

“Life Lessons from Big Bears”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
October 3, 2021 – Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 22
Psalm 8; Job 1:1; 2:1-10

So here we are, approaching the conclusion of this year’s Fat Bear Week! This annual week-long event, created by the National Park Service, celebrates brown bears as they gather each fall at Brooks River in Alaska’s Katmai National Park in preparation for hibernation. While at the river, they demonstrate their awesome angling and eating abilities by catching and feasting on sockeye salmon as they swim towards upstream towards their spawning grounds. Many of the park’s bears arrive at their fishing grounds looking pretty lean and in need of a healthy meal or two, but they all leave fattened up by their fishy feast and ready for their long winter naps.

Fat Bear Week is a competition between the bears, unbeknownst to them, to determine which among them girthed up the most over the course of their summertime fishing follies. The contest pits pairs of bears against another each day of the week in a March-Madness style competition, with fans voting online each day for their favorite chunky bears until only one remains as the year’s Fattest Bear.

Last year’s champion, Bear 747, one of the biggest bears in the park, lived up to his name by developing a gut of jumbo-jet-sized proportions over the course of the fishing season. Of 747’s girth, Park ranger Andrew LaValle notes, “The belly clearance with the ground is the thing that really stands out to me about 747. It almost drags. He seems to be more hippopotamus than bear at times!” He was living up to his name again this year as he once again packed on the pounds and outgirthed many of his rivals.

Yesterday, big 747 was pitted up against an older, blonde-colored bear missing a few teeth named Otis, who arrived late and concerningly thin at the fishing grounds this year. But once at the river, wily old Otis fished ferociously and fattened up considerably, becoming a formidable opponent for the other bears making it to this year’s bracket. The final vote count in yesterday’s matchup between old Otis and hippo-like 747 was 22,532 votes for 747 and 34,000 for Otis,

who, even in his old age, has advanced to the final four to take on some of park's other big bears to claim this year's title, which will be won this week on Fat Bear Tuesday. Be sure to cast your votes over the next couple of days to help crown a new champion!

Whichever of the remaining bears gets the title this year, they are all winners in their struggle for survival. Bears like Otis and 747 are so successful in part because of their great skill and savviness at catching fish. Ranger LaValle says of Otis and 747, "like many of our more dominant bears, [they have] learned that patience is key and to simply let the fish come to you. Do not expend calories trying to chase after them." Many of the younger and less successful bears haven't figured this out yet. Instead, they chase after the salmon as they swim by, running after them as they dart through the river and leap up and over its cascades. Most of the time, unfortunately for them, the big fish get away.

There is a good life lesson to be learned from big bears like Otis and 747, the ones that patiently stand in or by the river and snatch the fish that come to them instead of chasing after the salmon as they swim by. Too often, we are like the younger, less-savvy, much skinnier bears that waste their energy by frantically chasing after fish rather than let the fish come to them. We desire many things in life, some of which are good, life-giving things, but we often go about acquiring these in the wrong way. So often, we expend our energies on trying to control our circumstances, even though there is so much that is simply out of our control and will always remain elusive.

We even do this in our relationship with God. While God is beyond us and beyond our control, we try to chase after the blessings of God rather than learning to be content where we are and to let God's blessings come to us. We even try to force blessings from God, thinking that by doing good deeds or by offering some sacrifice, we can control the hand of the Creator. And we're disappointed if we do what's right and good -- even what's prescribed in our scriptures -- and walk away empty handed and unsatisfied.

But as the story of Job reminds us, and will remind us over the course of this month as we focus on lessons from Job in our Sunday morning services, God is not to be controlled, and good and bad alike will come to all of us, even those of us who are upright and blameless before God. When bad things happen to us, it

is not necessarily because we have sinned or otherwise earned badness. When good things happen to us, it is not necessarily because we have been faithful to God and earned God's blessings. Life would be so much easier and simpler if this were so, but it is not.

What we can do is stand where we are in the rushing river that is life, take the blessings of God when they come to us, chase not after those we think we can catch but are really beyond our grasp, and, with thanksgiving, be content with the grace we are given. This is the wisdom of the chunky champion bears, and this wisdom of long-suffering Job. May it be our wisdom this morning. Amen.