

INTRODUCTION

As we move toward Freedom Celebration, I encourage you to continue to use your prayer guide to pray with us for 40 days. We're halfway through these forty days. For the first 20 days, we've asked you pray for others, but for the next 20 days, you'll be asked to specifically pray about finding people in your circle of relationships who need Jesus.

This morning I resume the series called "Parables and Miracles." The title of this message is "If I Could Talk to the Animals." You might recognize that as the title of a song from the 1967 musical movie "Dr. Doolittle" starring Rex Harrison. Dr. Doolittle had the unique ability to converse with animals. If you're younger, you're probably more familiar with Eddie Murphy's portrayal of Dr. Doolittle in the 1998 version.

The idea of animals talking has fascinated us for centuries. That theme has been the source of inspiration for many stories and movies. My all time favorite Looney Tunes cartoon was the one about the construction worker who found a box containing a singing frog. The frog could sing and dance, "Hello my baby, hello my honey, hello my ragtime gal..." The frog's owner figured he would get rich from this amazing frog, but when he took the frog to audition, the frog only uttered, "Ribbit."

The Bible is full of stories about animals. There are 137 different animals mentioned in the pages of scripture. One story is about Balaam's donkey, who DID talk! In Genesis 1:28 God told Adam to "rule over every creature." God gave humanity dominion over the animals and plants, but that doesn't mean we should mistreat them. We are to take care of God's creation. Proverbs 12:10 says "A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel."

This next Tuesday is Groundhog Day. That's a real day, not just a funny movie. Not just a funny movie. Not just a funny movie. In Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, a groundhog named "Punxsutawney Phil" will come out of his cage. If he sees his shadow, legend says we'll have six more weeks of winter. This past week PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) sued the city for what they claim is animal cruelty to Phil. They demand the practice stop and that Phil be replaced with an animatronics groundhog—a robot rodent! The mayor of Punxsutawney responded to PETA's protest by saying Phil is treated better than many children in Pennsylvania. He's fed every day and has a large habitat that is heated in the winter and cooled in the summer!

God loves animals, and we know there will be animals in heaven because in Revelation 19, which we previewed last Wednesday in WEBS, Jesus is seen coming from heaven riding a horse, leading an army on horses. So if there are horses there, it's safe to say there are other animals there. Jesus uses animals as illustrations in His teaching. He used camels, foxes, gnats, and birds as metaphors. In our passage today, He mentions four different animals. The context of this passage is Jesus is sending out His disciple with specific instructions.

Matthew 10:7-16: "As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your

belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."

Of these four animals, Jesus says we are to be like three of them: sheep, snakes, and doves. The wolves are those who are enemies of the cross. I want to examine what it means for us to be like these three animals. If we could talk to the animals, or they could talk to us, what would they say to us about being like a lamb, a snake, and a dove? This message is a little different, because I want to tell a Bible story about a character who fulfills each of these three animal metaphors: So what would these three animals say to us?

1. THE LAMB AMONG WOLVES TELLS US TO BE PREPARED FOR OPPOSITION

A few weeks ago I said we are we are compared to sheep more than any other animal in the Bible—and sheep are dumb creatures. I received several emails with stories confirming just how dumb sheep really are. But Jesus was using this metaphor to warn us that as we go out into this world, there are going to be people who oppose our message and even attack us. We are like sheep in the midst of wolves. We shouldn't be surprised with this opposition because Jesus said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first." (John 15:18)

CASE STUDY: STEPHEN

This warning Jesus gave came true for thousands of Christians who were persecuted and died for their faith over the next three hundred years—and it's still happening in many parts of the world today. One of the first martyrs of the faith was Stephen. Stephen wasn't one of the apostles. He was one of the seven men chosen in Acts 6 to help serve food to the widows in Jerusalem. He was the forerunner of the men we call deacons today. But Stephen knew that being a deacon meant more than serving food to widows. The Bible tells us he was a man full of the Holy Spirit, full of grace, and full of power. He began to preach Jesus openly among the Jews. But the same group of Jewish leaders who had sent Jesus to the cross a few months earlier were opposed to Stephen. They arrested him and had him appear in court before the Sanhedrin, the very group who, a few months earlier, sentenced Jesus to death.

