

Facing our Fears Together

After these things, the Lord commissioned seventy-two others and sent them on ahead in pairs to every city and place he was about to go. He said to them, “The harvest is bigger than you can imagine, but there are few workers. Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers for his harvest. Go! Be warned, though, that I’m sending you out as lambs among wolves. Carry no wallet, no bag, and no sandals. Don’t even greet anyone along the way. Whenever you enter a house, first say, ‘May peace be on this house.’ If anyone there shares God’s peace, then your peace will rest on that person. If not, your blessing will return to you. Remain in this house, eating and drinking whatever they set before you, for workers deserve their pay. Don’t move from house to house. Whenever you enter a city and its people welcome you, eat what they set before you. Heal the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘God’s kingdom has come upon you.’ Whenever you enter a city and the people don’t welcome you, go out into the streets and say, ‘As a complaint against you, we brush off the dust of your city that has collected on our feet. But know this: God’s kingdom has come to you.’ . . . Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. Whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.”

The seventy-two returned joyously, saying, “Lord, even the demons submit themselves to us in your name.” Jesus replied, “I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Look, I have given you authority to crush snakes and scorpions underfoot. I have given you authority over all the power of the enemy. Nothing will harm you. Nevertheless, don’t rejoice because the spirits submit to you. Rejoice instead that your names are written in heaven.”

Lk. 10:1-11, 16-20 (C.E.B.)

“I’m sending you out as lambs among wolves” (Lk. 10:3). Really? Why would Jesus do that? Why would Jesus send them to meet the Big Bad Wolf, face to face?

Wolves are scary. They prey on sheep and lambs. It’s why wolves are invariably portrayed as evil in folklore. They are not nice. They are to be feared. It doesn’t matter if you’re talking about “Peter and the Wolf” or “Little Red Riding Hood” or “The Three Little Pigs.” Whenever we read about wolves, they are the enemy.

That isn’t necessarily true in Native American culture, by the way. I suspect that’s because Native Americans didn’t raise sheep. The Jews, however, have been raising sheep since the time of Abraham (Gen. 13:2).

Jesus knows how dangerous they can be. And yet he says, “I’m sending you out as lambs among wolves.”

In Western culture, the “Big Bad Wolf” is almost always a metaphor for the fears we have. In some stories, the “Big Bad Wolf” is really the fear of darkness. In others it’s the fear of failure or the fear of death or the fear of loneliness.

The Big Bad Wolf is symbolic of the things we fear.

I’m not talking about the phobias we all encounter, like the fear of heights or the fear of spiders – both of which I admit to having. I am talking about real fears. And we all have fears.

- Some of us have the fear of missing out that prevents us from making commitments. We’re afraid we might miss something better.

- Others are afraid of running out. We see scarcity and cling to what we have.
- Some people fear death, and they don't like the visual reminder we put front and center today.
- Maybe you are fearful for our planet as global warming continues to happen.
- Or maybe you are afraid of what is happening to our country with the rise of Christian Nationalism.

We all have fears. I don't know what your fears are; I do know some of mine. And I will be the last to suggest our fears should immobilize us, but we cannot face them until we name them.

One way to help identify your fears is to ask the question a friend of mine often asked when he met people. He asked, "What keeps you awake at night?" What are the dreams and images that make your heart race and your palms sweat?

That's your Big Bad Wolf.

I can't remember the last time I had the dream, but I had a variation of the same dream throughout much of my time in college and seminary – and well beyond. Others have told me they have had similar dreams, so I know I'm not alone. In those dreams, there is the sudden realization that I have a final exam in a class I have not attended since the first day of school. Or I couldn't remember what building it was in. Or I couldn't remember which room it was in. One time I couldn't remember the combination to my locker that had my assignment in it.

I always woke up from those dreams in a panic.

And I know those dreams reveal rather clearly that my Big Bad Wolf was the same as the one in "The Three Little Pigs;" it is the fear of failure due to lack of proper preparation.

That is no longer my fear, by the way – at least not a recurring fear. I know because it's been so long since I've had that dream. More recently, my dreams had me preaching to a church while I'm still wearing my pajamas. Or I'm running late because I can't find my Bible. Or I'm the guest speaker and someone reads a scripture that I didn't know I was supposed to use in my sermon.

I was in the middle of one of those dreams once – an especially vivid dream – when the fire whistle blew. I was a Volunteer Firefighter in a small town at the time. I did what I always did when the whistle blew at night, I jumped out of bed and raced to the fire station. It wasn't until someone made a comment about getting ready for work that I realized it wasn't Sunday morning. I was so relieved to realize I had three more days to finish my sermon that I laughed out loud!

Who's afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? I am. And if you allow yourself to ask that question seriously, I believe you are too. We all are.

The Big Bad Wolf is Big and Bad. And he is hungry. We meet him and see his big teeth showing. We have every reason to be afraid of the Big Bad Wolf, whatever it is that he represents in your life.

