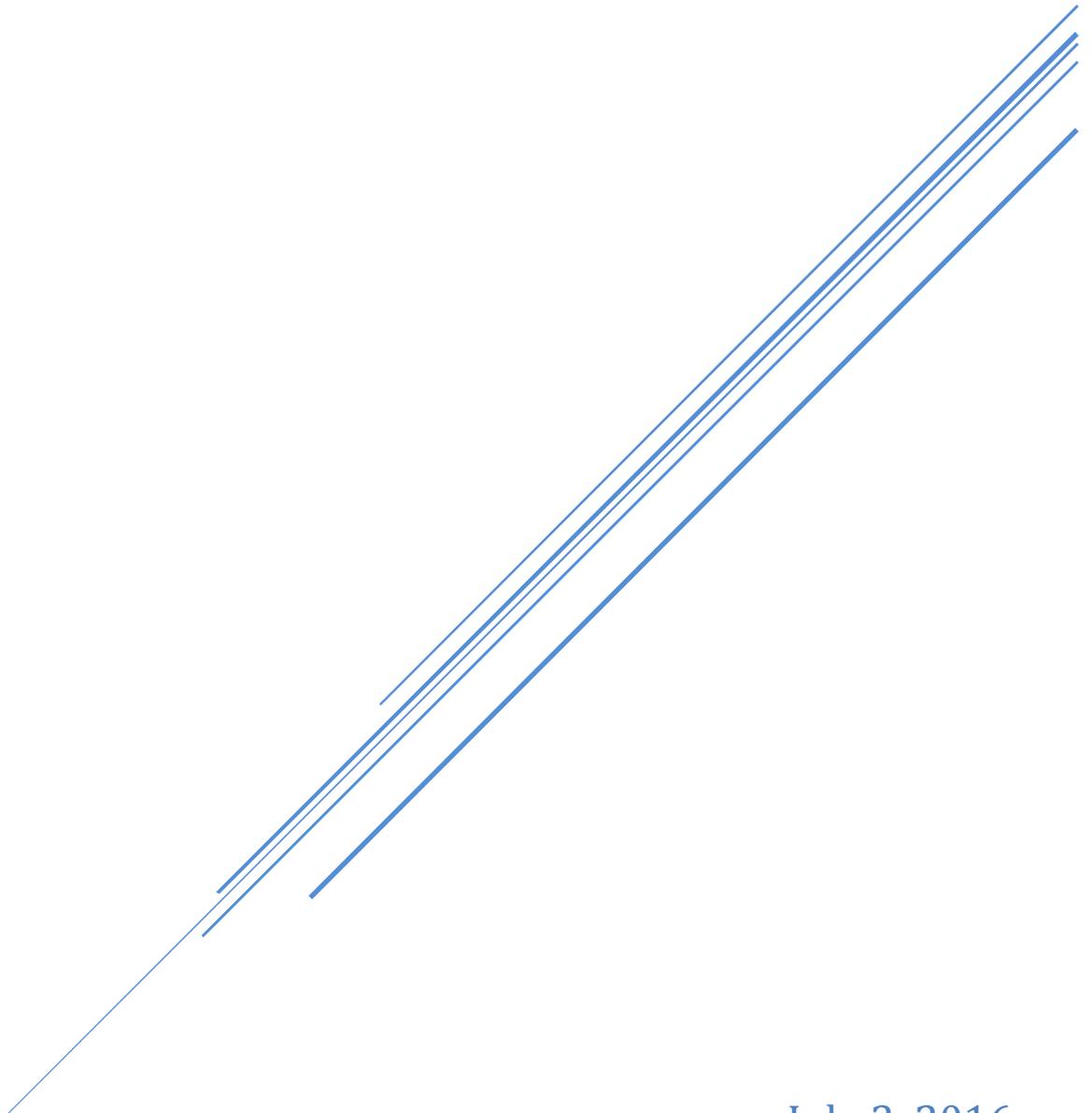


WHO'S AFRAID OF THE BIG BAD WOLF?

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20



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Wolves. Although it doesn't seem fair, wolves are invariably portrayed as evil in folk lore and fairy tales. Never the good guy. Be afraid. Be very afraid. Peter and the wolf? Be afraid. Little Red riding Hood? Be afraid. Even the Three Little Pigs. Whenever we read about wolves, it seems, they are the bad guy.

This doesn't seem to be true in Native American culture, but maybe that's because they didn't raise sheep...

But the Big Bad Wolf in Western culture is almost always a metaphor for the things we're afraid of. In some stories, the Big Bad Wolf is the fear of darkness. In others, it's the fear of failure or fear of death or the fear of loneliness.

The Big Bad Wolf is symbolic of our fears -- we all have them. I don't know what your fears are but I'm pretty familiar with mine! One way to help identify our fears is to ask the question a pastor friend of mine asks when meeting people at his new appointment. "What keeps you awake at night?" he asks. "What are the dreams that make your heart race and your palms sweat?"

That's your Big Bad Wolf.

It's been a little while since I had this dream but I had variations of it through much of my time in college and seminary. In this dream, I would suddenly realize that I had a final exam in a class that I had never taken! Or I couldn't remember what room it was in. And I always wake up with that panicky feeling

It seems to me, those dreams reveal that my Big bad Wolf was the same as the one in the Three Little Pigs – the fear of failure due to a perceived lack of proper preparation.

