

“The Fight with the Wolf”

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A Reflection for the Third Sunday of Lent, continuing a series on John 10.

John 10:11-21 (also Ezekiel 34:11-16)

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Read the Scriptures by clicking [here \(for Ezekiel 34\)](#) and [here \(for John 10\)](#).

The wolf kills the Shepherd!

Did you see that coming? More astonishing, Jesus tells this story about himself! He's the shepherd the wolf gets!

Jesus is messing with the story. Judaism had a long tradition of using shepherds and sheep to talk about kings and their people.

The story says there were good shepherd-kings. David is the prime example.

The story also tells of bad shepherds. Shepherds who led the sheep astray, who used the sheep for their own gain, who left the sheep unprotected and lost. Wolves came! Wolves from outside, all those empires that decimated Israel. Wolves from inside, pretenders and deceivers in sheep's clothing.

The story says there will be a good shepherd again. One who loves, gathers, protects, feeds and guides the flock. This good shepherd will be the messiah, a new king like David, even better. Some tellings of the story, like that one we heard from Ezekiel, say God will be this good shepherd.

The story says the good shepherd will drive off the wolves. Never that the wolves will kill the shepherd.

Not until Jesus.

II

It makes sense for a shepherd to take risks to protect the sheep. The sheep are the shepherd's livelihood. Their wool clothes the shepherd's family. Their milk and meat feed the shepherd's family. Their family needs the sheep.

So when wolves are sniffing around . . . when the pack is circling . . . when the sheep are in danger . . . though wolves are dangerous, the shepherd protects the flock.

Hired hands? You heard what Jesus says. They have no personal stake in the sheep, so they will not stick around for the fight. Can't blame them. But the shepherd stays to fight the wolves.

Still, how far do you expect the shepherd to go? Will the shepherd risk injury to save the sheep? Will the shepherd take such risks that, if things go badly, the wolves might mortally wound the shepherd?

Maybe. Shepherds' families depend on their sheep. So shepherds will take risks to protect their flock, because shepherds love their families. To protect their families, shepherds will risk themselves to protect the sheep their families depend on.

But a shepherd who is thinking straight will only go so far to fight the wolves. I mean, what if the wolves are so strong, so fierce, so hungry and so numerous, that the shepherd, surveying the situation, realizes there is no chance? What if the shepherd sees that taking on the wolves can only result in their own death?

Would a smart shepherd stay and fight?

After killing the shepherd, the wolves will still get the sheep. The shepherd's family will be worse off, with neither their sheep nor their shepherd.

III

Change the scene. Suppose a fire has started in my house? I'm safely outside. Will I rush in to put it out?

The fire department says I should not, and no doubt that is very wise. Honestly, I can't predict what I would do. I imagine I *might* go in to put out the fire. *If* the fire is still small enough that I would have a good chance. *And if* I have the tools to put it out. *And if* I have the skill to put it out.

Let's raise the stakes. I have no insurance. My house is also my business. If it burns, I can't replace it, I have no job, and my family will be homeless. Am I more likely to try putting out the fire? Maybe. My calculation might change. Still, thinking clearly, I will risk only as much as I think I can put out the fire. If I fail and die trying, the house still burns, my family is still on the street, and now without me.

Let me tell you, though . . . if my kids are trapped in the house . . . no matter how big the fire, and how un-firefighter-like I am, and with only a glass of water . . . I'm going to fight for them, though it kills me.

I love my kids. I'll die for my kids.

IV

"I am the good shepherd," says Jesus. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

That only makes sense if his flock is his family.

They are.

The sheep, they are not God's business assets. They are God's People! Yes, God has a purpose for them, God has a mission for them, God uses them and works through them. Yet the people are not a means for God to get to some other end.

So Jesus the Good Shepherd loves the sheep. They are his own, his delight, his treasure, his passion. This Good Shepherd will not only risk dying for them. He chooses to give his life for them. He decides to lay down his life for his sheep. He loves them, his family.¹

We're reading this from the Gospel of John. As we've been working through John's account of Jesus' Good News, we've been hearing growing threats against Jesus, his opponents conspiring to kill Jesus. But here! It's not just Jesus saying, "*I'm going into battle to protect you, and I might not come back.*" Rather, it's "*I must die to protect you. I must lay down my life. It's part of my job description. It's crucial to my vocation. I am the Good Shepherd!*" He sees his death, not as a possibility, but a necessity to save his flock.

V

Jesus dying was not necessary because it was noble. Jesus knew it was necessary because it would be effective.

If I run into my house where my kids are and I die, that will gain me what? A few more nice words at my funeral? But my kids will still be dead. I will have nobly failed. Unless by dying, I saved them. Then my death would be a success.

Jesus realized that by letting the wolves kill him, he was saving his people from those wolves.

What are the wolves? (I'm not talking about real wolves. Wolves are God's creatures. Jesus loves all the little wolves of the world! He uses "wolf" here as a metaphor, because wolves hunt sheep.)

What hunts us? What keeps people from living in God's shalom-peace? What keeps us from flourishing in God's Kingdom? Wolves from without: wolves of injustice and dehumanization, wolves of violence and terror . . . Death. Wolves from within: wolves of our selfishness, our cruelty, our bitterness, our resentments, our indifference, our hatreds . . . Sin. The wolf of Evil.

Jesus lay down his life, and let injustice, violence, terror, and dehumanization have him.

¹ In other words, I'm arguing here that Jesus' actions — choosing to die for his people — are not *typical* of what any good shepherd would do to protect his flock. Jesus' actions are not even *exemplary* of what a good shepherd should do. Rather, Jesus did what he did because he is unique: not a good shepherd, but *the Good Shepherd*.

He let our selfishness, cruelty, bitterness, resentment, indifference, hatred . . . all sin, all death, all evil kill and destroy him.

Notice, Jesus says God gave him this authority to lay down his life. Jesus had the authority to lay down his life, and the authority to pick it up again —his resurrection. God gave the Good Shepherd authority over life and death. So when those wolves devoured him, he destroyed any power they had *over the Shepherd or his sheep*. Laying down and lifting up, the Good Shepherd saved his sheep from the wolves.

Other sheep, too. Notice, Jesus said there are other sheep too, and they are already his. Laying down and lifting up, Jesus stretches out and reaches wide, to gather and bring us and many more together. To him. With him.

All because of love. Jesus' love. God-his-Father's love, poured through God-the-Son-the Shepherd, for all the sheep.

Our Shepherd loves us, loves you. Lay down and lifted up for us, for you. This is the Good News of our Good Shepherd.