
Serpents, Doves, and Swords: Jesus's Middle-Earth

Matthew 10:24-39

In today's Gospel reading, a continuation from last Sunday's reading, Jesus is preparing the disciples for the mission field. And always by extension, we listen in for our own preparation today.

It is almost Summer camp season in our house, as it is for some of you. Soon we will be going over all the various packing lists for our girls. And each camp will have their own very detailed list, which camp directors have very thoroughly prepared to ensure campers have the best time for the situations they will face and the activities that are being planned.

Jesus had a specific packing list for the 12—a minimalist approach: Take no gold, silver, or copper. No bag. Take only one tunic, no extra sandals, no staff—though you know stubborn Peter absolutely snuck an extra pair of sandals. Jesus wanted his followers to have maximum agility. He wanted them to bear a lightness that would enable them to humbly and peacefully depend upon hosts who take them in. So, like a caring parent, Jesus goes over how to pack.

Then comes the pep talk. And there is quite a bit to talk through when your teacher begins by saying, "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves." This is a troubling job description to lead off with. "Say more, Jesus. Elaborate please." Sheep. Wolves. Serpents. Doves. Swords. These are the object lessons in the master story-teller's hands to help the disciples understand how they are to be in the world. By the way, that question—How are we to be in the world?—never loses its relevancy when you are a Jesus-follower. It is a question that continues to challenge Christian communities who are navigating a rapidly-changing culture. So, it is just as much for us as it was for the 12.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus's field guide for discipleship was a reorientation. And today, I want to talk about this radical Middle Way, this positioning between two worlds, where courage and compassion meet.

It's Father's Day, so I'd like to use this month's man-card allowance to reference *The Lord of the Rings*. If you're not a huge fan of the series, bear with me, I won't stay in it for long. When I meditate on Jesus's words about serpents, wolves, and swords, it conjures up fantastical Middle-earth imagery. Whoever said the Bible wasn't full of adventure?! J.R.R. Tolkien's masterpiece is the journey of finding one's way between two worlds. He called it Middle-earth because it is the inhabited world between heavenly and hellish realms.

There is the diminutive, lovable hobbit, Frodo Baggins. For Frodo, it was no longer an option to remain in the peaceful Shire once the mission had been made known—to take the One Ring, that gave the dark forces its power, and throw it into the fires of Mount Doom where it was created, and ultimately destroy the powers of evil. In the story, the great question is not whether evil exists. That is a given. The real question is whether those who oppose evil can do so without becoming like it. But Tolkien also knows that evil is not defeated by staying home in the safety and comfort of the Shire. Someone must enter the struggle.

When Frodo inherits the One Ring, he inherits a terrible temptation. The Ring offers power, but every time he puts it on, it draws him closer to becoming possessed by it. Throughout the journey to Mordor, Frodo must resist the lure of using the Ring for himself, even when it seems like the easiest path. What makes Frodo the right hobbit for the mission is not his strength but his humility and heart. He leans on the wisdom of his bearded wizard guide, Gandalf, and the loyalty of his friend, Samwise Gamgee. This empowers him to enter the fight without succumbing to the temptation of power. And in the end, the Ring is destroyed, the Dark Lord falls, and Middle-earth begins to heal.

Jesus sends his disciples into a world filled with wolves. But in this dog-eat-dog world, Jesus knows we don't just need more wolves. He sends sheep instead. But not foolish sheep. Wise and cunning sheep. Serpent-wise and dove-gentle. Followers who can recognize danger without surrendering to it. Disciples who can confront injustice without becoming consumed by its hatred.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used to preach that Christians need "a tough mind and a tender heart." Tough-minded enough to recognize injustice. Tender-hearted enough not to surrender to bitterness. Standing in that radical middle.

Discipleship happens in a kind of Middle-earth—the narrow space between naïveté and cynicism, between withdrawal and domination, where love remains courageous and courage maintains its loving motivations. A narrow way, for sure. Because when you are not living by the Spirit, there is no sacred tension to keep you in this radical middle.

The church has historically struggled between the temptation of two extremes: Withdrawal from the world ("Let's keep our heads down, turn off the news, and avoid conflict.") and seizing power over the world ("Let's defeat our enemies and make everyone agree with us."). Jesus rejects both.

Here in Matthew chapter 10, he also says: "I have not come to bring peace but a sword." This is a head-scratcher coming from the Prince of Peace. Yet, the sword Jesus wields is not just another weapon of violence. Jesus's sword conquers through the refusal to be ruled by power, even when it seems like the easiest choice. One commentator says, "It's the sword of refusing to 'go along to get along,'" standing for what we stand for even when others oppose us. In fact the sword might even be our radical insistence that we are one despite other people's desire to polarize!" You see, when you resist power, when you engage in the struggle of peacemaking, your disruption will generate a violence. Because love, and the audacity to heal and restore, shake the very foundations of human assertion for power.

Jesus's reorientation includes an expansion of the family. He said: "I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and one's foes will be members of one's own household." Maybe not the best text for Father's Day. But we know what family has been gained with those we feel a solidarity, when blood relatives may have disowned us in our alignment with Jesus's way. We have felt that extended family here at church among those who accept us just as we are, even when blood relatives no longer claim us.

We celebrate this truth during Pride month. Many need to hear just how significant is our Chosen family. Many need this affirmation of radical belonging

—that when you risk to boldly live out who you are, there will be a family to surround you, even if your own family does not accept you. When you stand on the side of truth and love, some will be there to oppose you. Jesus says, “Don’t let them drive you from the mission. Stay true.” Don’t worry about people who threaten you. Worry about what can bring death to your soul.

In closing, I was thinking this week on Frederick Buechner’s wisdom when he said, “Vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need.” This would be my advice to graduates who are venturing off into unknown territories in a new season of life—and for all of us! Find that intersection between what brings you joy but also meets the needs of your community. It is sometimes a razor’s edge, that fine line. But it is what Jesus has asked of us. “Our deep gladness” is not necessarily what is easiest or even what makes us happy, in a way—it might demand quite a bit of our strength and courage—but there is a rich reward in pursuing it. Something that satisfies at the level of the soul.

And the God, who cares for even the birds, will watch over us. Amen.