

[1 **MONSTERS side by side**] We're in a series for the month of October called *Monsters*. It's not just because it's Halloween – monster stories are part of every human culture, including ours. Why is that? Why do we tell monster stories? Why do we like to be scared?

Sociologists tell us it's because monster stories represent aspects of our culture we're ashamed of. We're not proud of the fact that we're selfish, so we tell stories about vampires – creatures that live off the blood of others. We're afraid that we can't trust our desires, that left to our own devices we're mindless consuming machines, so we tune into *The Walking Dead* and *Z-Nation*. We have unresolved issues, so we tell ghost stories.

Monster stories make it safe for us to talk about the things that scare us *about ourselves*. As followers of Jesus, we can look at these monster stories as windows into our own fears. We can ask, Why do these scare us, and can't we find a better way to overcome our fears than just telling ghost stories.

[2 **WEREWOLF**] Which brings us to today's monster: the Werewolf. Of all the monsters we're looking at in this series, the Werewolf is the most ambivalent. Culturally, we like werewolves, we're interested in them, but we don't want to get TOO interested. They're not as sexy as vampires. Ghosts are scary. Zombies are cool. But Werewolves? It's almost as if we don't quite know what to do with them.

Well, that's not quite true. It's that werewolves are just... more... dangerous. There's an edge to them that other monsters don't quite have.

[3 **Human < Werewolf**] A quick review: werewolves are humans who occasionally transform into wolves or wolf-like monsters. The wolf is terrifying, unpredictable and uncontrollable. Once the person transforms, once the monster comes out, there's no telling who or what is going to be hurt. Usually the transformation is brought on by the full moon, though some more modern incarnations like the Incredible Hulk are triggered by anger.

A lot of us are more familiar with the Werewolf than we like to admit. We know what it's like to have a monster, a beast, a Wolf living inside us. We know it's dangerous. And most of the time, we've got it under control. We have ordered our lives in such a way that the Wolf can't get out. [4 **Rules = Caged Werewolf**] We've built a cage for the monster with structure, with rules and discipline.

But inevitably, in every story, the Wolf breaks out. The monster hurts people around us, destroys their lives. So afterwards, we try to put things back together, apologize for the damage the monster has done and start rebuilding the cage, hoping to make it strong enough next time. New rules. Stricter schedules.

[5 **Cage cracked Wolf out**] But just like in the stories, we can never make the cage strong enough to hold the monster. The Wolf will always find a way out. That's what both draws us to the Werewolf and terrifies us: we know that struggle to keep the monster hidden.

2 | Monsters Week 2 - Werewolves

We all have some monster inside us, some sin, some constant struggle. Maybe it's anger. Maybe it's an addiction or a sexual sin. Maybe it's food. Or an unhealthy desire to please other people. Whatever it is, you struggle with it. And mostly you think that you have it under control. You've figured out how to get by, how to arrange your life, your schedule, so that your Wolf stays caged up.

But your Wolf always finds a way out. And you've borne the cost of its escape. So have your family and friends. You know the shame in the aftermath. The fear and isolation. But the truth is you're not alone. This is the human condition.

[Scripture Slide] If you have a Bible, turn with me to Romans 7. This is a letter Paul wrote to the church in Rome. The church was comprised of people from several different races and religions, so Paul spends a lot of time talking about the common human condition. In this particular section, he's explaining why every person struggles with sin even though we're all created in God's image.

Paul describes our struggle with sin in language that sounds decidedly Wolfish. He's contrasting God's Way with what we actually do, and beginning in v14, he says,

The trouble is not with the law, for it is spiritual and good. The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin.

I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate... I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it. And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh. I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.

Paul describes Sin as this creature living inside him, causing him to act against what he knows is right and good.

But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it. I have discovered this principle of life-- that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong.

If the Wolf had a motto, that'd probably be it: Even when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. Paul goes on:

I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?

3 | Monsters Week 2 - Werewolves

This is the cry of anyone who knows what it means to live with the Wolf. Anyone who's experienced the shame, horror and regret of seeing the Wolf get out and the damage it does. Oh what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life of death?

If that were the end of the story, it'd be pretty depressing. Bad news: there's no cure for the Wolf. Sorry everyone. Just live with it.

Fortunately, that's not the case. Paul has some very good news for us: our lives don't have to be ruled by the Wolf. We can find freedom – not just the nervous freedom of a caged animal, but true freedom of a person who no longer lives with a wolf inside them. He says,

Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. So you see how it is: In my mind I really want to obey God's law, but because of my flesh I am a slave to sin. -- Romans 7:14-25 (NLT)

Paul says the answer is in Jesus, that Jesus can free us from the Wolf, make us human again. That answer probably didn't surprise you (you're gathered with your Church, listening to a sermon, after all). But we should be very careful. Because saying that Jesus frees us from Sin can actually take us right back into Wolf territory.

