



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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4th Sunday of Lent

March 6, 2016

“Trapped”

(Psalm 91:1-4)

Rev. David K. Groth

“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’ Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feather, and under his wings you will find refuge” (Psalm 91:1-4).

COLLECT: Almighty God, our heavenly Father, Your mercies are new every morning; and though we deserve only punishment, You receive us as Your children and provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant that we may heartily acknowledge Your merciful goodness, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

A number of years ago, JoEllen, the church secretary at the time, came into my office and asked, “So what do you know about setting an owl free from a net?” “Not a thing.” She said the kindergarten class had gone out for recess and noticed a great-horned owl had somehow become entangled in one of our soccer nets. I went out to have a look; he wasn’t thrashing anymore but was utterly spent. If an owl can look sad and hopeless, he was looking sad and hopeless. We felt so bad for him. But what to do?

I told JoEllen to call every place she could think of that might be able to help: the humane society, raptor rescue agencies. Meanwhile, I went home to gather whatever equipment might be helpful . . . a large box, a blanket, safety glasses, my beekeeping gloves because of their thick leather. I decided to leave the smoker behind. It was warm outside, but I put on my thickest winter jacket. (If I owned a Kevlar vest I would have put that on too.) Back at church JoEllen explained she wasn’t able to get through to anyone; just a lot of answering machines. So it was up to us.

Rick Krueger happened to be here that morning, and he offered to help. We were, of course, expecting a fight and were a little leery of that beak and those long, sharp talons. But without much hesitation, Rick just walked right up with the blanket, covered it and gently held it down. The owl didn’t fight back.

Now it was my turn. With a pair of scissors I started cutting the net. He was so hopelessly entangled. The string was buried under the feathers, digging into his flesh. I cut and cut and cut; still the owl didn’t fight or even fidget,

which worried us both. Maybe it was too late. It did, however, give us opportunity for a close look at a magnificent creature of God: a beautiful face, big round greenish-gold eyes, the feathered horns. We have such a creative, thoughtful God.

Finally, when there was nothing left to cut, we decided to see if it could fly on its own. I stepped back; Rick released his grip on the bird and pulled the blanket back. The owl hopped onto the grass, unfolded his wings and flew up to the nearby willows. Clearly he was sore and tuckered out, but looked fine. An hour later, he was gone.

Have you ever been trapped like that owl, hopelessly entangled in something, unable to free yourself? Some, I know, feel trapped in a job that you despise. But you need the salary or the benefits and nothing else seems available nearby. You're trapped.

Some feel trapped in a relationship that's not satisfying. At first it was so much fun, thrilling even. Now . . . not so much. You've tried counseling, and it helped, a little, but you've since fallen back into the well-worn patterns and the deep malaise. You're trapped.

Maybe it's an addiction. At first, you could control it, but now it's controlling you. You've noticed you're breaking your own rules.

Or maybe it's a family member who's addicted. You've learned not to believe anything she says, only what she does, and what she does is keep going back to get another fix, and if feels there's nothing you can do but watch as she wastes her life and does great damage to others in the process. Trapped.

Or maybe somebody discovered you doing something very wrong. There's nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. You can't lie your way out of it; the evidence is incontestable. Trapped.

Or maybe it's your body, which you used to think was invincible, but now it seems to be falling apart. Because of the arthritis, you're less active, and because you're less

active, you're gaining weight, and because you're gaining weight, the arthritis is getting worse. Trapped.

Maybe it's guilt. You did something you really regret, something that deeply hurt another, and you so wish you could turn back the clock, but there are no "do-overs" . . . only forgiveness. You've been told you're forgiven, but the guilt keeps coming back. Trapped.

Sometimes I'll take a half baked sermon out for a test run with my shut-ins. They get the two minute version. (Don't even bother asking for it.) In any event they all felt trapped in one way or another. Trapped inside on a beautiful day. Trapped in their house because they can't drive. Trapped in Wisconsin because they cannot afford to travel. One elderly man who is still independent but caring full-time for his wife, when I asked if they've ever been trapped, he replied, "I feel trapped." He said it quickly and very quietly, so his wife wouldn't catch it.

Have you ever been trapped like that owl? Through the night you thrash trying to find a way out, but by the time the sun rises things have only become worse. The strings entangling you are taut, digging into your flesh. You wake up and you're already feel worn out and hopeless. You have no fight left. All you can do is wait for the next bad thing to happen.

Our text says "The Lord will deliver you from the snare of the fowler. He will cover you with his pinions (which are flight feathers), and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.

A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you."

Those who take refuge in the Lord are not exempt from dangers. Bad things happen to Christians. But in another way, we are utterly safe. Paul writes, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:31-39).

When my Aunt Betty learned she had cancer, she said, “For me it’s a win-win situation. If by means of surgery, radiation and chemotherapy, God gives me my health back, I win. If, by means of cancer I die, I win then too, for because of Jesus, heaven is my home.” One way or another, God always sets his people free. One way or another, God always delivers us from the fowler’s snare.

Remember how he freed his people trapped in slavery in Egypt? The ten plagues? And remember how they soon felt trapped again, with the Dead in front of them and the whole Egyptian army bearing down on them from behind? He led them through the sea, freeing them from that trap. Remember how they wandered in the desert. They thought they were going to die of hunger and thirst, but they didn’t. Those traps never came down on them. .

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego found themselves trapped in a blazing furnace. But because of God, they came out unscathed, without so much as their hair being singed (Dan. 3).

Remember how the Pharisees conspired against Jesus and tried to trap him in his words. They asked him questions for which there were no good answers, questions where if he came down on one side or the other, either way he’d be condemned. They asked him questions about paying taxes to Rome, questions about divorce, questions about stoning a woman they caught in adultery, questions about healing on the Sabbath. Everywhere he went, these pests followed along, testing him, questioning him, trying to entrap him. But with just a few short words he was able to walk away from their traps, leaving them bewildered and befuddled and frustrated. Luke 20 says, “And they were not able to trap him in what he said, but marveling at his answers they became silent” (v. 26).

Others might try to entrap us, but God never does. He’s in the business of setting us free the traps. For example, he helps us get out of the trap of addiction, especially when we give up on our own strength and surrender ourselves to him.

He's the one who helps you get out of the trap of sickness or suffering, by giving you a body that is programmed to heal itself, and by giving you medical professionals to help your body along.

Jesus is the one who went to the cross to set you free from the trap of sin and guilt. We are all tangled up in sin; the strings dig into our flesh. But he's the one whose forgiveness cuts that net into pieces and frees us. He's the one whose forgiveness allows us to start over again.

One day, each one of us will be entangled in the net of death. None of us gets a free pass from that. The Bible says all have sinned. And the Bible says the punishment for sin is death. But the Bible also teaches the free gift of God is salvation in Jesus Christ. Because Jesus died on a cross for the forgiveness of your sins, death can no more keep its grip on you than it could keep its grip on Jesus.

Remember how they tried to lock Jesus up in the tomb? They rolled a large stone in front of the entrance, and sealed it. They put guards there too to prevent any foolishness. But trying to keep Jesus in a tomb was like trying to keep the sun from rising.

In the same way, Jesus will free us from the fowler's snare, from the trap of sin and death. He cuts us free and enables us to unfold our wings and fly again.

One way or another, God is always setting his people free through his Son Jesus. One way or another, God will deliver you from the fowler's snare. Thanks be to God. Amen.

