

**Sermon**  
**19 August 2018**  
**West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood**

By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald

Reading: Matthew, chapter 10, vv1; 16-20; 40-42

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Our Scripture reading this morning was 3 short sections out of a long discourse with the heading “Jesus sends out the 12”.

Jesus was basically giving his disciples a pep-talk. He was sending them out to go tell the world about Him, and at the beginning of the passage we read, it’s almost as if you can FEEL their excitement!

*It reminds me a little of my wee boy Nehan before a rugby match. He is always super excited and almost high on adrenaline. The coach will give the team a pep-talk and they will all feel ready to go out on that field and win that game, no matter how strong their opponents are...*

So when Jesus said: I’m giving you the authority to drive out evil spirits and heal every disease and sickness, his disciples were super excited! They’ve been watching Jesus do these things, they’ve been following him and learning from him, and now they were ready to go do the same.

They must have thought: YES! How cool is that? We are ready to go change the world now!

But then Jesus brings them back to reality with a shock: He doesn't say – "Go get them, boys!" He says: "I'm sending you out like sheep among wolves." What?!

I'm sure not a single disciple wanted to hear THAT!

SHEEP among WOLVES! That couldn't be right! Wolves eat sheep. Everybody knows that! How could Jesus expect them to do that?

But that's just the way Jesus was. Truthful. Honest. Realistic.

He wasn't going to tell them that this was going to be easy, as he knew, from his own experience, just how very hard it could be. He wanted them to be prepared.

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When we were on holiday in South Africa now, we spent a lot of time in nature reserves.

We went on safari almost every day, and when you are out in nature like that, close to the animals, it's very easy to understand why Jesus made use of animals in similes and stories.

All the animals we saw were just roaming free in the reserve, with the exception of the lions who were in a separate camp. Some of the animals would come really close to the houses, but luckily the dangerous ones are just as scared of people as we are of them, so although we could hear them at night, we only ever saw them from a distance.

One day we went to an animal sanctuary. It's a place where animals which have been hurt are taken to, to heal before they are set free into the wild again.

- Here the boys got to hold an African wild cat;
- We met a bush baby – the animal with the closest DNA to that of humans – over 60% the same, which I found quite interesting, because I thought baboons were the animals most like us – seeing that a huge baboon broke into our house, opened the fridge and ate ALL our food – but that's a story for a different day!
- We also met a cheetah, the fastest animal in the world – they can run up to 70mph in short bursts!!
- And then we met some very special sheep...

Growing up in Africa, I thought I knew quite a lot about wild animals, but I honestly didn't know this: If an animal is in distress and the rangers think that having company will help solve the problem, they put a *sheep* in the cage with that animal. And then having the sheep as companion will make the injured and lonely animal feel less distressed.

*So the story of the calming goat which we saw in the children's address is not just a story! (Video clip from "Ferdinand".)*

A "calming sheep" can be used to soothe any animal, wild or not, and although a sheep will obviously not be put in a cage with a full-grown meat-eating predator, the rangers at this animal sanctuary have put a sheep in with lion cubs before, and the cubs treated the sheep like a mum!

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So... If Jesus says that he is sending us out into the world like sheep among wolves – I think he might be saying MORE than we might think...

The text we read this morning wasn't only meant for his disciples – we *still* need to go tell the world about Him.

And this is still *exciting* and *hard* at the same time.

Think about it... The world we live in can very easily be described as a world of wolves – a world where people sometimes want to rip us apart if we talk about God...

But to be like sheep among the wolves, means that our FAITH needs to be stronger than our FEAR.

Because where a wolf can most certainly rip a sheep apart, when sent in at the right time, a sheep can calm a wolf down.

Time and again in the Bible Jesus refers to himself as a shepherd. As the *Good* Shepherd. And no good shepherd will lead his sheep into harm on purpose.

I think this very strong simile says so much about Jesus and what it means to be a Christian. Actually, it's quite hard to understand in our world of health and safety, where we make sure that everybody is always safe, and we have lots of rules to make sure we never do anything to cause harm to anybody else.

But then – living a Christian life just *doesn't* always make sense in the eyes of the world. It means taking risks, but doing this in trust and faith.

So HOW do we do this? How do we fulfil our purpose as Christians here on earth? How do we go in as sheep among the wolves?

Jesus says that if we want to advance the kingdom of God effectively in a world of wolves, without becoming predators ourselves, we need to be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

Now once again I think this simile can mean more than one thing. It's quite obvious that it means that we should combine the wisdom of a snake with the harmlessness of a dove. A fine balance.

Nobody's ever said that it's easy to be a Christian!

As we see in the creation story in Genesis already, the snake is sneaky and sharp witted. A dove, on the other hand, is the symbol for peace, for the Holy Spirit. Doves were used in offerings in Old Testament times, and the Greek word used here for "innocence" means "unmixed, uncontaminated, pure".

So in our Christian living, we should be gentle without being push-overs and at the same time be sacrificial without being taken advantage of.

Also I think it means that in a tricky situation, we should remember we are never alone. So if we face problems, resistance, hardship, we should make a plan. Sail through under it, like a snake; or fly over it, like a dove.

But just never give up, because God will help us to do what he wants us to do.

Being Christ's followers and going out into the world to tell people about him might sound like a very scary thing to do. It might make you feel as if you won't last for more than a minute before somebody will rip your guts out like a wolf, before somebody will tear you apart with their words, laugh in your face or outright make your life hard and unpleasant.

But in situations like that, we should just be like that calming sheep. Be a companion. Even if it doesn't seem to fit, even if logically it doesn't make sense – just be there. Sooth, care, respect, listen. Just be there.

And who knows – you might just be surprised – in stead of being eaten up, you might win someone over!

A good shepherd doesn't knowingly send his sheep to their death. A good shepherd is always there for his sheep. And just like that, through his Spirit, our Good Shepherd, God, is always with us – even when it feels if we are the only sheep in a pack of hungry wolves.

*This picture of a lion and a lamb lying together peacefully has probably been photo shopped, because normally lions and lambs won't lie together like that.*

But we should never forget that NOTHING is impossible for God.

God doesn't send us in as lunch for the hungry crowds, he sends us in as the calming sheep.

Let's do our job as best we can, however scary it might sometimes be, and let's remember that Jesus also said: "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me."

I don't doubt for a second that the wolves in the world out there are hungry – let's go make them aware that WHAT they are hungry for, is actually the word of God.

Amen