

HOLDING MY HAND

There was a nature show on television about a black bear that gave birth to two cubs. One cub died right away. Three weeks later the mother died and the remaining cub was left to fend for itself. An orphaned cub in that condition is like a walking buffet for predators. And of course, the camera immediately showed a hungry-looking mountain lion.

One day the orphan cub encountered a giant male black bear. The little cub cowered at the bear's sheer mass. The larger bear peered around and seemed to realize that the mother bear wasn't anywhere to be found. He gave the little cub a friendly nudge. The camera then showed the little bear happily trailing along after the larger one. The adoption papers were signed, sealed and registered at the county seat in that one nudge. Papa bear proceeded to show the

cub how to grub for insects and how to catch fish and how to scratch his back against a tree.

One day the two bears became separated. The cub began to cry and looked frantically for his new father, but couldn't find him anywhere. The cub approached a stream where he'd learned to fish and something caught his attention. He looked up to see a mountain lion ready to pounce. That same mountain lion had stalked the cub for the entire show. There was no way that mountain lion would've gone for that cub with Papa bear around, but NOW.....

The camera zoomed in on the cub. He automatically mimicked the posture of his adopted father when threatened. He stood on his hind legs and bared his teeth. Then, in exactly the same way his new father would have

done, this cub let loose a mighty growl that should have reverberated throughout the forest. But, instead, only a tiny bear cub squeak came out.

You just knew what was about to happen, so you covered the children's eyes or did something to divert their attention from the TV. But, to everybody's astonishment the mountain lion lowered his head and ran off in the opposite direction!

The camera panned back to the proud little cub still standing tall on his hind legs. And then all the viewers saw what that little cub could not: a few yards behind him, at full, ferocious height, his sharp, white teeth bared in a snarl, stood Daddy bear. He may not have made a sound, but he was there.

Even though the cub couldn't see his father, his father stood guard, protecting his young. The little cub had power available that was greater than anything he could produce on his own. There was a greater power watching over him.

(Billy D. Strayhorn, What Difference Does It Make?)

I know that was a long story, but the reason for the story is that every scripture we read this morning all point to God's care and love for us...and okay I thought it was a nice story. But seriously, God does watch over us, around us, and in us through the Holy Spirit, which Jesus promised in the gospel of John today.

This is Paul's point as well as he tries to persuade the Athenians that they are searching and groping for one God, what they call an unknown god, and even though we never

deserved or asked for it, our Creator has drawn near to us through Jesus of Nazareth. Why? Not for hanging out with us, or for curiosity's sake, but that God wants to be in relationship to us, Jesus says, live in us, and for us to live in God.

But how is this possible? Paul says that we "live and move and have our being in God", not just when Jesus was here on earth, but today, right now at this very moment, God abides with us so we can truly live. Paul said to the Athenians that our response is repentance, turning around and accepting this relationship with God, turning from a life apart from God and beginning a life in God and recognizing God who abides with us.

Yet there are times, even for followers of Jesus, when we have difficulty recognizing God living in us. The

brokenness and the pain of our lives becomes so intense: the loss of loved ones, the doctor's verdict of cancer or disease, even the pastor moving and fearing the future with someone else, this year has been incredibly hard for our church. In these times, God especially draws near, holds our hand, and we can find peace.

How? Well, let me tell you another story:

Surgery was scheduled for the next day. Tom could feel the anxiety rising. He knew his very life would be in the hands of the doctors. The day before surgery, an attractive nurse came into the room to talk with him about the operation. She took hold of his hand and asked him to hold it tight and feel its warmth. Tom had no objections to that. The hand was soft and smooth.

"Now," she said, during the surgery tomorrow, you will be disconnected from your heart and you will be kept alive only by certain machines. And when your heart is finally restored, and the operation is over and you are reconnected, you will eventually awaken in a special recovery room.

But you will be immobile for as long as six hours. You may be unable to move, or speak, or even to open your eyes... but you will be perfectly conscious and you will hear and you will know everything that is going on around you.

During those six hours, I will be at your side and I will hold your hand exactly as I am doing now. I will stay with you until you are fully recovered. Although you may feel absolutely helpless, when you feel my hand, you will know that I will not leave you."

The next day the surgery went exactly as the nurse had told him. When Tom woke, he could do nothing. Before he panicked, Tom felt the touch of the nurse's hand and he was at peace. John H. Pavelko, *The One Who Comes Alongside*

Today we are going to receive Holy Communion and then have a time of prayer and healing. It is through the Sacrament and opening our eyes to Christ in our midst through prayer that we know that God is holding our hand, that there is a power greater than we are... always watching over us. Therefore, do not let your hearts be troubled, Jesus says, and do not be afraid...God is holding your hand and will never let you go. Do you believe that? I do! I know it's a simple message, it may be too simple: God is holding your hand, God is watching over us...but when the storms of life are raging, when pain seems to want to swallow us up,

when losing our loved ones and transitions in life seem too overwhelming like drowning in a flood...I can't think of anyone else that I want on my side...when the storms of life are raging stand by me, precious Lord take my hand...all of these songs speak of a power that is greater than our hurt, greater than our loss, greater than all that wants to swallow us in darkness, and that power and One is the God who made us, who calls us by name, who died for us on a cross, who loves us no matter what we do and how much of a mess we make of our life, that's the One I want on my side, that's the One who will never let you and me go, that's the One God I will turn to and live in no matter what the circumstances and situations I find myself in... He is my Rock, He is my Fortress, He is my Deliverer, Praise God, Praise God, Praise God! Amen and Amen!