

***THE GOD OF ANIMALS, X:
FLOAT LIKE A DOVE, STING LIKE A SNAKE***
A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH
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THE LESSON FOR THE DAY—MATTHEW 10:5-39
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When thirteen-year-old Jesus came in for supper after playing stickball with his friends in the yard all day and tracked muddy sandal-prints all over his mother's freshly-mopped kitchen floor, Mother Mary would put her hands on her hips, shake her head in disgust, and holler at him: "Jesus, wipe your feet! Were ya born in a barn?" And Jesus would give her one of those patented teenage smirks and say, "Well, yes, Mother, as a matter of fact I was born in a barn!" That's not in the Bible, but it had to have happened, don't you think?

Born in a barn, first welcomed into this world by shepherds from the nearby Judean pastures, and raised close to the earth his entire life like all first-century Palestinian peasants, Jesus was intimately familiar with all the denizens of the barnyard and countryside. It's no surprise then that he peppered his rustic little homilies with a great deal of animal imagery.

"Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests," he once famously whined, "but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." "Consider the ravens," he advised. "They neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, yet your heavenly Father feeds them." "I am the Good Shepherd," he told his disciples. "I know each lamb by name, and they know my voice."

In this morning's scripture lesson, Jesus manages to shoehorn five different animal meta-

phors into a short message of about 750 words. He mentions sheep, wolves, snakes, doves, and sparrows.

Looking ahead to his impending departure from this earth, Jesus is preparing his disciples to preach, in his absence, the Good News of God's unmerited favor. Jesus knows, unfortunately, that the world is not quite ready for such Good News, and that those brave enough to proclaim such a radical message will be welcomed with the same hostility that greeted the Master himself wherever he went, and we all know what happened to him, so Jesus' message is filled with foreboding.

"I am sending you out as sheep among wolves," he warns them. "Therefore, be wise as serpents, and innocent as doves." To get his point across, Jesus uses four beasts from the extremes of the animal kingdom.

"I am sending you out as sheep," says Jesus, the most witless, harmless, defenseless beasts God, on one of his off-days, ever created. Without shepherds and collies sheep would disappear from the face of the earth in two years.

Winston Churchill, who was just a *little bit* conservative, once denounced his liberal Labor Party colleague Clement Atlee as "a sheep in sheep's clothing." I guess Churchill didn't think Atlee was tough enough on the Germans and later the Russians. "You sissy,"

Churchill was saying to Atlee. “Show some teeth.” A shrewd politician admired by most everybody else, Atlee never did live down that witty riposte.

“I am sending you out among wolves,” says Jesus, an apex predator with no serious rivals or worthy competitors in any habitat they occupy but people and other wolves.

Did you know that wolves are smarter than dogs? Dogs are simply wolves who, a long time, were too unambitious to hunt and figured out that ample calories for existence could be scavenged from the garbage dumps on the edges of human communities and over the generations learned but one integral skill: these proto-dogs discovered that you got more scraps if you looked humans in the eye and befriended them. And that’s where dogs branch off from wolves on the evolutionary tree. Friendly scavenger brains don’t evolve as rapidly as aggressive hunter brains, so over the evolutionary millennia, true wild wolves evolved a brain pan 10% larger than dogs in order to stay ahead of their prey in the wild.

Wolves are mentioned thirteen times in the Bible, always in an unflattering way as someone you don’t want to tangle with. Sheep are perfect prey for wolves, who can wipe out an unguarded flock in an instant.

They will kill more than they could possibly eat. Wolves are one of the few animals who share the nasty human habit of killing way more than they need. In Siberia in 1953, wolves killed 94 sheep in a flock of 99. I thought this was interesting: a sheep who witnesses and survives a wolf attack on his herd will often develop emotional problems; they lose their minds and run straight through barbed wire at their next inkling of a wolf in the neighborhood, something like Post-Traumatic-Stress Disorder I guess.

So Jesus tells his disciples that he is sending his disciples out defenseless among the snarling fangs of unscrupulous predators. You will preach the Gospel and they will return the favor by throwing you in jail, firing you from your jobs and disowning you from the family, and there’s nothing you can do about it. What he means to say is that when you arm yourself with the Gospel, you must disarm yourself of most other defenses.

As one New Testament scholar put it, “The sheepishness [of Jesus’ followers] is due to the nonviolent nature of Jesus’s work. We are not primarily fighters; we are not allowed to be haters...It is in the nature of sheep to be pushed around.”¹ Even witty ripostes like Churchill’s are off-limits to us.

By way of advice on how to survive this unhappy predicament, Jesus pulls out two more beasts at the extremes of the animal kingdom. “Therefore,” Jesus tells his disciples, “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves,” two more apt animal metaphors, yes?

For what can be wiser than a snake? Genesis tells us that “the serpent was craftier than any other animal the Lord God had made.” It doesn’t look like much, just a large worm or a coil of rope lying on the ground; it doesn’t have any dangerous claws or appendages to attack with nor even any evident means of locomotion, yet the snake is an evolutionary miracle, nature at its craftiest. It was a snake that conned Adam and Eve out of Paradise.

Or what could be more innocent than a dove? The English word ‘innocent’ comes from a Latin root which means, literally, ‘harmless.’ Innocuous, harmless. Don’t worry about it; it can’t hurt you. What could be more innocent

¹Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), vol. 1, p. 472.

than a dove? The only harm pigeons can do is outside the carwash.

