



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

**SERMON – 7TH EASTER
I PETER 4:12-19, 5:6-11
MAY 21, 2023**

“LIFE TOGETHER”

For those who might be wondering, I want to say at the outset this message contains no reference whatsoever to a song from the 1970's! Instead, I'm using a musical from the 1990's. The other night my family and I went to see "The Lion King." During intermission, my daughter and I got to talking about how lion's hunt – how, unlike other big cats of the African savannah, lions always hunt in groups – even if they are the biggest of all predators.

I told Johanna, *"There's got to be a sermon in there somewhere"* about cooperation and relying on others. The timing couldn't be better - today's lesson from I Peter says, *"be watchful, your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."* In one sense Peter is a little off base - lions don't roar when they hunt– that would be dumb on their part to announce to a herd of grazing, unsuspecting protein that they're on the way. Lions hunt by stealth using tall grass to hide themselves. Their coats help them blend in with their surroundings. They use their speed and agility.

The hunting party coordinate the attack, cutting off the escape routes of their prey. And once they catch something it's over rather quickly – strong jaws and sharp teeth make sure of that. Peter knew this much – lions are good at catching and devouring. But Peter employs lions on the prowl only as a metaphor – illustrating Satan, whose aim, Jesus said, is to kill, steal and destroy. What exactly Satan is, is not clear from the bible. What is clear is he offers nothing, he only takes. He has no life in him – Satan and the sin he conjures only consume.

And according to Peter, Satan's prey includes everyone last one of us. In his Large Catechism, Martin Luther said Satan *"tries every trick and does not stop until he finally wears us out, so that we either renounce our faith or throw up our hands and put up our feet, becoming indifferent or impatient."* Lions on the hunt wear their prey out and their primary tactic is to isolate. They don't attack herds – they select one, a stray or a weak one, a young or an old one. They're smart that way. Then they, as Luther observed, wear that one out.

When we're tired, we're not our best selves. For example, I've learned over the years not to discuss important matters with my wife or kids when it's the end of a long day and I'm tired. When I have, I've regretted it – I'm more prone to become irritable, defensive, accusatory, to shout, thinking volume will make up for what I lack in patience or perspective. When it was the kids it has been to their and my great benefit to have a wife who came come in and toned things down – I'm sure she'd say the same of me.

We need each other in order to resist sin and Satan, because sin hides itself in our surroundings, in our practices that depart from Christ and his word, and when it gets us it hangs on. As he concludes his great 1st Epistle, Peter, while not naming the church per se, testifies to the importance of the church. I need not repeat how Peter learned this firsthand when, isolated in the courtyard of the high priest, he denied Jesus three times.

You never see a solitary herbivore holding off lions for very long. If they have a chance, it's in groups, where they can distract the hunters – in unity with one another they defend each other by making the whole herd 'the hunted' – occasionally trampling the hunter. That's precisely what Peter is getting at in our lesson, and he says it like this...*humble yourselves*. In this entire portion of his letter the "you's" are all plural. Humble yourself is not simply an injunction to be an unassuming person – though pride is Satan's favorite sin. Humble yourself means submit yourselves to one another and recognize that you are something together you cannot be effectively apart – a resilient Christian. Pride elevates and separates – humility unites.

Living together in Christian community requires humility and humility's next of kin - patience. Look around and you will see someone in this room with whom you do or have differed or have had words. Yet in baptism, God made each of you a member of his church – of the gifts of baptism, the forgiveness of your personal sins, while surely important to God, may have been the easier thing for God to do. The harder was making you a member of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church and convincing you to remain one – getting you to see yourself as a child of the same heavenly father and worker in the kingdom of heaven, living together and growing in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God. The harder may not have been the gift of eternal life, but life together. But life together, if Peter is on to something, is how we quite literally survive.

Notice please, how Peter says we are to resist sin and the devil – not by going toe to toe with him, not by personally praying or giving more, though these bless, but by looking around at those who like you suffer trials – by looking at a fellow believer and realizing they too live in the crosshairs of sin and Satan – being for them what they in turn can be for you – someone to share that burden with, someone who can help you withstand it. A Christian's hope is in Jesus Christ alone. A Christian's strength is in numbers. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his great work "Life Together", said "*Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize, it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.*"

I have only a few more weeks to preach to you. As I said almost five months ago when I announced my retirement, I am thankful for the church, and those like you who have taught me about faith, love, and obedience to the will of God. In about a month's time, I'm going to "turn around" and face the same altar and listen to the same gospel you faithfully incline your heart to each week. I'll no longer be a 'hired hand', but I will be an eager listener. Yes, I'll listen *for* that noisy deceiver who barks that I'm next on his list, but I'll listen *to* the one who called me by name and to his eternal glory - who will himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish me together with you forever. AMEN