

His Eye is on the Sparrow
Meditation on Matthew 10:24-39
June 25, 2017
Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

24 'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ²⁵it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

26 'So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father knowing. ³⁰And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

32 'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. ³⁴'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵For 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; ³⁶and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

³⁷Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

I was preparing for my children's message when Jim interrupted to tell me that he didn't want to upset me. But he had just seen a snake.

"It was only a little black snake," he said quickly, seeing fear on my face.

"Where?" I asked in horror.

It was curled up under a faucet on the outside of our house, he said. "It took one look at me and said, 'You're not a mouse!' And took off."

"Which way did he go?" I asked. What I wanted to know was, "Where is he now?!" For what is worse than seeing a snake in your yard is knowing the snake is still there, without knowing where.

"Out by the wall," he said, gesturing vaguely, meaning he really didn't know.

The coincidence was that I had been studying animals of the Bible, including snakes, for my children's message. When the Bible mentions wildlife, it offers us a glimpse into the natural world in which the people of God lived thousands of years ago. We are brought closer to the ancient people, when we consider the many species of wildlife in the Bible that still dwell in the world today.

We read about bats in Leviticus (11:19) and Deuteronomy (14:18); 14 species of which still exist in Israel! We read about bees. For the land of the promise is described in Exodus 3:8 as a land "flowing with milk and honey." Bears are abundant and dreaded for their ferocity. To dare a bear was a mark of uncommon courage in 1 Samuel 17:34-36. And yes, we find 10 different varieties of snakes in the Bible, such as the one Jim discovered yesterday.

Snakes have always had a bad reputation, beginning with the incident in the Garden. Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees snakes and “You brood of vipers,” in Matthew 23:33. John uses the same expression in Matthew 3:7 for the hypocritical Pharisees and Sadducees coming to the Jordan to be baptized.

A viper’s bite is deadly and would often come unexpectedly--for the snake hides and strikes quickly its unsuspecting victims. This is what happens to the apostle Paul, when he is shipwrecked and is making a fire in Acts 28:3-6. A viper comes out of the pile of sticks and fastens itself on Paul’s hand. The natives see the creature hanging from Paul’s hand, and think he must be a “murderer” for this to have happened after he was saved from the sea. But he shakes the creature off into the fire and suffers no harm. “They were expecting that he was about to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.”

While snakes are a symbol of evil, birds are usually a symbol of good. In Isaiah 40:31, those who “hope in the Lord” will be renewed in strength. They will “soar on wings like eagles.” In Genesis 8:8, a bird is again a symbol of hope when Noah sends out a dove to see if the land is dry enough to leave the ark. The Holy Spirit, when Jesus is baptized, “descends like a dove.”

Jesus points to the birds in Matthew 6:26 when he teaches the disciples not to worry about food or clothing for God knows what they

need. The Lord will provide. Trust in God's steadfast love and care.

“²⁶ Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?”

In today's reading in Matthew 10:34-38, Jesus uses birds to teach his disciples, again, about God's love. He is preparing them for the difficulties of ministry, warning them that he is sending them out “like sheep in the midst of wolves,” and saying that they should be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” Then he tells them that the persecution will come from the ones closest to them. Jesus has come, he declares in vs. 34-36, “not to bring peace but a sword,” to “set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; one's enemies will be members of one's own households.”

This speech is disturbing, if we take it out of context. Jesus is not advocating violence and broken homes. He is trying to prepare his beloved for the suffering to come when they are *apostles*--the ones sent out to bring his message of hope to the world. When Jesus says that he has not come to bring peace, he is speaking of the pain and harsh reality of discipleship. Not everyone will embrace the Good News; many will oppose them and be ashamed of them, including members of their own families. The sword is a metaphor, as the writer of Hebrews says in 4:12, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

The apostle Paul also uses military language in Ephesians 6, beginning at v. 10 to describe the spiritual battle that is discipleship. ¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, ... authorities, ... the cosmic powers of this present darkness, ... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm..." Then, in vs. 15-16, he says ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready *to proclaim the gospel of peace*. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

At the end of today's passage--verses 37-39--Christ sums up his main points. Discipleship means loving Him more than anyone, including your own family, which would have been shocking to the culture into which Christ was born that valued the bonds of family above all else. The other is that discipleship means sacrifice, being ready to give up anything and everything to follow as Christ leads you. Give up your worldly ambitions. Give your life to Him, and he will give you new, abundant life in Him. The cross that was the worst sort of death for the worst sort of criminals would become, with Christ's resurrection, a symbol of God's love and power and the hope of our resurrection with Him.

"Take up your cross," Jesus beckons us, meaning trust in God's power and love and the hope of everlasting life. Then, "Follow me."

Embedded in this passage about persecution and pain for Christ's followers is the assurance that we need not be afraid of those who "kill the body but cannot kill the soul." Don't be afraid of people who might wish you harm--people who might be closest to you. But do trust the one who is your Savior, Redeemer and Lord.

Jesus tells us to consider the sparrows. The Hebrew word for sparrow, *tzíppôr*, appears more than 40 times in the Bible and is a name for a category of small birds, of which 150 species live in the Holy Land today. They are so plentiful and little that they are sold 2 for a "penny"-- a Roman copper coin, worth about 1/16 of a silver denarius and less than a quarter in U.S. money today. In Luke 12:4-7, we learn that if we bought 4 of them, the seller might throw another for free. The poor who could not afford to buy a sheep or a goat for the priest to sacrifice in the temple could buy a couple of sparrows, instead. They also ate them roasted and skinned; each one was only a mouthful.

And yet God knows when a single sparrow falls from the sky. Just as he knows us and values us even more, though we might think we are not valuable. I think that's why we have such a hard time sometimes in our walk with God. We are afraid that He doesn't care about us because we are not worth caring about. But we are mistaken! God our creator knows us so intimately that he knows what is impossible for human beings to know-- the number of hairs on our head!

Jesus stirs us to think on the tiny sparrow not just because it is small and prolific but because they are social creatures that like to build nests where people work and live. They inhabit much of the world today! So we don't have to look very far to find the reminder of God's loving care-

his assurance that we need not be afraid of the persecution that will surely come to all Christ's followers, though we won't know from whom or when our persecution will come. His Spirit will strengthen us through the most difficult times, such as when persecution comes from those closest and dearest to us--our families and friends--the ones we love.

As Civilla Martin wrote in a song, after visiting a bedridden friend, who said, when Civilla asked if she ever felt discouraged, "Why should I feel discouraged? Why should the shadows come, why should my heart be lonely and long for Heaven and home, when Jesus is my portion? My constant Friend is He: His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me."

Let us pray.

Lord God, thank you for your powerful Word that created all life on this earth--all creatures--creeping and swimming things, birds that fly in the air. Thank you, God, for creating all of us and calling your Creation, including us, "Good." Thank you for sending your Son to us to reveal your love and to teach us to love and then to equip us for compassionate ministry --and send us out! Help us, Lord, to not be afraid of the persecution we experience in this world--sometimes from strangers, but often from people who are close to us. Take our lives, Lord, and let us walk with you this journey of faith. And whenever we see the animals of your creation, especially the tiny, seemingly insignificant sparrows, take away all our fear. Open our eyes to see our value in your eyes and appreciate your redeeming love. In Christ we pray. Amen.