Yesterday, as usual, I went to the regional market to do my shopping. As usual, I came home with my car full of beautiful, delicious, life giving products: strawberries, asparagus, yogurt, lettuce plants, soap and even a few Christmas presents for next December. As usual, I bought mushrooms from my favorite mushroom farmer. As I picked out baskets of shitake and lion’s mane mushrooms the young man said to me, “Would you tell me your name? You are one of my most regular customers, and I feel bad that I don’t even know your name.”

Then I told Jesse my name, and Jesse told me his name. He told me about how his business was and I told him about my son, Noah, who is working on his own mushroom growing operation in New Mexico. Jesse encouraged Noah to come visit his mushroom farm and share ideas about mushroom cultivation. So I left the farmer’s market with a car full of life giving produce and with a new friend, Jesse.

All of this is to say that we live in a place that is as close to the garden of Eden as I have ever seen. Central New York sometimes seems like the garden of Eden, not only in terms of the produce of the land, but in terms of the openness of the people. As I tell you this story, I have to acknowledge that I must be one of the most privileged people on the face of the earth. I am privileged because I have the money to buy good food. I am privileged because I have a flexible work schedule, so I can go to the market on Saturday morning. I am privileged because I have a car that makes it easy to drive across town. I am privileged because I am a white man and almost no one seems afraid to ask my name and become my friend. I have a lot of privileges.

Perhaps you have felt that way too at some point in your life. Matthew’s Gospel message is especially important for me and for all of us who have experienced some privileges in our lives.

Matthew’s Gospel seems like a near perfect fit for St. Paul’s Church. Matthew’s people come from the mainstream tradition; they are Jewish by birth. They are part of the main group. Then, perhaps under Matthew’s leadership, they become ‘Christ following Jews’, like Jesus’ first disciples. They used to be part of the synagogue. Then they become a separate congregation, but they are not traumatized, they are not suffering for following Christ. Matthew’s people are filled with passion for their new mission, which is to bring the Gospel message to Gentiles.

Matthew’s congregation is a lot like St. Paul’s congregation. Most of them enjoy lots of privileges. They like to read and study scripture. They have time to be studious and literate. Matthew’s congregation is very familiar with all of the Jewish stories and scriptures. So Matthew’s congregation was probably not surprised to hear this verse from the middle of our passage: be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. This proverb is similar to proverbs found in Hebrew Scriptures and in the Midrash, the enormous collection of commentaries on the scriptures.

But Jesus and Matthew are using this familiar proverb to push Jesus’ disciples out of their comfort zone and into the true work of the kingdom. For Jesus’ disciples it is not enough to sit in our comfortable chairs studying scripture and reading books. Jesus tells us to get to work, As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Jesus says, Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. It is not enough to proclaim the message. Get to work. Give practical aid to those who need it most.

Jesus says, Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. We need to give our attention to work to be done right here, in our neighborhoods, in our city, in our community.

Then comes a passage that is especially striking for those of us who have a habit of solving problems with a check or a credit card. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for
your journey. Do not bring two tunics, or two pairs of sandals, or a staff. Rely on the hospitality of others. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As we do the work of the kingdom we are not relying on our own power, even when we are defending ourselves from the attacks of others: When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

Jesus and Matthew are pushing us out of our comfort zone, even into a zone where we might face physical danger. See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and as single-minded as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and whip you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles.

Reading these words, I think back to the many stories of young adults and older adults who have been arrested for protesting the violent treatment of George Floyd and other black Americans at the hands of the police. We, especially those of us who enjoy lots of privileges, are called to leave our comfort zone for the sake of God’s people. We are called to engage in a mission that may include suffering for the sake of justice. Those of us who do not feel like we are surrounded by wolves, are in some way sent out, like sheep into the midst of wolves, to bear witness to the love of God for all people.

This is the life to which we are called. It is a life of engagement and wisdom. If we are going to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves, the first step for us is the step many of us have been engaged in for the past three weeks. We have to open our eyes and see that many of our fellow Americans, especially black Americans, live in fear for their lives. Many black mothers and fathers live in fear that their children, will be victims of violence, including violence perpetrated by the police. When their children leave the house, they feel they are sending them out like sheep in the midst of wolves.

In Jesus’ worldview the wolf is the vicious predator and the sheep is the helpless victim. Jesus calls us to be neither the vicious wolf, nor the helpless sheep. We are not to be predators or victims, but to take a third path. Jesus says we are to be wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. A better translation would be ‘wise as serpents and as single-minded as doves’. In order to witness to God’s love and be witnesses for the God’s justice we need to take a third path in the world, the same way Jesus did. It is a path of engagement and wisdom and single-minded devotion to God’s work of love and justice.

I am trying to be careful about the news I am consuming. Like you, I have seen disturbing images and video of people, including police officers, acting like vicious predators. But I have also seen signs of hope. The most hopeful news for me from the past week came in an interview on the PBS Newshour on Friday evening. An adult journalist was interviewing two black teenagers about their experiences and their engagement in the movement to establish equal justice under the law for all Americans.

I was inspired by the wisdom and engagement of these two teenagers. They were not vicious predators. They were not helpless victims. They were taking a third path. They were acting as wise as serpents and as single-minded as doves. They were following the path given to us by Jesus.

We need to do the same thing. We must be neither sheep nor wolves. We must be wise as serpents and as single-minded as doves. We begin by keeping our eyes open. Then, through God’s grace, we may proclaim God’s truth with boldness, seeking to bring God’s justice with compassion.