[6 Timeline - Wolf → prayer → human] Many of us picture being rescued by Jesus as a thing that happens to you one time. Maybe it's when you pray a prayer or have a kind of mystical experience. Christians talk about it as a before and after: before we were dead in Sin. After, we're alive. Free.

[7 Timeline - Wolf → prayer → wolf] Except... any Christian will admit that after we find Jesus, there's still a Wolf in us. This hidden sin we do our best to keep caged up. Because we're already saved, already rescued, so we're not supposed to struggle with this anymore. And since we're Christians now, we figure that what Jesus really did was give us better tools to build a better cage. So we fall into the trap of legalism: we think if we just read our Bibles more or pray better or go to Church more often or... something... then the Wolf will stay locked up.

No wonder our werewolf stories are more ambiguous. No wonder they scare us so much and we don't quite know what to do with them. We can't glamorize the monster within. Paul certainly doesn't.

The Wolf still always finds a way out. And in the aftermath, we pray one more time. In the midst of all that shame and guilt, we echo Paul's words, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. It won't happen again."

So if there's always a *next time*, what are we missing? Is Paul's good news about Jesus not that good? Or do we have something wrong?

We have something wrong – we don't get rid of the Wolf through our own efforts. **[Scripture Slide]** Flip back to Genesis 2. This is one of the Hebrew creation stories – in this story, God is like a sculptor, forming humanity out of earth. As we read some key verses, consider the picture of humanity Genesis 2 offers us. In describing the creation of humanity, verse 7 says,

The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground. He breathed the breath of life into the man's nostrils, and the man became a living person. -- Genesis 2:7 (NLT)

The Hebrew word for breath also means spirit. So Humanity is a hybrid of two things: the dust of the ground and the breath or Spirit of God. A few verses later, the animals are created:

The LORD God formed from the ground all the wild animals and all the birds of the sky. -- Genesis 2:19 (NLT)

Genesis recognizes what we all know - that we're all animals. We're made from the same stuff as the animals (and Biology confirms that - we share over 98% of our DNA with some animal species). And we know this too... it's how we talk about ourselves when we give into our bodily urges.

He's a party animal.

She's a cougar.

We went at each other like animals.

He's an Alpha male-type.

You and me baby ain't nothing but mammals.

You're a dog. (Which means something different if it's said to a man or a woman.)

But we're not just animals. According to Genesis, there's an important difference between humans and animals. Even though we're made from the same stuff as animals, we also have the Spirit of God, the Breath of Life, within us.

[8 Wolf → Spirit → human] It's the Spirit who makes us more than just animals. And it's the Spirit who leads us on the path to freedom. The Spirit brings transformation and puts the Wolf down for good.

That's what Paul's really getting at in Romans 7 - trying harder, turning to legalism to rescue us from the Wolf is all really just playing into the Wolf's strengths. We can't overcome the animal by our own efforts because the Wolf is a product of our own efforts. It's like trying to fight fire with fire (which, contrary to the idiom, isn't a great idea).

If you have a Wolf, chances are you know when your monster is going to come out, what the Full Moon is that brings out your Wolf. Maybe it's when you're alone. Or angry. Or scared. Whatever it is, you try

Commented [1]: you're a dog! (meant in 2 ways depending on if spoken to a male or a female)

Commented [2]: Nice one!

to prepare yourself. You've got the Wolf inside you and you have all these rules and methods to keep it in place. But the Wolf breaks out and you experience all the guilt and shame, so you resolve to try harder, to build a stronger cage with better rules. And so the cycle starts all over again.

[9 ~~Cage~~ VS Spirit] The problem isn't the cage. It's the Wolf. We shouldn't be focusing on the rules, the cages, but on the Spirit. In Tommy's sermon last week, we saw that Spiritual Practices keep us connected to God, welcome us into his death. Spiritual Practices kill the monster in us so the human can live. So too with wolves - the Spirit slays the beast so the human can thrive.

Commented [3]: these 2 sentences make it sound like the wolf within us is the spirit.

Commented [4]: Better?

Did you notice that Jesus isn't *actually* in that process anywhere? That in this cycle of building bigger cages, even if we've been saved, we're relying on our own abilities, our own cleverness and discipline to save us? Is it any wonder it doesn't work? When we ignore the transformative power of God's Spirit, we ignore what makes us human. We are reduced to animal, to Wolf.

