



SNAKES AND DOVES

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Matthew 9:35-10:23

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Holy God, you call to us, you lead us, and your Word is a light for our path. Through your Word, with the power of your Holy Spirit, lead us again: discomfort us and teach us that we may be your faithful servants. As you so lovingly served others, lead us by your example as God made flesh, so that we may be your servant ministers in this world. Breathe through these ancient stories, the tradition of your storied people, so that we may be faithful in our time and place. Amen.

I should preface my opening story by saying that there will come a time when you get sick of hearing me introduce stories with, “When I was in Israel...” But for now, bear with me—I learned a lot last month on my pilgrimage. So ... when I was in Israel last month, we spent the last days of our trip in the desert south of Jerusalem. And while there we encountered several Bedouin camps. Bedouins are Arab farmers, nomads, who live lives drastically different from ours. As we traveled, we couldn’t help but notice their traditional clothing, their temporary encampments, and their nomadic lifestyle. Most interestingly, though, we watched the Bedouin farmers lead their sheep and goats through the hillsides.

For those of us who love the language of Psalm 23, it’s quite fascinating to actually watch Bedouin nomads guide their sheep through the wilderness. They lead their flocks from the front, calling to them, herding them, all the while remaining in the lead as their guide. They protect them, of course, but they always lead them from the front, calling out to them, and each sheep knows the sound of her shepherd’s voice.

Now, I’m no farmer, but I’ve heard that this style of shepherding is unique to the Middle East. American Cowboys drive and push their herds from behind. Middle East shepherds lead from the front, calling to their sheep to keep them together for



protection. “The shepherd is not the nursemaid who chases after them. He is not at their beck and call... The shepherd directs them away from danger and leads them to the things they need: food, water, and shelter.”¹ The shepherd leads the flock, from the front. He is in charge. Hold on to this image, because I’ll come back to it later.

Similar to the movement of that Bedouin nomad, today’s text is a traveling text. In the middle of Jesus’ ministry—after much teaching and several miraculous healings—Jesus prepares his disciples to be sent out as missionaries. He has shown great compassion on the crowds, the ones that seem like sheep without a shepherd, and Jesus now needs his followers’ help to spread the Gospel. His disciples, we see at the beginning of chapter 10 will now be called “apostles”—which literally means “the ones who are sent”.

In the narrative, Jesus gives his followers instructions for their journey. First, Jesus tells them to “pack light” with little money, no bag or change of clothes, food or a walking stick. If they are received by others they will be given hospitality and if not they should just move on, shaking the dust off their feet. I doubt these are the same instructions Adam gave our youth this month before preparing them for last week’s mission trip to West Virginia. But for Jesus, he sends his apostles out with instructions—pack light, seek hospitality, and move on if you’re rejected.

You may also have noticed that the Scripture passage intensifies as Jesus’ words move from instruction to warning. Jesus cautions his apostles that not everyone will receive the Gospel well and that some will seek to harm them. Jesus knows what lies ahead. So, in his instruction he doesn’t shy away from shooting straight—this is no easy journey, he says, there will be those who will try to persecute you. But push through anyway, because it’s not your words that you preach, but mine. Speak, Jesus says, because the Holy Spirit moves through you and I will guard and protect you.

Other than being a challenging directive, I find it interesting that Jesus gives us a sort of zoology for ministry with his instructions. Jesus sees the crowds, filled with

¹ Sermon: “Being Sheep”, Rev. Catherine Purves, Bellevue Presbyterian Church, April 2015
<http://www.bupchurch.org/being-sheep/>



pain and in need of healing, and he calls them sheep without a shepherd. Desperate to save them, Jesus, our Great Shepherd, commissions his disciples to go to these lost and hurting people. But the animal metaphors don't stop there. Jesus warns his disciples that they are sheep in the midst of wolves, and then he calls them to be as wise as snakes and as innocent as doves. Sheep and wolves, snakes and doves. Jesus gives us an animals' guide for the work of missionary ministry.

The Gospel of John reminds us that Jesus is the Good Shepherd.² The Lord is my shepherd³, we recall from the Psalms. In the line of King David, Jesus is the shepherd who guides and directs his sheep from the many dangers around them. If they are lost he finds them, if they are hurt he cares for them, if they need direction he calls to them.