Stephen's defense recorded in Acts 7 is one of the masterpiece sermons in the Bible. It is a commentary on the entire Old Testament and climaxes with Stephen telling the Sanhedrin that Jesus was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophets. And then he looked into the self-righteous faces of the members of the Sanhedrin and said, "Yes, Jesus is the same Righteous One predicted by the prophets, and now you have betrayed and MURDERED Him!"

As you can imagine, they weren't happy to hear those words. The Bible says they were furious and gnashed their teeth at them. That phrase, "gnashed their teeth" means they literally growled

at him like wild animals, like a pack of hungry wolves. Then Stephen said, "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." When he said that, they covered their ears and screamed and roared even louder. They rushed at him and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him to death. As Stephen was being stoned, he said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And in his last earthly breath he prayed for his attackers. He cried, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And there was a young man standing by watching how he died whose name was Saul, who was later to become the Apostle Paul.

If you stand up for Jesus Christ you WILL be persecuted. You probably won't be stoned yet in America, but you will be ridiculed and rejected. We aren't to go seek persecution, but don't worry, just talk about Jesus and there will be plenty of wolves to gather around you.

I've said before that I'm a great fan of Tim Tebow, not just because he's a gifted athlete. I'm a fan because he is a committed Christian and he is a great role model for young guys. You've probably heard that Tim is going to be featured in a commercial during the Super Bowl sponsored by Focus on the Family. There has been more controversy about this commercial than any previous commercial in Super Bowl history—and it hasn't even aired yet. When Tim's mother was pregnant, she had serious health issues and the doctors advised her to terminate her pregnancy. But instead of getting an abortion, she gave birth to a son who turned out to be a Heisman trophy-winning quarterback.

Wow! What a great message, right? Well, not according to some people. A national coalition of liberal pro-choice groups is vigorously lobbying CBS to not air the Tebow commercial. They are threatening a boycott if CBS shows it. The spokesperson, Jehmu Green is quoted as saying, "An ad that uses sports to divide rather than to unite has no place in the biggest national sports event of the year, an event designed to bring Americans together." Football? Bring us together? If there is any event that DOESN'T bring people together, it's a football game! There are going to be Saints fans and Colts fans, and they aren't going to be hugging and singing "Kum ba ya" during the game. And it's okay to show ads for beer, cars, and many unmentionable products that were never advertised 20 years ago. But the moment a Christian stands up and delivers a message for life, the wolves start growling and showing their fangs.

Now, obviously, the safest place for sheep is in the sheepfold. And we do feel safe to express our faith here among the other sheep. If someone stands up here and says, "I love Jesus and He is the reason for living," we're going to applaud or say, "Amen!" But if you stand up in your office or your school and say that, there is going to be ridicule and maybe laughter. You may be called a "kook" or a "religious fanatic."

But Jesus said, "I am sending you out as sheep among wolves." In other words, when you leave this place, you enter your mission field. That's where Jesus is sending you to tell others the good news. So what is the lamb telling us? He's saying, "Staaaaay awaaaaaay from the wolves." But you don't have to go looking for them; they'll come looking for you. So don't be surprised when the wolves surround you. But who's afraid of the big bad wolf when we have a bigger, better Good Shepherd?

2. THE SNAKE TELLS US TO BE CLEVER IN OUR STRATEGY TO COMMUNICATE THE TRUTH

Most of us are surprised that Jesus would tell us to be like a snake in ANY respect because in every culture a snake is considered to be a repulsive animal. Some of us grew up believing that the only good snake was a dead snake. Most people don't like snakes, and many people have a full-blown phobia about snakes. A few people keep snakes as pets, but most of us raise our eyebrow at those kinds of people.

When I was in college, I would drive from Birmingham to Montgomery every Friday and return on Sunday night because I was serving a weekend church there. Several students knew I made this weekend trip, so I would sometimes give rides to students who lived in Montgomery. There was a certain girl who everyone called "the snake girl," because she kept two large snakes as pets in her dorm room. She was a little strange, and was a Goth girl before that phrase was even invented. One weekend she asked if I could give her a ride to Montgomery. I said, "Sure." But I didn't expect her to take her snakes! When she got in the car, she put the portable cage containing her two pet snakes in the back floorboard behind my seat. I was a little nervous anyway, and about half way to Montgomery, she looked back at the cage and said, "Wow! There's only one snake, Alfred must have escaped again!" That was when I proceeded to slam on the brakes and screech over to the shoulder of the road, jumping out of the car before it was fully stopped! That's when I heard the snake girl's laughter. She said, "I was only kidding. Alfred is still in his cage." I reluctantly got back in the car, but I had a good case of the "heebie-jeebies" all the way home. As I recall, that was the last time I ever gave her a ride!