No amount of effort on our parts can overcome the Wolf. That's why Paul cries out: "What a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life of death?"

And his answer we should take seriously: "Thank God. The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord." This is a constant theme in Paul's theology: that as Christians we must choose to live in the Resurrection. That we need the power of the Holy Spirit to restore us.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul says the only way to defeat the Wolf is to kill it. Every day. He says it like this:

When I tried to keep the law, it condemned me.

This is the same argument he was making in Romans 7. When I tried to keep all the rules, make my cage stronger, it just destroyed me. The Wolf kept getting out. So what does he do instead?

So I died to the law-- I stopped trying to meet all its requirements-- so that I might live for God. My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. -- Galatians 2:19-20 (NLT)

Both Jesus and Paul talk about this dying with Jesus, this crucifying the Self as a daily commitment. Not just during those Full Moon moments. Dying to the Self, choosing to make ourselves available to the Holy Spirit is a choice each day. To recognize the Wolf, the urges of our bodies, the temptations of our animal natures, are *not* the sum total of who we are. And we do this - as Paul says - not on our own but through Jesus living in us as the Holy Spirit.

We aren't fully human, fully ourselves, fully the persons God created us to be until we are both animal and Spirit. Until the Wolf is transformed into a whole human by the power of God in our lives.

So what does that look like? How do we receive the power of the Spirit in our lives? Well, in the stories, you kill a werewolf with a silver bullet. But God is not a magic bullet that makes our lives all better. There's no one-size-fits-all solution to communion with the Holy Spirit. What works for me might not work for you and what works for you might not work for the person sitting next to you.

Christianity isn't a program. It's not a formula. It's not an equation. It's a relationship between you and God.

That's why what we call Spiritual Formation is so important. I really like the way my friend Johnathan describes Spiritual Formation. He says that Spiritual Formation is "Making ourselves available to the Spirit."

For the last 2,000 years, the Church has identified dozens of practices that help us to be available to the Spirit - everything from reading scripture and prayer to fasting and Sabbath keeping to silence and solitude to serving and giving.

And the tricky thing is that all those practices can become legalism. Instead of making us available to be transformed by the Spirit, they can become ways we are trying to build stronger cages. When I read Scripture, is it to hear from God, to learn God's story and how my story is part of that? Or am I checking off a box? When I pray, am I creating space in my life for God to speak to me, or am I earning some imagined divine brownie points so I can be better?

Spiritual Formation is really tough. Because it's not up to us. We make ourselves available to the Spirit and then we just have to trust. To wait. To wait for God to change us. Because we're not in control. God is.

We don't like it when we're not in control. This is why legalism is so attractive. We'd prefer a faith that *is* a magic bullet. We prefer a faith that's all about coming to a building one day a week. We want a God who fits into our agenda, who doesn't demand too much space, who makes our cages stronger, helps us keep the Wolf in check. A Full Moon sort of God.

But that's not who God is. That's not what it means to follow God. The Spirit isn't interested in making our lives better. She wants to give us wholly new lives, lives free from the Wolf. But this means that we are constantly, consistently making ourselves available to the Spirit. Not just on Sundays when we gather, but throughout the week.

Remember Paul's words: we cannot overcome the Wolf on our own. Because without the Spirit, we're just animals. We were designed to be animal and Spirit. So if we want to have victory over the wolf, it

has to die. We have to make the choice every day to crucify our old Selves, to make ourselves available to be transformed by the Spirit.

Our efforts to build a better cage for our darkness will never save us. But our daily efforts directed, not to caging the Wolf but to making ourselves available to the Spirit, changes everything. Because our efforts plus the Spirit's work makes us fully human.

We can be more than animals. We don't have to be defined by that thing inside us that we can't quite seem to keep a handle on. When we make ourselves available to the Spirit, we are transformed, over and over. We're saved, rescued anew every day. And every day we become more like Jesus.

What if Catalyst were a church free from the wolves within? What if we were a people who didn't work and work and work to fail again and again?

What if this week, each of us made space for the Spirit to work in our lives? What if instead of *trying*, we paused and let the Spirit transform us? How would our families be different? Our jobs?

So let's refuse to continue to be trapped in our Sin, to live in fear of our Wolves. Let's choose to make ourselves available to the Spirit.

Examine

1. When in the last week have you made yourself available to the Holy Spirit?
2. When in the last week have you seen the consequences of the Wolf?
3. When in the next week might your Wolf break out?
4. This week, how will you make yourself available to the Holy Spirit?

Benediction

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our flesh. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our flesh but instead follow the Spirit. Those who are dominated by the flesh think about fleshy things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. So letting your flesh control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. -- Romans 8:1-6 (NLT)