

Sermon on 4EasterC: Psalm 23, John 10:22-30
Preached on April 29, 2007 @ CLF by Pastor David Van Kley

The ranger warned: “Watch out! There’s a big one raising Cain down there, at the south end of the lake. Has only one eye. Lost the other during hunting season last fall.”

I didn’t think much about it: I’d had encounters with bears before and never run into any serious trouble. I knew how to hang our food in a tree. Besides, bears always run away from people. So we paddled down to the end of Crooked Lake and pitched two tents, one for Arlene and me and one for our three kids. After a strenuous day, we all fell fast asleep.

But in the middle of the night, I awoke to the sound of a bear huffing. I could hear it rifling through our belongings, not far from the entrance to the kids’ tent. Seized with fear, I snagged the tent’s zipper with trembling hands, ripped open the flap and started shouting into the darkness. I grabbed a handful of rocks and threw them in all directions. When I stopped, the night was silent.

But my heart was racing like Jeff Gordon at Daytona. Where had the bear gone? Would it come back? Was it a threat to our safety? I lit the Coleman lantern, thinking that the bright light might scare the bear away. I brought a couple of pans into the tent, to make noise if necessary, then lay down, on high alert.

It wasn’t long before I heard the heavy footsteps again. Heart pounding in my throat, I peered outside—an enormous, one-eyed bear, ten feet away, hunched over our cooking equipment, right **next to** the lantern. Maybe with only one eye, it needed the light to see whether there was anything good to eat!

Well, I don’t know exactly how long it was before the bear took off. I **do** know that I was scared half to death. Somehow, the kids slept through the whole thing. I couldn’t sleep the rest of the night. As soon as it was morning, we packed up all of our stuff and high-tailed it out of there!

Even if you’ve never had a one-eyed bear in your campsite, I bet you know the feeling I described, of being on high alert. Afraid of what might happen next. Anxious. Your heart pounding fast and hard, like a jackhammer.

You felt that way when your doctor informed you that the mammogram showed a lump on your breast. When your boss called you into the office to deliver what you knew would be bad news. The time your high school aged son stayed out all night without calling. The moment right before you delivered your first speech in high school. The day you swerved into the ditch to avoid hitting a deer on the highway.

Maybe you felt that way two weeks ago when you watched video footage of the Virginia Tech massacre. Or you saw those feelings in your mom, several months after dad died. Or you heard it in your six year old daughter, the night she woke up crying,

because she was sure **she'd** be the next one to die.

It's normal for human beings to feel anxious. We're wired to be on high alert when one-eyed bears show up in the neighborhood. Anxiety and fear are important defense mechanisms. Yet, anxiety and fear can come to rule us, even when there are no bears in sight. They can become chronic conditions, which extract joy from life.

Theologians talk about "besetting sins," by which they mean the sins people fall into again and again, which keep them from being all God created them to be. As an individual, you may be aware of **your** besetting sins: a quick temper, greed, procrastination, racism, insensitivity, wasting too much time in front of the TV. But theologians also speak about the besetting sins of different **generations**. And many have said that the besetting sin of this place and time is **anxiety**. Which is one reason doctor's and counselor's offices are filled with people seeking help. And one of the reasons so many people medicate themselves with alcohol and drugs.

Anxiety seems like an odd sin for our age. You'd think we'd be **less** anxious than those who lived before us. After all, we live longer than they did. No one in this room needs to worry about where their next meal is coming from. We have the money to buy all kinds of material things, the technology to make life easier. Still, we are often very anxious.

Why is that? Is it because we have **too much** to protect? For every material thing in the house, there is a corresponding worry? Maybe.

But the root cause may lie deeper. Have you, as a parent, ever said—or you, as a child, ever heard—these words: "Don't be such a follower"? Of course. We're taught that it's better to be a **leader** than a follower. Colleges recruit students with slogans like, "we train leaders for tomorrow." Who ever heard of a college training **followers** for tomorrow? We want to stand on our own two feet. To be **independent**, rather than **dependent**.

There's one problem with that. We weren't **created** to be independent. In fact, today's texts tell us that we were created to be like **sheep**. Sheep run **together**. And they need someone to feed them, guide them, protect them. An independent sheep is an oxymoron. A sheep left alone in the wilderness will die. Sheep live when they depend on the goodness of their shepherd.

We are like **sheep**, the Bible says. And we have been given a **shepherd**. The **Lord** is our shepherd, who leads us in paths of righteousness and beside still waters. **Jesus** is the Good Shepherd, who calls us by name and is willing even to lay his life down for the sheep he loves. The **risen Christ** is a shepherd who does not run from one-eyed bears or Roman soldiers with nails. The risen Christ leads us even through the valley of the shadow of death. Through the black holes we dread into life anew.

Dependence on this shepherd is the ultimate antidote to the anxiety which chokes our generation. Have you ever faced major surgery? As you lie on the operating table, your material possessions mean nothing. They take away your clothing and leave you wearing a skimpy gown. They take away your watch, your glasses, your wedding ring. They take away your wallet, with your credit cards and driver's license. All that identifies you now is a plastic band around your wrist with your name and age. I'm not ashamed to say that at those times, when nurses have bustled around me and the IV began to release chemicals in my bloodstream, I've recited Psalm 23 literally a dozen times to myself. I've pictured myself as a sheep, one of the flock, with the good shepherd, who knows me and will not let harm come to me.

That picture can get you through almost anything. When you're anxious and your heart is racing, dream yourself up a shepherd. Christ, the good shepherd, is as near as the air you breathe. He will not let anything snatch you out of God's hand.

Now, if this message seems intended to bring only comfort, nothing could be further from the truth. Release from anxiety frees us to be servants in Christ's name. To walk in the paths of righteousness. To stand up and be counted in a world of terrorism, violence, and greed. To work for justice and peace together, following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even if it means bearing a cross.

That's **exactly** what it meant to the "great multitude from every nation" described in Revelation, those saints "robed in white." They faced persecution and death at the brutal hands of the Roman empire because they worshipped a God other than Caesar, a God of abundant generosity, and non-violent love. People went peaceably into the coliseums where hungry lions waited to tear them apart. How **on earth** did they **do** that? Because they saw themselves as sheep in the hands of a good shepherd, who on Easter had overcome every evil, even death.

The next time your heart is pounding with fear and anxiety clouds your decisions, remember that you are but a **sheep** in the hands of this same, good, **shepherd**.

Amen.