

Lambs Among Wolves – Ben Wayman

2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

A friend called last week asking if our children's Bible story series featured the story of Stephen, the first martyr of the church. My friend had been asked to teach the children's Sunday School class at his church and was coming up short on children's resources for this essential story. I thumbed through our series at home but came up short too. The series skipped straight from Jesus to Paul. Nothing on the early church in the book of Acts, and certainly nothing about the stoning of the disciple who boldly spoke out against the religious leaders of his day for opposing the Holy Spirit.

This got me to thinking about St. Paul's. What about you, kids? Do any of you know the story of Stephen? [Cole and Claire, the acolytes, shook their heads.] I'm afraid I'm doubly to blame, not only as a pastor, but also as a father—my son Cole is sitting here in the front row.

Today we take a step toward righting this wrong—this failure in our Christian education about what it means to follow Jesus. How could we have missed this? It's not just the story of Stephen, but it's the story of Jesus, told four times in the gospels, and then explicitly played out in the lives of his disciples, as we see today.

Jesus says, *See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves* (Lk 10:3b). Now, I'm not a shepherd or even a farmer, but I have a hunch that being a baby sheep in the midst of wolves is dangerous. It's certainly not the safe religion so many of us have been taught to embrace. No. Following Jesus is about being lambs among wolves, and today I'd like to explore three ways how this is so.

The first thing we learn today about being lambs among wolves is that lambs go with a friend. In the first verse of our reading today we learn that Jesus appointed seventy others—seventy!—and sent them in pairs *to every town and place where he himself intended to go* (Lk 10:1). The number seventy may be symbolic of Moses's choosing the seventy elders from the twelve tribes or the seventy nations referenced in Genesis 10, but it also underlines that discipleship is a community affair.

The same goes for the pairs. While mission in pairs may have something to do with the testimony of two witnesses, it also reveals the nature of discipleship. This pattern of ministry in pairs is repeated throughout the book of Acts. "Don't go at this kingdom work alone," Jesus instructs. Note that these pairs of disciples go ahead of Jesus, without Jesus, to places Jesus intends to go. They're on mission, they're without Jesus' company, but they have each other, and it's a good thing because there are wolves out there.

Having a friend when you're surrounded by wolves makes a big difference. Sometimes friends help us be courageous when we'd rather take a pass. Sometimes friends remind us who we are—or, more importantly, who our shepherd is—and so help us remain faithful to who God calls us to be. And sometimes friends can help us distract or outwit the wolves. Such friends on the journey of discipleship help us follow Jesus better.

“Go in pairs,” Jesus instructs his disciples. This work is not to be done alone. We need each other. As Paul tells the Christians in Galatia, *bear one another’s burdens* (Gal 6:2), or in Romans, build each other up (Rom 15:2). A community that lives like this displays the kingdom of God. We all have burdens we need help bearing and there are *those of the family of faith*, as Paul puts it, who have burdens they need help with. Friendship is not accidental to our discipleship; it’s essential. Go with a friend, Jesus says.

Second we learn that disciples make new friends. Jesus instructs his disciples to *Carry no purse, no bag, [and] no sandals* (Lk 10:4). He gave similar instructions to the twelve apostles earlier. Why does Jesus send out the disciples with so little? Is it because they should be self-sufficient survivalists who can live with nothing but what’s in their minimalist pack? Is this a call to rugged individualism? Not at all. The disciples go with little so that they can request help from others, as we see when he tells them to eat whatever is offered. By making the disciples dependent on others for their basic survival, he is ensuring they will need to rely on the hospitality of others and so open themselves to the gift of friendship.

Such reliance on others strikes against many of our deepest held American convictions. We are trained from an early age to be independent, to be rugged individualists who need no one. But the “self-made man” strikes against the heart of Christian discipleship. There are no self-made disciples. We need each other. We need each other to follow Jesus as we become the courageous community God has called us to be. Jesus’s packing instructions—or, should I say, unpacking instructions—keep us from insulating ourselves from needing others. And so we learn that discipleship is about making new friends.

This new friendship, Jesus teaches us, is all about sharing the peace of Christ. Here the traditional greeting of the Hebrew *shalom* becomes an announcement of the kingdom of God and our citizenship under God’s rule. This is the peace announced by the angels to the shepherds living in the fields, announcing the birth of Jesus and the coming reign of God, saying *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!* (Lk 2:14). As we share Christ’s peace with new friends, we enter into new spaces that might challenge our ways of thinking and living. Jesus instructs us to embrace the differences brought by these new friendships, when he says *[eat] and [drink] whatever they provide . . . Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you* (Lk 10:7-8). This is a shocking instruction for Jews who have been taught that what they eat and drink is a matter of holy restraint and restriction. But Jesus teaches us that the gift of friendship is more important than our dietary scruples, no matter how well-intentioned.

