



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Eighth Sunday After Trinity, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2011

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son  
And of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

"Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." Verse 15 of Seventh Chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel contains one of the most evocative metaphors in the English language. It conjures up graphic images of evil appearing in the guise of good, even to those who have never seen a sheep or a wolf -- ravening or otherwise.

No doubt many folks here today will think there is something especially apt about the selection of today's Gospel reading in view of the way certain churchmen and women have been behaving in recent years. It would, however, be quite wrong to describe them as wolves in sheep's clothing.

These folks are not wolves in disguise. These folks are wolves in wolf's clothing: wolves out in the open and in plain sight. Nobody should be in any doubt as to what they are about and as to what Holy Scripture has to say about it. The people following them have, as the Bard might say, been quite voluntarily tripping down the primrose path to the everlasting bonfire.

By contrast with wolves dressed as wolves, wolves in sheep's clothing are very hard to recognize. This is why Jesus takes the trouble to warn us about them. One reason for this is wolves in sheep's clothing are by no means wolves all the time.

Much of the time they are part-time wolf and part-time good Christian. Actually, wolves in

sheep's clothing look remarkably like us. In fact, sometimes they are us. Indeed, wolves in sheep's clothing are at their most dangerous when we, ourselves, are playing the part of wolf.

It's rather discomfoting, terrifying even, to picture one's self as a wolf in sheep's clothing. But the fact of the matter is that each and every one of us plays the wolf in sheep's clothing with distressing frequency. And we are particularly dangerous when we do so because it is so difficult for human beings to recognize their own motivations for what they really are.

The easiest way to understand the problem is to go back to the Garden of Eden to take a look at the very first wolf in sheep's clothing. It wasn't the serpent. The serpent was a wolf in wolf's clothing – or rather a wolf in a snake outfit. The first wolf in sheep's clothing was Eve.

Eve knew that God had forbidden her to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, but she did it any way. She talked herself into it. She persuaded herself that it looked good and it tasted good, and, above all, she ate it because she was tired of God telling her what to do. She wanted to make her own mind up about things for a change.

And I'll bet you any money you like that, in the end, she'd convinced herself that when God found out how smart she was, and how much helpful advice she could give him, God would be happy she'd done it. Just to be on the safe

side, of course, she cut Adam in on the act. There's always safety in numbers and God couldn't be really angry if they'd both done it.

Adam was also a wolf in she's clothing. He knew that what Eve had done was wrong, but instead of telling her off, he went along with the program. I'll bet you he was more worried about how Eve would react if he didn't eat the fruit than how God would react if he did. And, finally, he had the ultimate line of defense: It was all Eve's fault. She was the one who'd picked the fruit in the first place. She would have nagged him to death if he hadn't eaten it, and, besides, it was a crying shame to let such a nice piece of fruit go to waste.

That's the trouble with being a wolf in sheep's clothing: The reasoning process is so mundane, yet the consequences are often dire. Consider: Many of the people who howled for Jesus' blood on Good Friday were just sheep. But a lot of them were wolves in sheep's clothing, deceiving themselves and others.

They were well aware that in Jesus all the prophecies concerning the messiah were fulfilled. But he wasn't doing things the way they expected – the way they wanted. And when God didn't show any inclination to take human advice and direction, they decided perhaps he wasn't God at all.

May be the best way to find out if Jesus was God or not was to see if he could be killed, or if he had the power to summon legions of angels to protect him. It never occurred to them that God might allow himself to be put to death. They were just taking a practical approach to the problem. If it had occurred to them that God might have allowed himself to be killed, they would never have done it.

Quite often, we act as wolves in sheep's clothing when we persuade ourselves to act self indulgently or foolishly, circumventing the commandments rather than directly breaking them (which is, of course, one and the same thing). In such cases, we tend to take comfort in the fact it is only ourselves we are hurting.

But harming ourselves does, in fact, harm other people. We harm those we love, and who love us, and who are grieved to see us do self-destructive things. Harming ourselves also breaks Jesus' commandment to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

Consider this commandment and you'll see isn't solely concerned with our relationship with our neighbors. Jesus is also telling us to love ourselves. We aren't loving ourselves when we harm ourselves. What's more, if we will willingly harm ourselves, how much more willingly will we harm our neighbors? `

We also risk acting as wolves in sheep's clothing when we treat other people less than kindly – imagining ourselves to be agents of God's justice. Sometimes it is proper for us to act both to protect society and to correct wrong doers. But it's important to examine our motives carefully beforehand. It's a common enough for people to claim they are acting in the public good when, in fact, they acting out resentments towards people who are different from them or oppose their agendas.

Jesus' warnings are pretty scary stuff when you think about it. But he didn't give them so us to make our lives difficult and fear-filled. He warned us of these pitfalls so that we could take steps to avoid them. And one of the best ways for us to do this is to study Holy Scripture; not in order to discover what makes God tick or to "unravel his great plan for mankind," but to discover how he wants us to behave – both towards him and towards our fellow men.

The warnings also serve another purpose – to comfort us after we have fouled up yet again. One of the most depressing things about Jesus' teachings is that they show that it is impossible for us to achieve God's standards of holiness. The good news is that he loves and cares for us so much he has provided us with a “get out of jail free” card to save us from the consequences of our constant failures. Indeed, so God loves the world that he gave his only begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life. *AMEN.*