

Something More than a Three Little Pig Church
John 10:11-18

Wolves are dangerous creatures. Just remember your children's stories. The Big Bad Wolf huffs and puffs at the three little pigs; Little Red Riding Hood. In fact the only non-dangerous wolves out there are the North Carolina State basketball team. But for the most part, wolves evoke a sense of danger and death. That's why all the town came running when the boy called wolf. That's why we all try to keep the wolf from the door.

And today Jesus talks about a wolf. Now, I don't really mean to quarrel with Jesus, but there's another reason the hired hand runs away when the wolf is at hand. It is not just that he does not care for the sheep; it is that he is afraid. Afraid of dying. The hired hand is not evil; it is just that self-preservation is more important to him than saving the sheep entrusted to him.

I suppose I would be afraid of a wolf, also. And if I ran, who among you would dare complain? Jesus himself implies that to stand fast against the wolf means death. Jesus is the good shepherd, and when the wolf comes, it means death.

But Jesus dies. For two reasons. He loves the sheep, more than his own life, in fact. And he believes in the power of God to bring new life. He lays his life down, trusting he would take his life up again. As Jesus talks about the good shepherd, he anticipates his crucifixion; he anticipates his resurrection.

But what about us? Wouldn't we be tempted to flee from the fangs and frothing of the wild wolf? Of course.

Self-preservation. Unless. Unless. Unless we love the sheep more than we love our very own lives as well.

Then we would stay. Defend. Protect. Even at the cost of our very life. But wait a minute. Aren't I off course here? Isn't this passage about Jesus who is the good shepherd? Isn't this passage about Jesus, whose love, ministry, and presence are anticipated in the 23rd Psalm? Who loves us. Who accompanies us through dark valleys, even in the shadow of death. Who allows us to feast even in the presence of our enemies? Who promises goodness and mercy, no matter what, to the very end of our life and even unto eternity?

So why am I talking about us, and what we might do when wolves come baying, barking, and howling, when the Scripture is all about Jesus?

Well, it has to do with who we are in response to Jesus. Scripture never just talks about Jesus as an object out there for us to look at or believe in; Scripture begins to define who we are in response to Jesus.

As the church, we are the ones entrusted with Christ's purposes. It's supposed to work this way: whereas folks who lived two thousand years ago could see Christ when he happened to come to town, folks who live today are supposed to be able to see the power of Christ alive and real when they look at the church. Remember from two weeks ago, when Jesus said, as the Father sent me, so I am sending you.

So, as a church, we have a choice: either to be hired hands or shepherds. Hired hands are in it for their own well-being; shepherds are in it for the sake of the sheep.

Or let me put it this way. Our faith begins with a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, the good shepherd.

But it only begins here; it does not end here. Now, let's not understate the importance of what Jesus Christ means to us. He is our port in the storm, our hope on hopeless days; he is the promise of eternal life when death comes calling; he is the one who gives his life, lest we be devoured by whatever name we call the wolf: for instance:, illness, trouble, danger, sin, death.

But, and here we get to a part of our Scripture that is sometimes glossed over: Jesus concern is not just for us. He has other sheep not of this fold. . . for whom we must have concern. When Jesus says I have other sheep not of this fold and I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice, he is not just talking about himself: he is also talking to the church, and talking about our mission, talking about who we are to be in response to him.

Let me put it another way. When the Big Bad Wolf comes huffing and puffing, the three little pigs are safe and secure within their house made of brick. They are safe. They have everything they need. The wolf can't get in.

But we are called to be more than a three little pig church; we are called to be more than three little pig Christians. We are called to do more than simply rest behind safe walls.

Let me put it this way. Folks, we have all the church we will ever need for ourselves. We have a place to worship. We have friends who like us and whom we like in return. We know Jesus loves us and we love Jesus and we need nothing more.

But folks, we are also a church that realizes something profound: we do not exist primarily for ourselves, but

for the sake of the world. Think of who we are and all we do.

What was the vision that built this Sanctuary in a by-gone century? Or the back part a few decades later? What compelled us to build the Eure Building, and then do a massive renovation? It wasn't for our own needs, but for the sake of sheep outside the fold, and the hope that some would find shelter among us.

Our Preschool kids here this morning are here because of a vision launched almost thirty years ago; not just for the kids of Ann Street, but the kids of our community. . . Jesus' sheep not of this fold.

And every month we send thousands of dollars to our Annual Conference. We trust and believe this money is used to help people we will never even meet. These funds help to support camps, help to support our missionary program, help to offer help to nations and people after disasters; the list goes on and on.

Why do our United Methodist Men cook peanuts and the Women hold a Bazaar? Why the yard sale? Not for us. We have enough. But for the sake of those outside these walls. Now bazaars and peanut cooking are hard work, even if the fellowship is wonderful, but it IS hard work. Cheerfully done, because in the name of Jesus Christ we know that we are called to be good shepherds. Peanuts might not be exciting, but the mission and ministry they support are. Same with the countless ministries the Bazaar supports.

Why did some of our youth, during spring break, go up to New Bern to pack food packages for Stop Hunger Now? Well, maybe partly because their parents said, it's a good idea. And God bless parents who continually remind their youth that service and sacrifice are blessings, but here's the main point: the kids went. Not for their own entertainment, but for the sake of hungry sheep outside this fold. And by the way, to get involved

with our youth is to have hope and confidence in the future of our world, but I digress.

What about our once a month Thursday soup and bread luncheon? It's a lot of work. Folks who have plenty to eat for themselves sacrifice their time and energy. And it's not for our own folks. We all have plenty to eat. But it's for the sake of those who live nights at Hope Mission because they have no where else to live; it's for the sake of those who come to me for help: last Wednesday, I went three for three. All three folks were working. But their hours have been cut back. And their bills have not been.

I could go on and on, but you get the point. Jesus, the good shepherd, calls us to be engaged in healing the hurting and calling the lost. Jesus is the good shepherd. Not a hired hand only out for himself, not running in fear away from the wolf. Not hiding safe and secure while the others are in danger. But rather standing firm for the sake of his sheep.

And we the church, who believe in the good shepherd, are at our best when we bear witness to the good shepherd through our ministry and mission. When we exist as a church, not just for our own sake, but for the sake of Jesus' other sheep not of this fold.

We are at our best as a church, when we define our future not by the dangers and difficulties of today, but by God's call and claim upon our future.

To be sure, there are wolves out there. The future is filled with uncertainty and challenges. But at our best, as believers, as a church, we know that no matter how long and how hard the wolf might huff and puff; the Good Shepherd knows us and loves us, and sends us forth to be his people.

Amen.