Fortunately, in the folklore of our culture the Big Bad Wolf is always conquered. He is defeated by the hero. Sometimes, when we face our own fears, we realize we become our own heroes as we outsmart the wolf and become victorious.

But more often, we are looking for someone else to save us. We take that image with us when we read the scriptures and are grateful for the image of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the One who protects us from the Big Bad Wolf (Jn. 10:11).

We like the image in the 23rd Psalm where the Lord is our Shepherd who leads us beside still waters, who restores our souls (Ps. 23:2). We find comfort when we are surrounded by the Big Bad Wolves and the “darkest of valleys” because the Shepherd is with us (Ps. 23:4).

When the Big Bad Wolf huffs and puffs, we know we are safe because Jesus is the rock who protects us (Ps. 62:2, and others).

But in our text today, Jesus sends the disciples “out as lambs among wolves” (Lk. 10:3). Not only that; they are not allowed to bring anything with them for protection – no money, no food, no clothing (Lk. 10:4). For all intents and purposes, they are going to their sure and certain death!

What kind of a shepherd does that?!

It’s one thing for the shepherd to *lead* us through a valley where there may be wolves lurking, but what kind of a shepherd *sends* the sheep into the midst of hungry wolves with no means of protection?

I mean, it may be appropriate to send someone out to show what they *can* do. In fact, sometimes it’s important to do that.

I had my car in for service this week. The service manager made the comment that he was new, and this was his first day on his own. I know he needed to have the experience of being on his own or he would never succeed as a service manager. But it didn’t make me feel confident in his ability to do so – even if his boss was sure he could manage it on his own!

I can also tell you it was scary when someone showed that kind of confidence in me. The first time I was trusted to answer the phones by myself, for example. And the first time I was left home by myself.

But the absolute scariest for me was the first time I took a plane into the air solo. But I had the knowledge and the experience to do it. I was capable of flying the plane solo and my instructor knew it. So he got out and sent me into the air on my own.

But this is different. The sheep don’t have the knowledge, or the experience, or the capabilities to go out on their own!

If we are afraid of the Big Bad Wolf – and as I said, I believe we all are – where are we to find hope?

As a preacher, I began to wonder where I can find good news in this text. That’s when I re-read the text.

And when I did, I noticed that the sheep aren’t sent one-by-one, but two-by-two (Lk. 10:1). One lonely lamb would become a quick and easy meal. And while two sheep cannot overcome a powerful wolf – and even less so a pack of wolves – I realized there is significance in the fact that they are not sent alone.

For “where two or three are gathered in my name,” Jesus says, “I am there with them” (Mt. 18:20).

They are *not* alone. They are not unprotected. Not as long as there are two or three of them. They are not alone. The shepherd is with them.

And just to ensure they trust the shepherd and not their own abilities or their own skills or their own resources, Jesus tells them not to bring anything along (Lk. 10:4). They must trust him entirely. Just like lambs trust the shepherd to lead them, even when they are surrounded by wolves.

Amazingly, 72 out of 72 go (Lk. 10:1). And as far as we can tell, 72 out of 72 return. 36 pairs of servants go and face the wolves and 36 pairs return sharing the excitement of not only conquered wolves but conquered bears and dragons as well!

And like the proud parent of a child who has just learned to ride a bike, Jesus rejoices in what has happened (Lk. 10:21).

By the way, did you notice there were 72 who were sent? Jesus isn't sending the twelve Disciples to preach the Good News. He's sending a larger group than that, suggesting that you and I are not exempt from this story.

We have all been sent to serve. And we are all sent in such a way that we know we must trust Jesus to be with us. We must face our own "Big Bad Wolves," but not on our own. We do it two-by-two or three-by-three or four-by-four so we know that Jesus is with us when we go.

It doesn't matter if your Big Bad Wolf is the fear of visiting in the hospital or leading committees or teaching Sunday School or singing in the choir. We can face our fears together and allow God to conquer them through us.

One way I used to confront the "wolf" of my own fear of failure due to poor preparation was to invite people to join me in a weekly Bible study of the texts I used in worship. It's a practice I sometimes miss, but that "wolf" is no longer scary to me, so I no longer need it to be prepared on Sundays.

I encourage you to face your own "wolves," whatever they may be. I do that because I'm convinced God wants us to stand up to every "Big Bad Wolf" we fear.

But you'll need to take a risk and share your fears with someone, so you can go in pairs or in triads. You see, it's together that we respond to the shepherd's call to go and serve, trusting God to lead us, trusting God to protect us, trusting God to work through us.

And when we face our fears together, I believe God smiles. When we confront the Big Bad Wolf, I believe God rejoices. I believe it becomes a day of rejoicing, not unlike the one in our text today (Lk. 10:18). You see, Jesus, the disciples, and all of heaven rejoice whenever the "Big Bad Wolf" is put to rest.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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