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Matthew 10:16-23
WHEN THE SHEEP BEAT THE WOLVES

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The elections are coming in just nine days. There are always a lot of interesting things on the ballot. We will be voting for a new Senator, representatives in Washington and Lansing, the state Supreme Court, other judges, executives for Wayne County, school boards and other local positions. There are also two items on wolf hunting. I guess that there are many people who are both in favor of and opposed to wolf hunting. You can help decide. But there is one obvious group that has not been consulted and that is sheep. I would guess that most sheep would be very much in favor of wolf hunts, keeping the wolf population down.

It's pretty obvious why when we think about it. Wolves are natural enemies of sheep. Wolves are predators who kill sheep. Wolves are stronger than sheep, faster than sheep and much more aggressive than sheep. Las Vegas wouldn't even take bets. Wolves versus sheep? It's no contest. Wolves win each and every time.

Our Lord Jesus speaks to his apostles then and to us today. We live in a hostile world. Jesus is not very popular. We know what the religious leaders thought of Jesus. We know what the Romans thought of Jesus. They would work together to kill Jesus. They would have him crucified. That would take care of the problem. There was one slight miscalculation on their part. Jesus actually was the Son of God who would rise from the dead on Easter Sunday. That made their lives a lot more miserable. But they wouldn't give up. They would continue their hatred of Jesus, directing it to Jesus' followers. But we do not have to be afraid. Jesus is with us and that carries over as we his people see WHEN THE SHEEP BEAT THE WOLVES.

Today we celebrate the festival of the Lutheran Reformation. We know that Satan is going to attack God's Church. Satan is pictured as a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. He is a wolf who often disguises himself in sheep's clothing to infiltrate and attack the flock. He will do whatever it takes. He will keep bringing up false teachings since he is the father of lies. He is smart and wily. He is going to focus his attacks in the same ways. Most of the heresies will attack Jesus as the Son of God. They will also attack God's plan of salvation. Salvation will not be seen as God's free gift to us through Christ, but rather as something that we must earn, at least in part, through our own merits and good works. We are always only one generation away from losing the truth of the Gospel. We can watch all the Martin Luther movies and read all the Luther books that we want, but we must see that we face the very same threats to our faith.

"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be a shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." Jesus certainly gets our attention. Wolves invading a flock of sheep certainly bring up a warning, but a person actually sending sheep into the midst of wolves would be ludicrous. What kind of person would do such a horrible thing? Oh, it is the Good Shepherd. He says, "I am sending you." Jesus is the Great I AM. He is the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is the eternal God come down from heaven to be our Savior. We can go out into the hostile world, knowing that Jesus is with us.

Jesus speaks very frankly here. He does not deceive his people with false promises. He does not speak like many who claim to speak for him by promising that if we follow Jesus we will be blessed with all kinds of earthly wealth, honor and fame. No, it is the very opposite. Servants are not above their master. If the world hated Jesus, it will hate us as well. That can be certain. There will be opposition, violent opposition. We see it in many parts of the world. We see it in Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Syria and other parts of the Middle East. We see it in China and Russia and other countries that have espoused Communism, even though some parts of those countries are open today to the message of Christ. And more and more we see it right here in America.

Slowly but surely, our history books are being rewritten, taking our any references to Christianity. Our forefathers came to America for religious freedom. Our documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution certainly showed a belief in God. They knew that God could certainly bless a nation. And God did! We enjoyed more blessings than any nation in history. But Satan has sown his seeds of hate. Christians are being persecuted. Christians who stand up for their beliefs may lose their businesses. Those who do not celebrate homosexuality are guilty of hate crimes! Pastors are being subpoenaed to send in their sermons to the mayor of Houston, Texas.

It may get worse. I believe that it definitely will get worse. If we follow Christ, we will incur hatred, persecution and threats. But we know that Jesus is with us to the very end of the age. He wants us to depend upon him. We think of Dr. Martin Luther.

He was one man against an empire. It is an amazing story. Like all of us, Luther struggled with the question of how do we get right with God? If it is by our own works, then how many do we have to do? Are there some good works that give us more points with God than others? What about our bad deeds? Do some of those disqualify us forever? Can these sins be removed?