So far we have learned that to be a lamb among wolves we need friends, friends, and more friends. We need to go with friends and we need to make new friends, and part of our making new friends requires that we give up control and receive the hospitality of others. As we embrace new friends, we share in the peace of Christ, which is to say, we give witness together that Christ is king and his kingdom is about a new family that is *a new creation*, as Paul says to the Galatians.

And now for the **third** feature of what it means for us to be disciples who are like lambs among wolves. What Jesus teaches us today, and what we find as well in our reading from 2 Kings,

Psalm 30, and Galatians, is that disciples exercise authority. We may be baby sheep among wolves, but God has given us divine authority to announce the kingdom of God to the powers and principalities of this world. Our mission is God's mission. It is divine, and it is full of power. Our mission is not to make the world a little bit better. Our mission is to announce *The kingdom of God has come near to you* (Lk 10:9).

Exercising God's authority is no small thing. It requires urgency, confidence, and courage, and as we've already seen, it requires friends. I'd like to close with three ways in which we exercise authority as followers of Jesus.

1. **Cure the sick**, Jesus tells his disciples. While he gives this instruction to the seventy, this remains a mark of our discipleship even today. We cure the sick here at St. Paul's in praying weekly for cancer sufferers and survivors, and by regularly offering anointing for healing. We cure the sick through medical practitioners like Ann Zahniser Jr. and Sara McPeak, and through our support of Ken & Linda, curing the sick in Africa and the Middle East. Through Companionship Ministry we make new friends as we come alongside them in a healing, listening ministry of presence, especially those marginalized with mental health issues.

As disciples we know, just as Elisha did, that only God has the power to heal and God has enlisted us to cure the sick. Disciples also know, like the Psalmist did, that God heals us. When God heals us we shouldn't keep silent, but announce what God has done for us.

2. Another way we lambs exercise authority is through **protest**. Protest is a bad word for people in power, and it's a mark of Jesus' disciples. Jesus told the seventy that when they are not welcomed by a town to *go out into its streets and say, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this, the kingdom of God has come near"* (Lk 10:11). We are commissioned to live lives that announce God's kingdom and the end of leadership that defaces the image of God in others.

People in power would have us endure oppression and rejection in quiet resolution. They would have us turn a blind eye to our country's inhumane practices at the border or keep silent about the bullying of a nominee for bishop into resignation. But not Jesus. Jesus wants us to openly oppose oppression and the denial of God's rule. Jesus's protest instructions are public—"Go out into the streets!" Protest displays the way in which our discipleship is very much like being sent as lambs into the midst of wolves. Protest is an act of faith because through protest we announce to the world that Christ alone is King and Lord.

3. A third way we lambs exercise authority is by **treading on wolves**. Today we learn that we have nothing to fear, baby sheep though we may be. Not even demons. Not even the devil. As we read today, Jesus has given us *authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy* (Lk 10:19). I am reminded of the desert monk Antony, who would pray psalms like Psalm 30 and put demons to flight as he proclaimed the name of Jesus, confident that he has defeated death and the devil. Saint Athanasius, who wrote Antony's biography, was similarly fearless in the face of the powers and principalities. In one of his most famous works he writes,

“Human beings, before believing in Christ, view death as fearsome and are terrified at it. But when they come to faith in him and to his teaching, they so despise death that they eagerly rush to it and become witnesses to the resurrection over [death] accomplished by the Savior.”

Exercising authority over the powers and principalities requires faith that Christ has in fact conquered sin, death, and the devil. If this is true, we have nothing to fear! Not if we're surrounded by wolves, or bullied at school, or threatened by our boss at work. Lambs exercise authority by living in the new creation Christ has made possible, where the fear of death and the devil, where intimidation and oppression, have no hold on us. We have been set free by Christ the king who gives us authority over every power that would harm us.

My friends, we are lambs—baby sheep—and Jesus has sent us out into a world of wolves. These wolves may be colleagues at work, family members, or maybe even, Lord have mercy, people in the pew beside you. The good news is that the wolves have been defanged. Christ has conquered them and calls us—a community of holy friends—to exercise his authority to cure the sick, protest the oppressor, and announce to the world that the kingdom of God has come near. Through friendship with one another and our friends yet to be, we expand the new creation that sings loudly with the Psalmist, *I exalt you, Lord, because you pulled me up; you didn't let my enemies celebrate over me!* (Psalm 30:1; CEB)