

**“The Influence of the Lambs”**  
**Isaiah 40:3-5, Luke 10:1-11, 16-20**  
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Within both the Old and New Testament texts this morning is the hopeful message that salvation is on the way and God is bringing it. There is also a call that we can hear coming through these texts, and it is a call to prepare the way for the arrival of the Lord and the salvation he brings. In the Gospels, the Isaiah text is associated with John the Baptist who prepared the way for Jesus, and in today's Gospel reading, those charged with preparing the way were Jesus's disciples.

In the beginning of Jesus's ministry, his disciples traveled with him, but at a certain point, after Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, he began sending messengers ahead of him to prepare the people in the towns and villages for his visits to them. The first group of messengers were the Twelve disciples. In Luke 9 Jesus sends them out for the first time. They went ahead of Jesus and told people the good news that the kingdom of God was near, and they healed people and cast out demons as a sign of how near the kingdom truly was. In Luke 10, Jesus expands the group of messengers and sends out 72. Jewish tradition said there were 72 nations in all the world and the number signified the expanding scope of God's mission. It was a sign pointing ahead to the revelation that the good news of the kingdom was good news for *all* people. Later, after Jesus had completed his earthly mission, he commissioned his followers to go and make disciples of all nations, and the Spirit was given to all of Jesus's followers who would be his witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

You and I are included in that last group of disciples who have been commissioned by Jesus to go out in our own time and place in the world to prepare the way for Jesus by announcing that his kingdom has come and by inviting people to become part of it by trusting Jesus and submitting to his rule. This is not something that you haven't heard before. Matthew 28:19-20 is not some obscure passage of Scripture that you had no idea was in the Bible. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." You've heard that, and you understand that as a follower of Jesus you are part of this commissioned community of messengers and preparers of the way.

When we hear about the commissioning of the 72 in our passage today, it does remind us that we are commissioned messengers and preparers of the way, and it is good for people who are easily distracted or who have a tendency to become self-centered instead of kingdom minded to be reminded that we are supposed to be giving ourselves to this work as we wait for Jesus's return. One of the things that is communicated through this passage is a sense of urgency, and sometimes we can lose that. People all around us are experiencing hell on earth all while the door to a new kind of life through Jesus stands wide open to them but we don't share this good news because the urgency of God's mission takes a backseat to other seemingly more urgent or maybe seemingly more interesting things. Sometimes we need an awakening to the urgency that comes with the call to prepare the way for Jesus, so we can hear the little alarm that the text is sounding today saying "remember people urgently need to hear the good news and make a decision about how to respond to it," but this passage also has something to say to us about who and how we are called to be preparers of the way for Jesus, and that's what I really want to talk about today. I want us to think about the influence of the lambs.

The big thing to pay attention to is that Jesus likens his messengers to lambs, and that is an identity that we are meant to embrace. I was thinking about this in terms of school mascots, and I thought probably no one would ever want their school mascot to be the lambs. It's about as bad as the UC Santa Cruz mascot which is a banana slug. A lamb is not a strong intimidating creature like a tiger or a shark, and you want your school mascot to be an animal that says we are strong and powerful! For similar reasons, we might think it would have been better if Jesus had said he was sending his messengers out like tigers or bears into the midst of wolves, but he didn't. Lambs come up a lot in the Bible as a metaphor for God's people, and it's usually a metaphor that points to our vulnerability or to our tendency to wander away from the shepherd and into dangerous places. Here Jesus uses the metaphor to point to the vulnerability of the messengers.

Jesus is known for saying and doing things that are counterintuitive, and this is one of those times where what he says seems a bit unexpected and strange to our natural way of thinking. Why did Jesus compare his disciples to vulnerable lambs and not bears or tigers who might stand a chance against a wolf, and why would Jesus send his disciples out into an environment that he knows will be inhospitable and unfriendly at least some of the time? Why would he send them out without extra provisions, and why wouldn't he permit them to call down fire from heaven to smite any who refused them and their message? That's what James and John wanted to do when they visited a Samaritan village and the people weren't receptive, and Jesus rebuked them for making this suggestion, but why? Why wouldn't Jesus tell them to equip themselves with money and weapons and get rid of any vulnerabilities before sending them off? He wants his disciples to be successful, doesn't he? It makes me think of the story of David and

Goliath. Saul did what you would expect the King to do for one of his subjects who was going to face a threat. When he realized that David was serious about facing the giant, he insisted that David at least borrow his armor.

Jesus didn't insist on armor or even slingshots for his disciples, and he didn't compare them to predatory animals and one of the reasons for that is because he wasn't sending them out as predators or sending them to engage in a battle with the goal of squashing enemies and expanding his territory by force. He wasn't sending them to hunt and devour the wolves, or to argue, or shame, or scare people into joining their ranks. He wasn't sending them to try and gain control of others or to try impose his rule on people. The battle metaphor has often been used by the church to illustrate its mission to proclaim the gospel in a world that is hostile to Christ. Think, "I may never march in the infantry, ride in the calvary, shoot the artillery....but I'm in the Lord's army." Or, "onward Christian soldiers marching as to war!" There is biblical precedent for this kind of language and imagery. You probably thought right away of the armor of God. I'm not saying that there isn't a spiritual battle going on in the spiritual realm that affects the realm of this world, but that imagery doesn't capture the truth, or the essence of *what Jesus has commissioned his disciples to do in the world*. We are commissioned to make disciples not to build an empire for ourselves by gaining control and power over people. There are too many examples of how Christians have gotten this mixed up and seem to have forgotten that they've been sent as lambs and not tigers or bears. The words predatory and evangelism shouldn't go together, but sometimes it seems like they do, and the call to announce and invite shouldn't be misunderstood as a call to impose and conquer, but sometimes it has been.

You can see in the passage that there is not a spirit of compulsion but a spirit of freedom in Jesus's instructions to the messengers. The only thing they are "armed with," is the announcement of good news which they are to share with everyone. In the event that people don't receive the good news, the disciples aren't compelled by Jesus to force anything. They are free to shake the dust of their feet, and move on. Shaking the dust of the feet is not a harsh act of condemnation or judgement. Instead, this is one of the places where that sense of urgency comes through. The messengers are called not to judge but to show a kind of pastoral honesty with those who reject the message. The kingdom has come near. You have a choice about whether to be part of it, but by walking away you will forfeit the grace that could be yours. The messengers are not compelled to issue judgement on anyone. They are free to let Jesus be the judge.

Preparing the way for Jesus and his kingdom is *not* meant to be predatory or controlling activity. That is not how the lambs are called to wield influence. The lambs are meant to wield influence by being faithful witnesses to the salvation and freedom that Jesus brings and to what life looks like when we obey his teaching and follow his way. That life is a life lived in utter dependance on and trust in Jesus and his power which I think is also why Jesus insists on sending us as lambs. To participate in Jesus's kingdom is to live like a lamb in total dependance and reliance on our Shepherd who is our Lord. We rely on our Shepherd King to give us our daily bread, to protect us from danger, and to meet our deepest needs. This posture of dependance and trust is the one that the citizens of Jesus's kingdom are always meant to hold in everything that we do, and certainly in the things we do to prepare the way for Jesus. Embracing that identity and remembering that Jesus sends us as lambs can help us avoid giving in to the temptation to try to wield influence for Jesus by grasping for power over others or seeking to conquer or control them.

What we see at the conclusion of the passage is what we should expect: that when Jesus sends his messengers out like lambs, and when they trust him wholeheartedly for everything, and when they are faithful in telling people that the kingdom has come near, they are successful, and their ministry bears fruit. The 72 are excited to tell Jesus about their success especially in casting out demons in his name, but Jesus doesn't want them to rejoice over the fact that they were able to cast out demons in his name. Jesus rejoices and wants them to rejoice in the fact that they have been his faithful lambs and witnesses.

This is what we are asked to consider today. Are we willing to be the faithful witnesses that Jesus sends us to be who live as lambs as we do it? To live as a lamb in a state of total dependance on the Shepherd is a radical way to live, truly, but it is also a truly influential way to live. Jesus can and will use us in ways that grow his kingdom not by force or coercion, but in that quiet and wonderful way that the mustard seed grows into a giant tree with giant limbs that give shade. Amen.

