

Title: *Sheep Among Wolves*

Text: Luke 10:1-16

One concern I have about much of present-day Christianity – and there is much to be concerned about – is how often I hear people praying for safety.

There's nothing wrong with wanting our loved ones to be safe and to do well. I'm sure when we leave my Mom's house and drive about 1000 miles to come back home, she prays quite often for our safety and protection. There are too many things that can go wrong on a trip of that distance – a drunk driver, a sudden storm, an over-extended trucker desperate to make it home cutting a corner here or there. As our children grow, we pray a lot of prayers for their protection. And indeed, we would be devastated if something bad happened to someone we love. As I was working on this, I saw a facebook post from a military mother. Nothing wrong with praying that your son comes back safely from the war. After the Japan quake, there was another facebook post stating that a Wake Forest student studying in Japan was safe.

What concerns me though is when Christians never ponder the possibility that God may have a bigger agenda than just allowing us to have a nice, safe little life.

Think about it for a moment, how interesting would your life be if you always chose the safe option? What opportunities would you miss if you took the risk out of everything? How dull would your life be if your main prayer was always 'keep me safe' rather than 'Lord give me courage to take risks and let me feel your presence when I'm in a dangerous place.'

The world is not a safe place. We look at the gospel of Jesus Christ as being the good news that its name implies and we wonder what harm could ever befall anyone just for trying to go out and tell people good news. The world as we find it this morning, March 20, 2011 is not a "safe" place to do missions. You can look at the web sites of organizations like Voice of the Martyrs and understand that there are dangerous places in this world.

Pakistan's only Christian cabinet member, Shahbaz Bhatti, was assassinated by gunmen on March 2. Shahbaz wanted to reform Pakistan's blasphemy law, which is often used against Christians. He is the second politician killed for criticizing the blasphemy law and calling for the release of convicted Christian Asia Bibi. The governor of Punjab province, Salman Taseer, was killed on Jan. 4 after he publicly spoke out against the law. In some countries of the world, I guess that's just the way you handle dissent.

Several armed men opened fire on Shahbaz's car in a residential neighborhood of Islamabad. Two of the men pulled Shahbaz's driver out of the car while the third man repeatedly fired his Kalashnikov into the vehicle. Shahbaz was killed instantly. Pakistani television carried images of his bullet-riddled car. Should he have prayed for safety? There would have been nothing wrong with asking for God's protection as he was in a dangerous place, taking what was a controversial stand.

As we read this morning's text and realize we are looking at it as a part of the general

series *Jesus: Lamb of God*, there are times that Jesus sends us out and our safety is not his first concern.

As in all of the gospels, Jesus has been preaching, teaching and healing. His fame and reputation are growing. In his humanity, he recognizes that he will be limited. There's only so much one man can do, only so many places he can go. That's why he told his disciples, "You will do greater things than I have done because I am going to the Father." He could say that because he would send his spirit and by his spirit, he could be in all of his believers and go into every corner of the globe.

Jesus appoints 70 or 72 depending upon which ancient manuscript or which translation you are reading and he let them serve as his advance team. There are a couple of different ways of understanding the significance of the 70. That is the number of Gentile nations that are mentioned in Genesis 10 and it is the number of judges that helped Moses judge disputes and hear the cases among his people.

If you look at the 70 as being the number of Gentile nations, it is a powerful foreshadowing of a Gentile mission in Luke. Don't forget either that Acts is volume 2 of Luke-Acts which concludes with Paul taking the gospel to the Gentiles.

He says, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few." How often does that motif appear in Scripture? The same thing is said in Matthew 10. It's kind of a hinge point in that gospel as from that moment forward, Jesus spends more and more time with his disciples and makes his way toward Jerusalem.

Now look at what Jesus says. He doesn't say what the captain used to say on Hill Street Blues – the old police show where he would say after their morning roll call and after he'd passed out all of the assignments for the day, "Be safe out there."

Don't get me wrong. Jesus is not advocating a reckless disregard for our own personal safety. Remember when he was being tempted, the devil took him to the pinnacle of the temple and said, "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here."¹⁰ For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully;¹¹ they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

One of the things that Jesus is reacting against here is the idea of forcing God to do something spectacular to defend himself. One of the other things he's saying is, "I'm not going to do something that is just plain flat dangerous. I'm not a fool and I'm not going to be foolish."

Notwithstanding, Jesus says, "I'm sending you out as lambs among wolves." It's interesting to see some of the adjective that are used to describe wolves. Nowhere are they described as anything other than a very dangerous animal. Ezekiel 22:27 says, "²⁷Her officials within her are like wolves tearing their prey;" Habakkuk is describing the forces of the Chaldeans who were about to conquer his people and he says, "⁸ Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at dusk. Zephaniah says, "³ Her officials are roaring lions, her rulers are evening wolves, who leave nothing for the morning. Matthew says, "Watch out for false

prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves, and then Paul warns the Ephesian elders, "After I leave ferocious wolves will come in and will not spare the flock.

Jesus is saying, "I'm sending you out as a defenseless animal in the midst of some pretty ferocious animals." It's almost as if he has no concern for their safety. I'm sending you out into a situation that I know will be dangerous. Those who are overly preoccupied with their own safety need not apply. Why is it that we hear about Christian missionaries being shot and killed on the foreign field someplace? Why is it that Christians may be martyred for their faith or be thrown into prison or have to endure beatings and persecution? It's because we are engaged in warfare. When we fell, Satan, Lucifer, the devil, the prince of the power of the air – whatever your preferred name for him is – took charge of this world, or he acts like he owns it, and we're taking back the territory the enemy stole. He will do everything in his power to try to hold on to it.

