob was a talented Shepherd, Moses was a shepherd for his father-in-law, and of course David was also a shepherd. This morning we hear how Jesus is the good Shepherd.

And unlike his predecessors, Jesus is a different kind of Shepherd. He lays his life down for the sheep. Notice, there is a wolf in our lesson, “The hired hand, . . . , sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.”

Quick story... Many years ago, during lambing season, I woke up in the middle of the night because Luigi, our dog, was barking like crazy. I turned on the floodlights and looked out the bedroom window. I saw a coyote making its way along the fence line toward the sheep corral.

The coyote was pretty close to the house, so I opened the window and yelled at it, I just assumed it would run. Instead, it ignored me, and kept walking toward the sheep. Luigi kept barking.

I was a little surprised by that, so I ran downstairs, grabbed a flashlight and went outside, I thought a few yells and hollers from the porch would make it run off. But not so much! The coyote went right to the paddock and started pacing back and forth...

I started walking out to the corral, Luigi right next to me barking like crazy... I kept yelling and gesturing, hoping to shoo him away. The sheep were restlessly grouped together and stomping their feet. I kept the flashlight right on the coyote, he kept pacing back and forth...

Suddenly it dawned on me, this coyote was behaving a little weird. And I had nothing to protect myself, and not only that, the house was a long way behind me. I had a pitch fork next to the barn so I made a little run and grabbed it.

The coyote didn't even seem to notice and kept on pacing back and forth. Luigi stayed right by my side. With pitchfork in hand, we charged the coyote and finally, it moved off a little... Maybe thirty/forty feet... But then it stopped, turned back, and kept pacing back and forth.

Just about then a pack of coyotes started to howl down in the ravine. Talk about goose bumps! Finally, the coyote turned and ran down the hill toward the howls.

I was shaking in my boots, and with pitchfork in hand, Luigi and I made a mad bolt for the house. And I remember thinking, "to heck with the sheep, if the coyotes want them, they can have them." I guess I'm like the hired hand in our lesson. I know what it's like to run! Believe me, I am not a good shepherd!

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus tells a story about the Good Shepherd, and his relationship to his sheep, which of course, are us. In my encounter with the coyote, I displayed very sheep-like qualities-- short on brains and long on fear.

According to our Gospel lesson, unlike the hired man, Jesus does not run away from the wolf. I have to wonder then, how does Jesus' deal with the wolf? In our Gospel lesson, five times, Jesus says that he lays down his life. Jesus deals with the wolf by laying down his life.

When Jesus is arrested, tried and nailed to the cross he does not lash out at those who carry out the crucifixion. In fact, Jesus forgives them. Jesus does not use violence or force to protect himself; he literally lays down his life.

Our Lutheran identity affirms that we are saints and sinners. We are in bondage to sin. We're not only capable of violence, we commit violence. In a very real way, we're not only like the sheep, there is also a bit of the wolf in us as well. It is that wolf, which we continue to struggle with, today as ever before.

And perhaps the wolf is never more cunning and dangerous than when it is cloaked in righteousness. After all, it was the religious people who were the wolves initially plotting to have Jesus devoured, to have him crucified... It seems the more righteous we feel, the more justified we feel to engage violence.

This week, this past month we have been in the middle of a very contentious time. There's a lot of opinions about everything that has taken place and about the guilt or innocence of everyone involved. Lots and lots of finger pointing. And so, we really do struggle with that wolf that lives inside us, don't we?

I confess, I do... But there is hope!

Jesus says, "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again... I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again." While it would appear that the wolf would gain the victory because Jesus lays down his life, it is really nothing of the sort. Death does not defeat Jesus, because the Son of God has the power to pick his life up again.

Here we see that Easter has turned everything inside out. Life springs from death; Strength is born of weakness; Peace wins over Violence, and even Forgiveness is given to those who would crucify.

The good news today, is that Jesus not only protects the sheep, but that through unimaginable love Jesus has also found a way to redeem the wolf that is lurking within us.

For me, it means I need to die to some of my opinions, and do more listening to those who are hurting and different.

Because of Jesus, as the prophet Isaiah puts it, “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.” Now that’s a good Shepherd story.

Amen.