

Sermon 2010 Easter 4

Text: Acts 20:17-35

Theme: "Beware the Wolves"

Good Shepherd Sunday is a good time to remember some things about shepherding sheep. First sheep are not particularly bright – like us. We are not particularly bright either. If we were, we would not make so many stupid mistakes, especially the ones that God clearly warns us of. He gives us commandments. He gives us examples. He does everything but wrap us in bubble wrap and caution tape and chain us to a warning sign and yet we still do the stupid things we do.

Case in point: How many times do we need to be warned not to trust in human beings but in God? And yet we still put all of our confidence in some human being and we are crushed the first time that human being proves himself to be...well...a human being. This can apply to spouses, politicians, teachers and pastors.

Second sheep are prey. I know we don't particularly like being prey, but we are what we are. It goes against our capitalist, egalitarian grain to think of ourselves as prey but think about it. We are called to love, forgive, overlook faults, speak well of others, help everyone. We are sitting ducks in this broken world. That's why we are so tempted to act like wolves. You hear it in our justifications.

"I know it says to love your neighbor but this jerk doesn't deserve love." Really? Do you deserve love? Do any of us?

"I know we are not supposed to steal but what am I supposed to do, point out to the idiot that he can't count and just gave me too much change?" How would that work if God held all of us idiots accountable for our failures? So we turn the other cheek, swallow hard, refuse to act like wolves and just accept the truth that we are not the lions of this world but the antelopes.

Third only the shepherd saves us. Imagine a wolf bearing down on a sheep. The only chance that sheep has is if the shepherd sees and intervenes. Likewise, our only chance against the wolves is the Good Shepherd watching over us and intervening, which he does daily – even minute by minute. So this begs the question – why do we so often ignore the Good Shepherd and listen to the wolves even as he is protecting us? It could only be because we do not fully trust the shepherd and we do not fully believe that the wolves seek to tear us apart. Even the dumbest sheep on earth has the sense to run from a wolf and yet sometimes we invite them in don't we? Our itching ears love to hear gossip about someone. We choose to stay out late Saturday night and sleep in Sunday morning instead of worshipping the Good Shepherd. Kids are allowed and even encourage to place making money and playing sports over worshipping God and studying his word. We go to places where there is underage drinking and drug use, saying everybody does it. We watch pornographic trash on the internet and TV, thinking just this once. You can pick your own particular vice but we make choice after choice that invites the wolves into our living rooms because we either don't believe the Good Shepherd or we don't think the wolves are all that bad, and maybe even kind of fun, until they rip a limb off anyway.

Fourth it is better for sheep to listen to the shepherd and not the wolves. In case you hadn't noticed, wolves lie. They lie because they want to devour you but they have to get you to walk away from the shepherd before they have a chance to

sink their teeth into your neck. Otherwise they will get a shepherd staff across the back and they don't like it when Jesus swings for the fences and connects with their hind end.

So, in our text from Acts, St. Paul calls the pastors together in Ephesus to remind them to remind their people that wolves lie, so beware. Don't believe every word even when it is spouted from seemingly well meaning sources. Wolves are crafty and they will make it sound so good. They will tell you that the Good Shepherd is boring and that they have so much excitement to show you. They will tell you that life is short and you have to live it to the fullest. Wolves work to make sheep think that they are missing out on something. Wolves want sheep to believe that the Shepherd is not in control of everything. Their main goal is to panic the sheep and get us to start running. Then as soon as we are far enough away from the shepherd – they pounce.

Paul warned the Pastors of Ephesus to warn their people. Filter everything you hear through what the shepherd says. There are not two parallel ideas from which truth may be picked and chosen. There is one Word and one truth. The Shepherd's Word is truth and only the Shepherd's Word is to be heeded.

When we measure everything against the one truth of the Shepherd's Word, everything goes well with the flock. The wolves cannot scatter the sheep when we are listening to the Shepherd. In fact, when we are united around the Shepherd, we are impenetrable and invulnerable. But beware the wolves. They are not always outside the circle. Sometimes they dress like sheep and even act like sheep. They are often good actors too. That is why standing near the Shepherd is not enough. Sitting in church every Sunday and thinking about lunch will do you no good. Attending potlucks and receptions but never reading and studying the Bible will fill your belly but not your soul.

A wolf can be near the Shepherd. He just can't touch the sheep. He has to convince the sheep to leave of his own free will. That is when the sheep needs to know the Shepherd's Word.

What does God say about caring for the widow, the orphan and the alien? What does God say about worship out of obligation instead of love? What about teaching the children about God? Is that an option or a mandate? What about Baptism? Is that a religious ceremony or does it actually do something for me? What about the Lord's Supper? Does that bread and wine represent something or is it the true body and blood of Christ?

See, if the sheep don't know the Word of the Shepherd, all of these issues can be horribly confusing. But if we hear the Shepherd's Word, we know the answers. That does not mean the answers are easy – but at least we know the truth and the truth, Jesus promised, will set us free – free from the manipulation of wolves. Free from fear. Free to graze in the green pastures by the still waters with our Good Shepherd. AMEN