What can remove them? Luther tried every man-made remedy that he could think of. He went without sleep, chanted endlessly, swept dirt floors, became a monk and beat his body. His answer would come not in any of these things, but rather in studying the Scriptures. It was there that he saw that salvation was a gift of God through Christ. We are saved by God's grace alone by faith alone revealed in the Scriptures alone.

Luther was excited. He thought that this would be a wonderful truth to share with the church that seemed to have lost this precious truth. It did not go over well with his superiors who were looking for ways to build St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. They would raise the needed funds by selling the forgiveness of sins through pieces of paper called indulgences. Luther would post 95 theses against the sale of indulgences on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. It would set into motion the Lutheran Reformation. It would change the world.

Luther was alone. He was a sheep in the midst of wolves. He would be brought to trial before the Emperor Charles V where he would be asked to recant all his writings. Luther knew that to refuse would probably mean death. He would be declared an outlaw, free to be killed by anyone, no question asked. But Luther could not and he would not compromise. He could not deny his Lord. He could not change the truth of God's Word. He truly believed that he would die a martyr's death. But the Good Shepherd protected his sheep. Luther would preach every Sunday and teach every day at the University of Wittenberg. He would get married and raise a family. He would translate the Bible into German, write two catechisms, countless hymns and writings on every conceivable subject. He openly preached and taught for another 25 years until he died a natural death. This isn't merely fascinating history. It is a comforting and dramatic fulfillment of Jesus' promise given to his apostles.

Jesus gives the warning to be on our guard. We are to be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. We are to be wise and prudent, not ignorant. We know what people are like. We know the natural sinful inclination of the human heart. We know that people will lie to us. At the same time we trust that the Holy Spirit can and will change some people's hearts. The apostles were all arrested at various times for various things. They would all die martyr's deaths with the exception of John who would suffer in other ways. There was one reason and one reason alone for the suffering, persecution and death. They preached Jesus as the Son of God, the crucified and risen Savior. They would not back down and renounce him. "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." The apostles were eyewitnesses of all those things. They rejoiced when they suffered because they were counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name of Christ.

Sadly much of the opposition came from within the church. It did with Jesus. It did with the apostles. It did with Luther. Satan will always try to infiltrate the church. Sadly he has succeeded all too often. There are pastors who have abused their power and cheated and defrauded people in the name of Christ. There are pastors guilty of adultery and embezzlement and other crimes. There have been hypocrites in high positions. These men are scoundrels and they will appear before our Lord Jesus. They will be judged for their unfaithfulness and hypocrisy.

Christ's true followers were not to worry even as they appeared before the wolves. "But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." It sounds scary. Most of the apostles were uneducated fishermen. Men like Paul and Luther were brilliant men who spent many a sleepless night as they faced their trials, knowing the opposition was formidable.

But God put these men in these positions so that they could testify to the truth. Paul would testify before governors and kings and perhaps even before the Emperor Nero himself. Luther would testify before the Emperor. Christ's truth would be preached and told. Some people would believe it. Others would not. God would give them the very words to say. They would be his witnesses and so would we!

In just three years we will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. Germany has been planning this celebration for some time. Many of the Luther sites are being restored. Some have already been restored. Some are still to come. Luther is truly a hero to the German people. But sadly, it is for the wrong reasons. Luther is hailed as a political hero who united Germany with a common language and stood up to the Pope. People will visit the churches to see the architecture, but not to hear Luther's message of salvation through faith by grace revealed in the Scripture alone.

Most of the world yawns more and more every day as we approach the end of the world. We have come to the last Sundays of the Church year with their emphasis on the last things: the second coming of Christ, the last judgment, heaven and hell, the resurrection of the body, eternal life and Christ's eternal reign. These things are certain and opposition to God's Word is also certain. Jesus tells us that persecution will intensify before he returns.

"All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved." The days are getting shorter and so are the days until our Lord's return. Each day brings us closer to that. Satan and the other wolves know that their time is short. They know that they cannot win, because Christ has already won the war. Pray for your persecuted brothers and sisters throughout the world. Pray that God raise up faithful men and women who will always make the bold confession of truth. We have Jesus, the Good Shepherd. This time the sheep win! AMEN.