But Jesus said we should be as "shrewd" as a snake. The KJV says, "Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves." The Latin Vulgate uses our word "prudent." It means to be savvy, clever, street smart. Snakes are brave, they try to avoid being trapped, but once cornered, they will strike out against a larger predator. They are also patient. They will remain motionless for hours waiting for their prey to pass by.

You might not have much good to say about a snake, but you have to admit they are clever animals. In fact, when the Bible described the serpent in Genesis, we read, "The serpent was crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" (Genesis 3:1)

The serpent didn't just come out and say, "Hate God, worship me." Instead he used a clever tactic of questioning God. Jesus was teaching that we should also use clever approaches to communicate the truth.

CASE STUDY: ESTHER

The Jews have always valued stories about people who were as shrewd and clever as snake. For our case study for cleverness, I want to tell you the story of Queen Esther from the Old Testament. Once upon a time there was a powerful king in Persia named Xerxes. He was looking for a new queen, so he sent his messengers throughout his kingdom to find the prettiest, smartest girls in the kingdom to audition for the role. All the prospective queens were sent to a spa for two

weeks of treatments to get a full makeover before they appeared before the King. One of the pretty girls who auditioned to be queen was Jewish girl named Esther. Her uncle Mordecai told her NOT to tell the King she was a Jew. There were Jews living in this Kingdom because their homeland had been conquered and they were living in this foreign land. Esther was prettier than all the rest and when King Xerxes saw her, he immediately made her his queen.

One of the king's Advisors was named Haman and he's the villain in the story. He was so egotistical and vain that he had the king pass a law that everyone had to bow down when Haman passed them. But Mordecai refused to bow down to anyone except God. This made Haman so furious he decided to kill the Jew. But he got to thinking, "Why stop with one Jew? I'll just kill them all!" So he tricked the king into making a law that all the Jews would be killed on a certain day. When Mordecai heard about this, he was alarmed so he went to Queen Esther and said, "You've got to help us! God has brought you into the kingdom for such a time as this."

Esther didn't just rush into the King's chamber and spill the news about the plan to kill the Jews. She was much more clever and shrewd than that. In fact, if anyone appeared before the king without being invited, they would be executed. So Esther asked Mordecai to have all the Jews fast and pray for her. She said, "I'll go see the king. If I live I live. If I die, I die."

Then she hatched a clever plan. She fixed her hair and makeup and put on the special perfume the king liked and then she dressed in her very best gown. She slipped into the throne room and just stood over to the side. It worked because the King saw her in the shadows and said, "Esther! You look marvelous! What can I do for you? Just name it! I'll give you anything up to half of my kingdom."

But instead of blurting out her alarm over Haman's plan, she laid out her clever plan. She said, "If it pleases the King, I just want to fix supper for you. And oh, why don't you bring Haman, too." The King said, "It's a date! Somebody go call Haman!" That evening, Esther served a delicious meal and served the King and Haman. After dinner, the King said, "Great meal, Esther. Now, what do you want? Just name it and I'll give it to you." But Esther's plan wasn't finished yet. She said, "I just want you and Haman to come to supper again tomorrow night, and then I'll answer your question."

Haman left walking on top of the world! He had finally made it to the inner circle. He was feeling great when he happened to walk by Mordecai, who didn't bow down to him, of course.

This made Mordecai so angry that he went home whining to his wife. His wife said, "You have the king's ear now. The Queen loves you. So tomorrow let's build a hanging gallows 75 feet tall and then you ask the King to let you hang Mordecai. When the King and Queen say yes, we'll string him up." Haman said, "Great idea! I'll give word to start building the gallows."

That evening the King and Haman joined Esther again for dinner. After dinner, the King said "Okay, Esther, please tell me what you want!" Esther said, "My Lord, I only ask you for my life and the life of my people, the Jews." There is a plan to massacre all of my people." The King was infuriated. He said, "Who is the monster who is trying to do this?" Esther pointed her perfectly manicured finger and said, "He's right here. It's Haman."