I still have that fear – I know if it'll ever go away... I still have dreams where I dream that I get up to preach and realize the scripture is suddenly different than the one I prepared. Or I have no sermon to give. Or no pants!

Who's afraid of the big bad wolf? I am. And if you're honest and allow yourself to seriously ask the question, I think you are too. I think we all are.

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

Fortunately though, in the folk tales and fairy stories of western culture, the Big Bad Wolf is always conquered – defeated by the hero. And guess what? You're the hero. As we face our own fears, we become the heroes who outsmart the wolf and become the victors.

But more often, we're looking for someone else to save us. We take that image with us when we read the scripture and are grateful for image of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who protects us from the Big Bad Wolf.

We love the image in the 23rd psalm of the Lord as our shepherd, who leads us beside still waters, who "restoreth my soul..." We take comfort in the midst of the biggest, baddest, Wolves and the darkest of valleys, because the Shepherd is with us.

When the Big Bad Wolf huffs and puffs we know our houses are safe because Jesus is our rock and our foundation.

But in today's text, Jesus sends the lambs out into the heart of wolf territory. And not only that, they're not allowed to bring anything with them to defend or protect themselves – no money, no food, no extra clothes. Surely, they're walking into certain death! What kind of shepherd is that?

I mean, it's one thing for the shepherd to lead us through a valley where there might be wolves lurking about, but what kind of a shepherd sends the sheep out into the middle of a pack of hungry wolves, on purpose, with no way to protect themselves?

Well, you know, sometimes it's perfectly appropriate to send someone out on their own in order to show what they can do. In fact, sometimes it's necessary. I took my car in for an oil change one time and the service manager told me – not sure why – that he was new, and that this was his first day on the job unsupervised. He needed to have the experience of being on his own or he would never have made it as a successful service manager.

One of the scariest days of my life was the first Sunday I was appointed pastor for CCUMC. My very first appointment – solo! I had some knowledge and I had some experience. I said I was ready, but inside I was a frightened mess. (My second appointment, one year later wasn't much better!)

What big eyes you have – what big ears you have – and what big teeth you have – metaphorically speaking of course!

Fortunately, Sione (the D.S.) and whoever he gets his information from seemed to think that I was ready – that I could take this baby out solo.

But today's story is different. These sheep haven't been to seminary. They don't have the knowledge, or the experience, to go out on their own!

So, if we're all afraid of the Big Bad Wolf, then where are we supposed to find hope? Where's the Good News in this text?

Well, did you notice that the sheep aren't sent out one by one, but two by two? One lone lamb could quickly become a wolf's Happy-Meal. And while two sheep can't overcome a powerful and hungry wolf – much less a whole pack of them – it's significant that Jesus doesn't send them out alone.

"...truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18:19-20).

They're not alone. And they're not unprotected. And there are two or three of them, they're not alone – the shepherd is still with them.

And to make certain that they trust the shepherd and "lean not on their own understanding" (Prov. 3:8) -- their own abilities or skills or resources -- Jesus tells them they can't bring anything with them. That way, they have to trust Jesus entirely – just like lambs in the heart of wolf country, who trust in the shepherd entirely to see them through.

Amazingly, all 70 out of 70 go. And just as amazingly, as far as we know, all 70 came back! 35 pairs of servant-disciples go and face the wolves, and 35 pairs return sharing the excitement of not only conquered the Big Bad Wolf but lions and tigers and -- maybe bears! (Bogeymen and monsters of all kinds...)

And like a proud parent of a child who has just learned to ride a two-wheeler, Jesus rejoices in what's happened.

Notice if you will, the fact that 70 people were sent out – probably all men, but who knows? Jesus didn't send the original twelve disciples to preach the Good News. He's sending a larger group, which suggests that you and I are neither exempt nor immune from this story.

We've all been sent to serve, and we've all been sent in such a way that we know we have to trust Jesus to be with us. Those really are Jesus' footprints in the sand beside ours. We face our Big Bad Wolves, but not alone. We do it by

two's, or by three's, or even by four's. We know Jesus is with us whenever and wherever we go.

It doesn't matter if your Big Bad Wolf is the fear of visiting in the hospital or leading a committee (or just serving on one!), teaching Sunday School, or reading scripture. We can face our fears and allow God to conquer them through us.

One way that I've confronted my Big Bad Wolf -- my fear of failure -- is to only focus on the next right thing. If I try to think about all the things I need to do, it gets to be overwhelming, so I just think about the very next right thing, and do that. It's how I got through college at age 45 and graduate school. That -- and showing up -- is half the battle.

But I want to help you face your own Big Bad Wolves, too, whatever they might be. I want to help because I'm convinced that God wants us to stand up to the Big Bad Wolf. But for me to join you, you'll need to take a risk and share your fears with me. Together, I think maybe we can respond to the Good Shepherd's call to go and serve, trusting that God will lead us; trusting that God will protect us; trusting that God will work through us, whether we know it or not.

And I really believe that God smiles when we face our fears. Like that parent watching the child conquer the two-wheeler, God rejoices with us. When we confront the Big Bad Wolf it becomes a day of rejoicing, not unlike the one in today's reading. For Jesus, the disciples, and all the citizens of the Kingdom rejoice when the Big Bad Wolf is put to rest.

Amen.