It sounds like not much of an offer. It gets worse before it gets better. He says don't take along a purse or bag or sandals. It's interesting later, when Jesus commissions his disciples, immediately prior to his crucifixion, he asks them, "³⁵ Then Jesus asked them, "When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" "Nothing," they answered. ³⁶ He said to them, "But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one."

Don't take a purse. Don't take a knapsack or a traveler's bag – like you might use as a carry-on when you're traveling. Don't take sandals. He says you're going out into a dangerous world. He doesn't say anything about weapons or anything that they may need to defend or protect themselves. That may not seem unusual given that Jesus was a pretty non-violent guy. He also told them not to take any provisions. After the time of the wilderness wanderings, God reminded the people, "During the forty years that I led you through the desert, your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet."

I think of how hard I am on shoes and that seems beyond belief to me. I just had to get new black shoes because they were so worn down on the outside of the heels that they were getting really uncomfortable to wear and to walk in and to try to stand and preach in. I thought, "I haven't had these for that long."

Jesus said, "Don't take provisions and don't stop and greet anyone on the road." He wasn't telling them to be unfriendly. He was simply telling them that the task at hand was urgent. Hospitality was and still is such a big part of middle eastern culture that the greetings would be so elaborate and involved that it would take a significant portion of time that the sent ones just didn't have.

The implication is that Jesus does promise them that they will have what they need. He doesn't promise that he will keep them out of danger. He promises that he will go into the dangerous situations with them. He doesn't promise them safety, but he does promise them provision and he promises them his presence. The best example I can think of this is in the book

of Daniel. We're familiar with the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Nebuchadnezzar had issued a decree that anyone who worshiped any god other than him would be thrown into the fiery furnace. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego worshiped only God.

They were found out and when they were, they said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

Would you rather have the promise of utter and complete safety, or would you rather be assured of God's presence and His provision? I've heard missionary challenges that are so austere and so hard and painted in such terms that no one in their right mind would ever take up the challenge to go on mission. Indeed, we ought to count the cost before we just go out on mission. It's not for the faint of heart and it's not for the spiritually immature. Not to say that God can't "grow you up" when you're working for him, but there ought to be a certain level of spiritual maturity, especially before we go overseas.

The great missionary pioneer Samuel Zwemer, who was also called "The Apostle to Islam" lived in the early part of the last century and he said, "The unoccupied fields of the world await those who are willing to be lonely for the sake of Christ." There will be loneliness, culture shock, homesickness, but there will also be wonderful and fascinating people you will meet that you wouldn't meet otherwise.

There will be people who are hostile, but there will be people who themselves are lonely and searching, like the man who told the missionary, "I always knew there was a God, I just didn't know his name.

Sometimes, your efforts will depend upon a man of peace being there. Go in the spirit of wishing peace. Those sent out by Jesus represent the Prince of Peace. We're not on some sort of jihad to coerce or threaten people to become followers of Jesus. We go wishing peace. The wholeness, the balance, the joy of God. A person of good will receive that but a person who is hostile to that will be rubber and you'll be glue and what you say will bounce off of them and stick to you.

A recent survey done in England offers insights into the minds of those who do not attend church and ideas for reaching the seemingly unreachable.

Most of those surveyed agreed that the strongest motivating factor for attending a worship service would be the personal invitation of a family member or friend. Other prime motivators: a more general church invitation (like a phone call or a flier), difficult personal circumstances, personal illness, or a time of depression.

The survey found that openness to alternative worship structures and special midweek gatherings also catch the eye of the seeker. England's "Fresh Expressions" movement is proving quite effective in its experimentation with church traditions, attracting young and old alike,

modern or postmodern.

Some churches in England have created a special "Back to Church" Sunday, inviting "lapsed" attenders to come back and reconsider commitment. Over 20 churches in the London area have adopted the event as a regular part of their calendar year.

Though outreach efforts have sometimes seen mixed results—and though some surveyed say they will never attend any worship service whatsoever—a few of these ideas seem to be working. Worship at Christmastime has increased by a third since 2000. Easter celebrations have seen a 9 percent rise in the same period of time. Overall, worship attendance in London cathedrals has increased by 17 percent.

When God sends you, go in peace. Go as a respectful guest. I read about a seminary professor who asked his students what was most striking about this passage and one student replied, "Eat what is set before you." His dad had pastored in a rural area where it was a big deal to have the pastor and his family in their homes for dinner and they would serve what they had – wild game, squirrel, whatever. The gracious thing to do is as my mother used to tell me, "Take what you get and be glad to get it." That's a witness.

If someone rejects your message, they're not rejecting you, they're rejecting your message and the God that you represent. God will deal with them. Don't be obsessed with them. Shake the dust and move on because the task is urgent and there are still a lot of people who haven't heard.

Donald MacGavran, a father of the church growth movement, once said, "The world has more winnable people than ever before ... but it is possible to come out of a ripe field empty-handed."

It's called ministry. One writer defined it this way:

Ministry is giving when you feel like keeping, praying for others when you need to be prayed for, feeding others when your own soul is hungry, living truth before people even when you can't see results, hurting with other people even when your own hurt can't be spoken, keeping your word even when it is not convenient, it is being faithful when your flesh wants to run away.

It's also knowing that when you're a lamb and the wolves are howling, God is right there present, protecting and providing.

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