I can just imagine the blood draining from Haman's face and suddenly his food lost its taste. The king was so incensed that he stomped out of the room to calm down. Meanwhile Haman ran over and knelt before Esther to beg for his life. Esther was reclining on a couch and Haman was so desperate he was groveling all over her. At this moment the King walked back in and said, "Haman! You dog! So now you're even trying to molest my wife while I'm just around the corner? Guards, come take him away!" One of the guards said, "King, there's a 75-foot-tall gallows that Mordecai built by his house to hang the Jew Mordecai from. Do you want us to tear it down now?" The King said, "No. Use that gallows to hang Haman."

And to this day, the Jews celebrate the festival of Purim to commemorate when a smart, savvy, cunning, beautiful queen named Esther saved them from being destroyed. We can learn from Esther. We should develop a clever plan to share Christ with our friends, we should be patient, and at just the right time we should be brave enough to follow through.

3. THE DOVE TELLS US TO BE PURE AND PEACEFUL IN OUR MOTIVES

The dove is the very symbol of peace because it doesn't have any weapons, offensive or defensive. It doesn't have talons or a sharp beak like some birds. I've watched mean mockingbirds dive on other birds or even cats, but I've never seen a dove attack another animal. The dove is also the symbol of purity; it was the only bird accepted at the Jewish Temple for sacrifice. When Jesus said we are to be as innocent as doves, He meant we are to be pure and peaceful.

The Bible says, "Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life." (Philippians 2:14-16)

The snake and dove metaphor make for a powerful combination. They aren't to be understood separately but as an indivisible pair. If you only act like a snake, you'll only be a cunning, tricky rascal—and that's the way some televangelists come across. But if you only act like a dove, then you'll be as skittish as a dove and fly away from every opportunity God gives you to share your faith. It's the combination of traits that prove valuable to us.

CASE STUDY: PAUL

In Acts 23 there's a wonderful story about how the Apostle Paul was as shrewd as a snake, but as harmless as a dove. Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem because a riot had broken out over his presence in the Temple area. Since he was both a Roman citizen and a Jew, the Commander had some soldiers escort Paul to the Jewish Sanhedrin the next day. This was the very same group of men who had demanded the crucifixion of Jesus and had stoned Stephen. Many of them wanted Paul's blood as well.

It was a hostile environment and Paul could have been convicted and stoned according to the Jewish law. But this is where we see him behaving like a cunning snake and a peaceful dove. The Sanhedrin was divided along political lines. There were the Pharisees on one side and the

Sadducees on the other side. It's kind of like the Democrats and Republicans, but the animosity between the Jewish factions was much stronger. The Pharisees believed in miracles and the resurrection from the dead. The Sadducees didn't believe in miracles or the resurrection—That's why they were sad you see. Paul was aware of this animosity, so he said, "I know why I'm trial today! I'm the son of a Pharisee and I'm being persecuted because my hope is in the resurrection from the dead." That was being as clever as a snake. And he said, "But I have lived before God with a pure conscience." That was being as innocent as a dove.

When he brought up the topic of the resurrection from the dead, the Pharisees shouted, "Preach it, Brother!" The Sadducees shouted, "Shut up, you heretic!" At that moment a riot broke out in the Sanhedrin that was so violent they forgot all about Paul. The Bible says, "The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him back into the barracks." (Acts 23:10)

CONCLUSION

God has called us to go out into the world and share His truth. We are sent out like sheep among wolves. We must be as clever as snakes, and as innocent as doves. Will you learn from these animals today and adjust your behavior accordingly?

So what are we to do when people reject us and even attack us? Are we to strike back? No, Jesus said that if anyone rejects you just "shake off the dust from your feet" and move on. He didn't say to curse them, or to become angry. To shake off the dust simply means you don't want any part of their attitude of hatred and rejection to linger on you.

Some of you are carrying around a load of dust and dirt on your personality. You have failed in the past and that failure is dragging you down and holding you back. You've been rejected before and there's a voice in your head that keeps telling you that you are a rotten failure and you'll never be anything else—there is no hope for you.

Even if you've failed the Lord, you can still get up, shake off the dust and move on. Don't become a victim of your past. You can't do anything about your past mistakes except learn from them. But once you have recognized your mistake, move on. I love the words of the Apostle Paul in Philippians 3:13-14, "But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal..."

Have you failed morally? Shake off the dust and keep on moving ahead. Have you failed relationally? Shake off the dust—keep on moving ahead. Have you failed financially, or in some business? Stand up, shake off the dust and try again. There is always HOPE for you when you are following Jesus because He's more interested in your tomorrows than in your yesterdays!

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes