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Human Things vs Divine Things:
A Lesson from Wolves

In the early 20th Century, a few decades after Yellowstone National Park was founded, the government made the executive decision to eradicate the wolf population. Labeled as a threat to visitors, and to the Elk and Moose who the visitors came to see, park rangers were issued rifles and ordered to kill as many wolves as they were able. In 1926 the last two surviving Yellowstone wolves were killed. Almost 70 years later, after realizing the devastation to the delicate ecosystem of the park, Yellowstone realized their error and began the work of reintroducing wolves. On January 14th, 1995 the first pack of 14 wolves was brought into the park and placed in isolation. Each wolf was tracked and identified by a number. When they were released into the wild, there was one wolf that was of particular interest to the park, the runt of the litter, Wolf 8. Whom it was assumed would have a hard life given his meager size. And, considering his 10 other brothers were constantly beating up on him and stealing his food. One evening while observing the pack, Wolf Interpreter, Rick McIntyre, witnessed something incredible. Wolf 8's two brothers had gone off behind a tree and reappeared with an Elk calf. Not long after a Grizzly appeared wanting to reclaim its dinner (of course). And so as soon as the three saw the bear they began to run. But, because of his size Wolf 8 quickly lagged behind. As the bear gained on Wolf 8, he stopped, turned around, stood his ground, putting himself between the bear and his brothers. Causing the bear, in confusion and fear, to back down and away.

This week in our reading from Matthew, we are given quite the contrast in our depiction of Peter, or at least Jesus' response to him. Given that just last week, Jesus was praising and blessing Peter as the Rock on which he would build his church. Only to find Jesus this week, calling Peter not only a stumbling block, but also Satan, the great tempter himself. I'll be honest with you though, I don't blame Peter one bit for his rebuke of Jesus' exclamations and descriptions of his foretold death and crucifixion at the hands of elders and chief priests in Jerusalem. I mean no one wants that. Even now, 2,000 years later, when we know the end of the story, we don't want it. It's horrific, it's gruesome, it's not exactly fodder for idle chit chat let alone for polite company! And yet, without the suffering, without the death, we don't get the resurrection.

At the same time Wolf 8 was continuing to be pushed out of his own pack, another pack, and the park at large, was expecting their first litter. On the day the expectant mother, Wolf 9, delivered her eight pups, the first wolves born at Yellowstone in 69 years, the father was tragically and illegally shot and killed. Leaving Wolf 9 in a serious predicament. Without an alpha male to hunt and secure food, Wolf 9 wouldn't be able to keep up her milk supply. Furthermore, if she left her pups to hunt, they would be at risk of hypothermia. While the park rarely intervenes with wildlife, in this instance, with the litter and their mother making up 43% of the park's population, the decision was made to put the wolves to isolation. Allowing the pups to grow old enough to regulate their own body temperature, and be released before they came of age to hunt.

On the day Wolf 9 and her litter were released, Wolf 8 heard an unfamiliar howl for the first time. No sooner did Wolf 8 realize the small size of the pups did he begin to collect and bring them food, approaching them gently and playfully, causing their mother, of course, to take notice. And, while Wolf 8 was less than ideal mate, upon seeing his compassion and benevolence towards her pups, that day, Wolf 9, made Wolf 8 her mate, and in turn the new alpha of their pack. Adopting the pups Wolf 8 took on the role of teacher and guide to the litter of 8.

No sooner does Jesus admonish Peter criticizing him, "Get behind me, Satan! You... stumbling block...;

for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Does he turn around and continue his harsh words, now addressing his disciples, and saying “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Yuck! If I am honest with you I would have to say I like the Jesus from a few chapters earlier a whole lot better. The one who said “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest... For my yoke is easy and my burden light.” But, whether I like it or not, these are the words we hear today, and we would do well to take them in just as much as we took in his earlier words about rest and easy yokes.

Of 8 the pups Wolf 8 became close to one in particular, Wolf 21. Who, ironically, was the largest in the litter, outgrowing even his own enormous biological father. But, as the pup grew and found himself of age to choose a mate he had to leave the pack. Interestingly enough the mate Wolf 21 chose was from his own Pack's rival pack, the Druid's, who had threatened and fought Wolf 8 and his pack. An incident in which Wolf 8 amazingly had the opportunity to kill the other packs alpha, in an unbelievable and unlikely duel. But, instead chose to spare the wolf's life. Years later, with Wolf 21 as the alpha, the Druid pack, and Wolf 8's pack would have to duel once again. Except this time Wolf 21 not only followed in his adopted father's footsteps, but went above and beyond. As Wolf 21 charged towards Wolf 8 to begin the duel, instead of slamming into the old and feeble wolf, Wolf 21 simply veered off and ran right past him, inviting his pack to do the same, like cars passing one another on the highway. Rick, the wolf interpreter, noted that in all his years of watching and interpreting wolves, he had never seen anything like it. Nor had he ever seen such a strong, large, and dominant alpha male, like Wolf 21, remain both a peaceful leader, never killing another wolf, as well as a playful alpha, romping and rolling with his own pups whenever he had the chance.

“Those who love their life will lose it. And those who lose their life, for my sake, will find it.” There is a sense in both Jesus' saying here, and in the story of Wolf 8 and Wolf 21, that things aren't always the way they appear. We believe the strongest is always the defeater, the losers never win, and whatever you want you have to fight for and cling to. But, that simply isn't true. Yellowstone wanted to keep their visitors, elk, and moose safe by destroying the wolf population, and in turn disrupted the sanctity of life and their ecosystem. Wolf 8's brothers pushed him out because he was small and thus deemed useless, and yet he became the alpha of one of the best packs in the park. Wolf 21 by all accounts could have bullied his way to the top, but instead chose the peaceful and joyful path of his father, in turn creating a completely new way of handling pack rivalries. Jesus could have listened to Peter and bypassed Jerusalem, but my guess is that would mean we wouldn't be here today.

In just a moment we will join with George as he makes his baptismal covenant and as we renew ours. A covenant that calls us in short to take up our cross and follow in the footsteps of both Jesus and his followers. Joining in the body of Christ. I would encourage you to consider what are the human things that keep you from putting your mind on Divine things (maybe even on wolf things)? How can you leave them at the altar today, giving them over and away to God, so that you might more fully live into your baptismal covenant, and the body of Christ. Even more, so that you can put your mind on things Divine, things that bring us closer towards life to the fullest. Life full of joy, like wolves wrestling in the snow, full of grace, like sparing another's life, and full of love, like being a part of a pack, a community, a church home!