

“Sheep, Wolves, Serpents, Doves, and All of Us”
November 16, 2025

Isaiah 6:1-8

Matthew 9:35-10:1, 5-10, 16

“I send you out as sheep among wolves.”

We are living in a time of upheaval in our nation and the world.

I don’t seem to be the only one thinking this. Just this morning a member gave me two article—one was titled: “One of Our Founders’ Worst Fears Have Been Realized;” the other: “How to Replace Christian Nationalism.”

Many have a growing sense that democracy is in trouble. Democracy is in trouble as censorship and human rights abuses increase. Nations are seeing democracy crumble as authoritarian populism rises and takes hold.

David Brooks recently wrote about the growth of authoritarianism around the world. He mentioned Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Narendra Modi, Elon Musk, Mohammed bin Salman, Benjamin Netanyahu, Viktor Orban, and, yes, Donald Trump, as representing “both the wolves who run governments and [the wolves] who run tech companies.”¹

There is a struggle for dominance between the strong and the weak, those on top and those below. Increasingly, they break norms in unpredictable ways, they resort to violence, they stoke anger and chaos, and feed dreams of glory and honor.

Brooks said of calling them wolves: “I mean it as an insult — predators who are ravaging the world. But the authoritarians take it as a compliment. They know they are wolves!”

They and many others are persuaded that wolves are just what are needed in these days. Around the world, they are convincing citizens and consumers that the wolves are the ones who will protect the poor and the hungry and the war-torn, and those on the margins whom polite society would like to forget.

Broken norms, violence, anger and chaos. How is the church to respond to turmoil and corruption on a grand scale? Is there anything we can do to counter the rise of authoritarianism in our nation and in the wider world?

There are times when I lament that nothing can be done against such forces.

I remember the great prophet, Isaiah, attempting to influence the political situation in Judah, warning the despicable King Ahaz of the disaster to come. Isaiah was eloquent. and his bold words went unheeded. After his stirring, “Here I am, send me,” he prophesied without success.

If this was Isaiah’s fate, can we expect any better?

I'm beginning to see, however, that there is much we can say and much we can do.

As is often the case, when we start in small local ways, our message grows and our strength grows as well.

It helps to remember Jesus as he looks at the crowds of people who came to him. He has compassion for them, because they are—as we are—like sheep without a shepherd. They are harassed and helpless—and a more vivid translation pictures them “wounded and lying exhausted.” And, yes, many people feel like that for all sorts of reasons—maybe you do. As one person says, it is “as if wolves had harried them and left them bleeding because they had no one to lead and protect them.”

You might remember that the Hebrew word for compassion, *rahamim*, comes from a word meaning “womb.” *Rahamim* evokes a sense of a mother’s deep love for her child.

Such is the love of God. Through this motherly love, God remembers those cut off from others, remembers the poor and the hungry and the war-torn, remembers those on the margins whom polite society would like to forget—and, yes, God even remembers harassed and helpless people like us.

The ministry of Jesus incarnated this compassion of God. Confronted with human sickness and suffering, Jesus reached out, healed, taught, and fed. He brought to other human beings the wholeness that we seek, the wholeness that God desires for all creation.

He saw the people like sheep without a shepherd.

But he did not think that a wolf was the answer, that a wolf was just what they needed.

What the people needed, it seems, were the followers of Jesus. We heard this morning how he sent out his followers to “heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and drive out demons.”

We shouldn’t let those first-century specifics become rigid descriptions that limit what we do. Jesus sends his followers to act in ways that bring God’s wholeness to the world. He sends his followers out to show God’s compassion. What they do are signs that the living God is establishing a new realm in the midst of a broken, decaying, and dying world.

In the twenty-first century, we are called and empowered to do the same—to bring strength and courage to those worn out by poverty, hunger, violence, and the simple demands of life in these days.

You see, there is a deeper, life-giving reason for each and every thing that we invite you to do in our life together.

On any given Sunday, someone is going to walk through our doors either after having barely made it through a difficult week or with a sense that the days ahead are filled with big challenges. Maybe today that was you or a person sitting near you. They will be

looking for a listening ear or maybe just an encouraging smile—someone, some action that reminds them that they are loved and supported by God and by this community. *That's* why we ask you to greet people and offer them hospitality.

On any given Sunday, someone will come into this sanctuary, seeking to set themselves and their lives right once more; someone will sit here hoping for strength and renewal; someone will sit here filled with thanksgiving for just how good their life has been. Again, maybe today that is you. *That's* why we ask you to lead people in the worship of God and why we invite you to sing with joy in the choir.