Be crafty as snakes and harmless as pigeons, Jesus tells his disciples. Don't you think Jesus was the inspiration behind Muhammad Ali's slogan "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee"? "Float like a dove, sting like a snake."

Wise as serpents, innocent as doves. It's tricky advice to get right and I don't know exactly how to do that, but I'll get to that in a moment. Just to start off, though, it might be helpful to remember how many people get the advice backward, how many people somehow manage to be wise as doves and innocent as snakes.

These are words that I just never thought I'd see on the front page of a local newspaper: "controversial whiffleball field." But you know how it goes with teenagers: first they take a sip of beer at a party, then they're playing whiffleball, before you know it they're dealing crack on the street corner.

I just never thought I would be reading about The Great Glenville School Cupcake Scandal. Float like a snake, sting like a dove. Many people get the advice backward.

So is Jesus asking for the impossible when he asks us to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves? Don't those two qualities clash and collide? I know people who are wise as serpents; they are rarely innocent as doves. I know people who are innocent as doves; they are rarely wise as serpents. Perhaps intelligence precludes innocence, and innocence intelligence. Is Jesus demanding the impossible?

Maybe not. Isn't he merely asking his followers to practice a well-rounded and all-encompassing humanity? Isn't he just asking us to neglect neither of humanity's two most promi-

nent indigenous attributes—its intelligence and its compassion? Isn't he just asking us to cultivate a thoughtful mind and a caring heart? Religion, Jesus seems to be saying, is an excuse to go neither soft in the head nor hard in the heart.

Be wise as serpents, because religion is not an excuse to go soft in the head. Your faith ought not to be undone by shallow skepticism, brutal materialism, or virulent atheism. If you don't have the intellectual ammunition to counter skeptics like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, get some. Read N. T. Wright's little book *Simply Christian*; it'll take you about three hours. Read Marcus Borg's *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, another three-hour investment.

Read a biography of Lincoln and find out what his faith meant to him. Read a biography of Einstein and find out what his very different kind of faith meant to him. Read a biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., and learn how an unwavering trust in Jesus' guileless, innocent, non-violent life changed a whole brutal land into something more just and merciful. Be wise as serpents, because faith is not an excuse to go soft in the head.

But all the while, be innocent as doves, because neither is faith an excuse to go hard in the heart. Harry Emerson Fosdick once said, "Intelligence is almost *useless* to those who possess nothing else. The pure intellectual is an incomplete human being. He is unhappy because he is not capable of entering the world he understands."²

The point is not to get smart. The point is not to get rich. The point is not to get famous.

²Harry Emerson Fosdick, quoting Alexis Carroll, in *Dear Mr. Brown: Letters to a Person Perplexed about Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 78

The point is not to get girls. The point is not get ahead. The point is to get right with God and neighbor.

Bill Moyers talks about being dismayed over the number of American Christians who have grown up well-loved, well-churched, and well-taught and yet still completely indifferent to the reality of other people's lives.³ Do you know people like that: well-loved, well-churched, well-taught, and completely indifferent to the existence of other people?

Wise as serpents and innocent as doves. It's so hard to keep the balance, so easy to veer off the side of the road one way or the other like a drunk driver, into the lovelessness of the wise or the thoughtlessness of the innocent.

Perhaps around here among folks like us, being wise as serpents comes a little more naturally to us than being innocent as doves. Lots of intelligence, a less generous supply of innocence around here. It's just that a life out of whack like that simply will not work.

A while back a few of us got together to read J. M. Coetzee's 1999-Booker-Prize-winning novel *Disgrace*, about David Lurie, a self-absorbed, uncaring, handsome but aging South African university professor who divorces two wives, ignores his daughter, sleeps with his students, and finally loses his job as a result. As the title suggests, David Lurie is disgraced. David Lurie is very intelligent, not very innocent. There is something rather serpentine about him, nothing at all dovish though.

With nowhere else to turn after his disgrace, he ends up at his daughter's farm in the South African bush raising flowers and tending dogs

³Bill Moyers, quoting T.B. Maston, in "Newsworthy: Bill Moyers on Journalism and Democracy," *The Christian Century*, April 17, 2007, p. 27.

at her boarding kennel. One day his daughter Lucy comes upon him stretched out on the concrete floor of the kennel scratching the ears of an ugly abandoned mutt named Katy. "Making friends?" says Lucy. "She's not easy to make friends with." "Poor old Katy," says Lucy. "She's in mourning. No one wants her, and she knows it. They do us the honor of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things." "What will you do with her?" he asks. "With Katy? I'll keep her, if it comes to that."

A shadow of grief falls over David Lurie: for Katy, alone in her cage, for himself, for everyone. "Forgive me, Lucy," says David Lurie. "Forgive you? For what?" "For being one of the two people assigned to usher you into the world and for not turning out to be a better guide."⁴

It's just a lovely, fleeting moment of humanity for this otherwise inhumane academic. It is his experience of homelessness and brokenness that leads him slowly but surely to his tenderness, to his empathy with the other broken things of this world, an abandoned dog, a neglected daughter. And it is the first step of his journey out of *Disgrace*. Always long on serpentine wisdom, David Lurie eventually acquires a dovish innocence.

Stewards of Jesus' nonviolent Gospel, we are indeed sent as sheep among wolves. But an all-encompassing humanity of thoughtful minds and caring hearts will give us what we need to face the danger.

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" Yet not a sparrow falls from the sky without your Father's notice. And are you not of far more worth than a sparrow? Yea, every hair of your head is numbered."

⁴Slightly adapted from J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (New York: Viking, 1999), pp. 78-79.