

Series: Upstream

June 19, 2016

Title: Swimming With Bears

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Text: Acts 19:23-41

Running the Gauntlet

Brooks Camp, AK:

It's mid-summer on the Alaska coast and the salmon are running. By the thousands they have returned to the Brooks River to spawn. After years in the open ocean, they are now coming back to the stream where they were born to give life to the next generation of sockeyes.

And waiting for them are the bears. Katmai National Park has 2200 brown bears. These are impressive, top of the food chain, animals. An adult male can stand 9'8" tall and weigh as much as 1500 pounds. Their favorite food? Salmon, of course. Bears eat as many as 30 fish per day during the salmon run.

How do they catch them? Let me count the ways:

- Sit and wait
- Dash and grab
- Snorkeling
- Pirating
- Diving
- Begging

In short, whatever it takes.

For the sockeye salmon this means running the gauntlet of sitting, dashing, snorkeling, and diving bears. Daytime is better for the salmon because they can see the bears. Deep water gives them more room to maneuver. The lucky ones – and the smart ones – make it past the bears and continue upstream to fulfill their mission.

Ephesus, 52 A.D.

It was in the ancient city of Ephesus – located in what is now southern Turkey – that Paul made his greatest impact upon the pagan world. He brought the Good News about Jesus and His resurrection to this city, established a teaching ministry for some two years, and impacted the entire region with the Gospel. In many ways, these years in Ephesus were the high point of his life work and the fulfillment of his upstream journey.

But along the way he came face to face with the spiritual powers that ruled Ephesus and its people. Like the Alaskan brown bear, these forces guarded the spiritual and cultural river of Ephesus and the world around it. They weren't about to let these upstart Christians swim past them without a fight.

Luke tells us:

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Acts 19:24-27 NIV

A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. He called them together, along with workers in related trades, and said:

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"You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. [Slide 4] He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty."

Artemis:

The goddess Artemis was the heart and soul of ancient Ephesus. Her massive temple was one of the 7 wonders of the world. The ancient writer Pausanias informs us that the cult of Artemis was the most widely followed in the ancient world, with 33 worship sites from Spain to Syria. Artemis was said to answer prayer, she was acclaimed as Savior, and was said to have lordship over the supernatural powers, including demons. Her zodiac

necklace implied her power over fate and the stars. In a pagan society awash with gods and goddesses, Artemis was the uncontested Queen.

Paul's message struck at the very heart of the worship of pagan gods, including Artemis. It likewise struck at the very heart of the entire culture – its worship, its celebrations, even its economy.

If Paul's upstream journey to plant the Good News in the pagan world were to succeed, he would have to get past the bear-infested rapids of pagan Ephesus and its devotion to Artemis.

Much Ado about Nothing?

Uproar in Ephesus:

The Artemis Bear struck out at Paul and his followers through what seems to have been an impromptu street demonstration. When the tradesmen of Ephesus heard Demetrius' attack against Paul, they started a riot:

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Acts 19:28 NIV

When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

The crowd turned into a mob until Luke tells us "the whole city was in an uproar." (Acts 19:29) Here was no organized attack by the Temple of Artemis or its religious leaders. This was a grassroots protest turned into a near riot.

The mob grabbed two of Paul's companions and rushed into the city's theater. This amphitheater survives to this day. It holds 25,000 people, and was now filled with shouting, angry people, most of whom didn't have any idea why they were there in the first place!

Lesson: When cultures collide people get crazy! When our Christian faith collides with the non-Christian world around us, people can and will do all sorts of things without even thinking about what they are doing.

Where's Paul?

And here's where the story gets interesting. It turns out that Paul tried to get onstage to address the mob. Imagine: 25,000 confused people in one place with excellent acoustics. Paul must have thought that this was the supreme moment to announce the Good News.

Luke tells us that his own disciples would not let him go to the theater. Then Luke says:

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Acts 19:31 NIV

Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater.

These officials, or *asiarchs*, were priests of the imperial cult by which the emperor was worshiped as a god. Somehow, perhaps because of Paul's Roman citizenship, they knew Paul and intervened.

Much Ado about Nothing!

Luke tells us that the mob carried on its confused demonstration in defense of Artemis for hours. Finally, a high ranking city official came onstage to talk the crowd down. He reminded them that Ephesus was fine, Artemis was fine, nothing had been done to demote either the city or its goddess. The greater danger was that the mob would riot and bring down the wrath of Rome upon the city!

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Acts 19:40 NIV

"As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of what happened today. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it."

He concluded by reminding them that if they had any legal concerns, they could press charges through the normal channels. Then he sent them all home. Much ado about nothing. End of story.

Swimming with the Bears

How do you swim with bears?

How do you swim with bears? Very carefully.

A 15 pound sockeye salmon doesn't have a chance taking on a 1500 pound brown bear. The bear is going to win every time. If the salmon is going to swim or jump past the bear, it's going to have to find a way to avoid a direct confrontation. That's how you swim with bears.

This was a lesson that Paul had to learn on a dangerous day in Ephesus. Paul was never one to turn away from danger. He would have willingly died for his faith that day. But if he had walked into the theater that day, he would have never fulfilled the purpose of his upstream journey.

You see, Paul wasn't called by God to be a rabble-rouser. He was commissioned to go into pagan cities and stir up mob violence. Not every crowd was ready for the proclamation of the Good News about Jesus.

Paul had to learn to swim the bears that day. In fact, on a return trip to the region he declined visiting Ephesus. Instead, he sent others to meet with the Christians in the city. Why? Perhaps he was still *persona non grata* in the city.

Keeping the main thing the main thing:

Something much more important than preaching to 25,000 angry pagans happened that day in Ephesus. The very fact that Demetrius and his fellow tradesmen were upset in the first place tells us that God's Presence had destabilized the pagan culture. As Paul would write to these same Ephesians:

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Ephesians 3:10-11

[God's] intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In Ephesus, Paul and the other Christians had done just that: they had made known not just to their fellow Ephesians, but *to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms* that Jesus alone is Lord of the world. Their message alone had sent shivers through the spines of Artemis' most devoted

followers. Their mission was to bring people to Jesus and to establish His church in this most pagan city. That was the main thing.

Swimming with bears:

Like Paul, you and I are called at times to swim with the bears. We will sometimes encounter the overt hostility or irrational fears of the culture around us. There will be times when the mob will become incensed and go out looking for scapegoats. It will be tempting to wade into the confusion and defend ourselves or try to win the argument.

At those times it would be wise to remember the lesson Paul learned that day in Ephesus. Learn to swim with the bears. Swim around them; swim under them; don't swim into their paws or into their mouths!

Instead, let's make the main thing the main thing. We're here to stand as representatives of the God Who created all things. We're here to remind the dark forces that rule this world that Jesus is the world's one true Lord. The way that we do this is not by argument or confrontation. It is by becoming living examples of God's love. Only then will we succeed in our upstream journey.

That's why Paul wrote to the Ephesians:

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Ephesians 3:17b-19 NIV

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.