Someday each child in this congregation will be a teenager or a young adult facing a time of decision, a time of choosing between what is right and what is easy, a time when they will discover whether or not the values they hold are strong enough to carry them. *That* is why we ask you to teach.

Someone is going to be hungry or lonely or desperate. *That's* why we invite you to serve at the Free Lunch Program or at the CommUnity Food Pantry.

The small things that we do here—and what we do beyond this building is important to individual lives and to the life of the world. What we are doing is vitally needed work, if not always easy work.

But again, Jesus didn't say this would be easy. He said he was sending us out like sheep among wolves. Following in the way of Jesus Christ is a demanding way of life. It requires much and gives even more.

You know that. We just need to be reminded of this now and again.

The life we are called to is characterized by love, gratitude, kindness, delight, care, nurture. Such is the life that we are sent out into the world to live.

It is far different from the way of the wolves.

Jesus calls us to a new way.

And these tumultuous days call us to boldly live this way.

This congregation, then, is where we develop and practice the skills we need for these days.

And this is where all of this comes around and starts connecting with the wider world.

We are sent out, not as conquerors, nor as the righteous judges of the world who impose our religious perspective on others. We are sent out to lost and wounded and exhausted sheep *as sheep ourselves*. We are sent out like sheep among wolves.

Jesus sends his followers—sends you and me—out among the unwelcoming and the inhospitable to announce the good news that the realm of heaven has come near.

We recognize, of course, that Jesus is not talking about someplace where all good people will go when they die if they just do this or believe that. The kingdom of heaven, the realm of God, is the new reality that is seen when strangers are no longer cast out but are welcomed in, when the image of God is seen and accepted in all people. It has come near.

Whenever he talks about the realm of heaven, Jesus is pointing toward the great value of this earth and of our lives before we die. Jesus is pointing toward the great value of each human being created in the image of God.

We are called to announce this as good news. And because it is good news, because the kingdom of heaven has come near, we are called to act in certain ways. Welcoming. Accepting. Loving. Offering hospitality.

Not everyone will welcome this message or these actions. Not everyone will welcome us when we speak the good news of God's love for all people, when as a congregation we show God's love and acceptance to all people.

So, in sending us out, Jesus also tells us to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Serpents, of course, get a bad rap in the Bible. And I'm always a little troubled when I hear Jesus suggesting that I should be like a snake. But he is calling us to a wisdom is a kind of shrewdness. We need to look closely and accurately assess situations and people.

Peter Gomes helps us here when he reminds us: "When Jesus speaks of the wisdom of the serpent, he is not giving us an invitation to cynicism; he wants us, like the serpent, always to know what is going on. Of all creatures, the serpent is the one most aware of his environment, most sensitive to his surroundings, most in touch with his circumstances, for his entire body is a live wire of sensation. We are meant to be aware, heads up, eyes open, mind on full throttle, not easily fooled or seduced by the blandishments of this life."

Only by clearly seeing what is going on will we be able to show a new and different and better option to the lupine agenda as it stalks the unsuspecting land.

And we can perhaps better understand the "innocence" of doves as the "purity of heart" spoken of in scripture—that is, a single-mindedness, "keeping our eyes on the prize" as the spiritual says.

Gomes, too, says: "To be innocent as a dove is an exercise neither in naïveté nor in deception. The dove is the symbol of the spirit of God, and where the dove is, there is to be found serenity, reconciliation, and peace. Give me the dove any day," Peter concluded. "The dove is no dumb bird."²

Because we are sent into the world, we need to be awake and aware.

Because Jesus sends us into the world, we need not be overwhelmed by what we encounter.

We offer another way that affirms the dignity of each person as an image of God. We offer another way that affirms that all are equal and all are of infinite value. We offer another way that is the way of a love that is both abiding and filled with power.

In the other gospels, after Jesus sends his disciples out, we read later on of how they returned, filled with wonderful reports of what they did. Not so with Matthew.

Oh, we know they must have come back, but there are no glowing reports, no news of success. Instead, we're left with the sense that, once sent, the followers of Christ are still out there announcing good news even in the face of opposition and resistance. We get a sense that they are still out there, showing compassion with wisdom and in peace.

We get a sense that *we* are still out there, too—sheep among wolves, wise as serpents and innocent as doves—announcing and showing that the realm of God is near.

¹ David Brooks, “Imagining What’s in Trump’s Brain,” NYT, November 7, 2025.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/07/opinion/trump-putin-authoritarianism.html>

² Peter J. Gomes, “Innocence and Experience,” *Strength for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living: A New Collection of Sermons* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 102, 103, 104.