Of course, the opposite of a sheep is a wolf. Wolves are predators, they travel in packs, seek to harm the animals they hunt. For sheep, the wolf is the enemy; it prowls alongside their flocks looking for a helpless lamb to devour. The wolf wants to scatter the sheep and distract the shepherd, so that it can take advantage of its prey for itself. In this world, there are those who seek harm, cause distraction, and inflict pain on the most vulnerable of God's children. In Jesus' instructions the calling to be sheep in the midst of wolves is a warning: for some the Good News of Jesus is a threat. Some will seek to silence the message, reduce its power, or even manipulate Jesus' intent. Some of these wolves are obvious, but others can be quite deceptive. If you know *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, you'll remember that it is Maugrim, a powerful wolf, who serves as the right hand of the evil White Witch. While he can be violent, Maugrim usually seeks to control the other animals of Narnia through manipulation, threats, and fear. In the same way, some of the most dangerous threats to Jesus' flock today are from those with influence or the power to manipulate, some even going so far as to inflict violence.

Therefore, because of these dangers, Jesus instructs his followers to behave not only like sheep, but also to be as wise as snakes and as innocent as doves. Doves are a common symbol for peace—another way to translate innocent in this verse is

² John 10.

³ Psalm 23.



“harmless.” Doves are a symbol of calm; with their white color they are a reminder of God’s peace. In the New Testament doves are a symbol for the Holy Spirit, and in the Old Testament they’re valued as a pure sacrifice⁴. So part of the calling of Gospel ministry is peace, the unwillingness to harm another with our words or actions.

While doves might be an obvious choice for Jesus to use, snakes are less so. It seems odd that Jesus would call us to be as shrewd as a snake, right? Think back to Genesis 3: the snake “was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made.”⁵ And it was the craftiness of the snake that manipulated Adam and Eve’s understandings of God’s good creation and even of themselves, leading them to disobey. The snake is wise, it is shrewd, in fact its wisdom is traditionally tied to manipulation. And this is the animal Jesus calls us to resemble in his ministry?

New Testament theologian N.T. Wright says that we Christians often misunderstand the ministry of Jesus as only innocent and never shrewd. But Jesus’ advice is clear in this passage—we are called to be both shrewd like snakes and innocent as doves. “Without innocence, [the] shrewdness [of the snake] becomes manipulative; without shrewdness [the] innocence [of the dove] becomes naivety.”⁶ Shrewdness does not have to equal dishonesty, and innocence does not have to equal gullibility. Ministry in Jesus’ name is therefore a mix of snake wisdom and dove innocence. Identifying wolves and their dangers takes skill and wisdom, and combatting their danger takes patience, innocence, and peace.

My friends, I hope it’s obvious that these instructions from Jesus in Matthew 10 aren’t just ancient words—Jesus’ direction is just as relevant to us today as it was 2,000 years ago. These instructions from Jesus are meant for anyone who goes forth in ministry in the name of Christ. They are for each of us here today, for this

⁴ Leviticus 14:22.

⁵ Genesis 3:1.

⁶ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One (chapters 1-15)*. WJK, 2002. Page 117.



church, for all Christians. These are instructions for anyone bold enough to follow the Good News.

My friends, we are in a treacherous time in our society, when truth is being manipulated. We find ourselves today in a culture that has a casual relationship with facts and honesty. There are people in power in our world who have decided that it's in their best interest to forcefully, repeatedly, and brazenly insist that certain lies are the truth and certain truths are a lie. It's becoming increasingly difficult to discern the sheep from the wolves.

And yet, in this passage in Matthew Jesus asks us to go out amongst them and spread the Gospel. The gift of speech, of words, was given to us by God, proclaimed by Jesus, and sealed in us with the Holy Spirit. Yes, Jesus warns us that there will be wolves who will reject the justice and mercy that we proclaim, but we must use our God-given cunning, like the snake, and our God-given innocence, like the dove, to discern just how God would have us remain faithful to our ministry in this world.

Now, I want to return to that Bedouin shepherd in Israel. He calls to his sheep, they know his voice, and he walks ahead of them guiding their steps. Sheep are not allowed to move in front of him and dictate their own path, their own way. They are not allowed to race ahead in blind confidence, waiting for their shepherd to come and rescue them. Sheep are called to follow.

So here's the truth about ministering in the name of Jesus: living as sheep in the midst of wolves, called to be a mix of snakes and doves, requires wisdom. And it's a wisdom that comes not from ourselves, not from our media, not from celebrities or cultural "experts". Wisdom comes from the only true Shepherd that can lead us—the one whose voice calls to us and to whom our ears should be tuned. My friends we have a Savior who can teach us what it is to be as wise as snakes and innocent as doves. Jesus—the one who loves each and every one of God's children, the one who calls us in ministry to proclaim the same is our source of wisdom. So follow him, listen for him, and be very careful that no one else tries to lead you astray.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.