So, Pastor Kjell and Pastor Emily had a great idea for family camp this year . . . we would study the text for the Sunday following family camp (this Sunday) AT family camp, THEN we would bring family camp to Peace. We would study the text for this week and come up with some of the different worship elements and then help lead worship! Then, they asked me to preach. I excitedly told them I would!

Then, during planning, Pastor Emily and I actually looked at the text that was coming up for this Sunday. We both looked at each other and said . . . “so . . . how do we bring this to family camp?”

It was an interesting question. How do we bring beasts with horns and the voice of a dragon to camp . . . the same place that we are hanging out on the beach, building sandcastles, laughing while sitting in the sun on the giant raft on the “deep side” of the swimming area?

How to we bring up this beast who deceives the inhabitants of the earth . . . all while paddle boarding, singing camp songs, zooming around in a pontoon?

What about this same beast that forces others to into worship with threats of death . . . while savoring the foggy beauty of early morning quiet on the lake in canoes, walking in the forest, or playing one VERY long game of Scrabble with . . . what we actually now believe to be. . . more than three sets of letters . . . how does that relate to this terrible image of these who horrible creatures with manipulative power?

It is really easy to be at camp and forget the outside world. One of the reasons that we do family camp is to have a chance to get out of our routines and our suburban backyards, be with our families, be with each other as a church family, and spend time with God and nature. It is a time to reflect and refresh, to be quiet and relax.

We did all of that.

There is a lot of reflecting that we did as the adult women ventured out while all (well most) of the men and children were still asleep and explored the calm water of beautiful Wood Lake. We all had a ton of fun relaxing on the raft as a few of the kids took turns jumping and diving off the diving board . . . especially once Ian Bonow started in on that fun! We connected over games, sitting in the sun talking, walking around camp. We saw big kids fishing with little kids, parents taking their little ones out in the canoes and paddle boats . . . the fun . . . and slight embarrassment . . . as everyone cheered Annika Peterson and I on as we each attempted to stand on small child sized paddle boards, and the cheering that ensued as Kinzie and Eden each stood for the first time on the paddle boards.

We had a really great weekend.

However, while we all had a lot of fun . . . one of the main goals of family camp is to connect with God in ways that we do not necessarily do on a daily basis. The goal was to create not only deeper connections for the families and for the community . . . but also with God. We want families to be able to come together and explore the Bible together in a way that will bring richness to who we all are and how we interact with the world.

So how do we bring this story of the beast to family camp and help families connect deeper with their faith?

I think that the answer to that is in taking a little time to look at the text itself. The text makes it clear that the beasts are malicious and vile . . . on each of the seven heads, were blasphemies, characteristics were that of wild animals that could be quite scary and dangerous . . . there is evidence of violence. However, as something so horrible, it had a lot of power over many people.

Commentaries for this section of scripture suggests that the image of these beasts is something that is contrary or divergent from the image of the lamb, an image which evokes peace and vulnerability. The beasts have authority because as the text states, no one can actually fight the beast. The beast will kill all those against it. This is authority based on fear . . . manipulation . . . and corruption.

Now, everyone can relate to fear . . . manipulation . . . corruption . . .

If you perform a synonym search on corruption, you get words such as:

dishonesty, unscrupulousness, double-dealing, fraud, fraudulence, misconduct, crime, criminality, wrongdoing, immorality, depravity, vice, degeneracy, perversion, debauchery, dissoluteness, decadence, wickedness, evil, sin, sinfulness, ungodliness, rot . . .

And, as you begin to look through the definitions and synonyms of all of these words, the word that keeps coming up is rot.

What is rot? Decay, deterioration, corrosion . . . and corruption.

So now, we have this image of this beast. This beast who is controlling, manipulates, causes fear, is the opposite of the peace of God, and facilitates rot.

This is a theme that we knew we could talk about with the participants of family camp. Where is there corruption in your life? Where do you find manipulation or when are you tempted to manipulate others? What is corrosive to your family unit? What are you fearful of? What causes rot for you, your family, or community? When and how do you live in opposition to the peace and vulnerability of Jesus?

We knew that this was a theme that we could spend some time with.

Now, we did not actually read this text at family camp.

The first reading we used in our Bible Study was the same reading that was read here last Sunday morning . . .

Revelation 7:9-17 in which we learn about the great multitude from every nation coming into this wonderful scene of worship. We also learn that these are those who came out of the great ordeal. Their robes are now white and God is wiping their tears from their faces.

We also read and expertly acted out during our study . . .

Jonah 3:10-4:1-11, our first reading from today.

So, in this Jonah text, we have Jonah who is essentially . . . pouting. He is angry. He does not want the repentant inhabitants of Nineveh to receive the grace of God. Actually, he says that he would rather die than to see them forgiven.

God sends a bush to offer Jonah protection. Then, we get a lesson in compassion, when a worm comes to corrupt the bush. The choice of God’s mercy does not belong to Jonah . . . but to God.

What is interesting, to me, about this story is the image of the worm. I think that the decay or deterioration that it caused the bush is similar to the anger and hatred Jonah was showing toward those who were living in Nineveh.

Jonah was experiencing the rot and the corruption of these beasts.

SO! Where does this bring us? Where does it all connect?

We are talking about the beasts of corruption and manipulation and the corruption that caused Jonah to react poorly to God’s Grace toward those who he believed did not deserve it.

What did we talk about at family camp?

We talked about corruption in our own lives, the rot that enters into our families, and the decay that can eat away at our community. It all exists all around us. Like Jonah, sometimes we lack compassion. Sometimes, it is hard to feel like we are good enough or have enough or do enough. The sense of having to keep up with “The Jones’” . . . the temptation of getting what we want through manipulation . . . greed . . . imbalance and rushing through our lives and time we have with others.

However, at the end of it all, we have a God of Grace and mercy that is there to wipe away our every tear. A God that relates not to the image of a forceful and violent beast . . . but a God of the peace and vulnerability of a lamb.

That is not the end. We did one more thing. We created art projects. I adapted a really neat activity from a group of therapists in Australia and Africa called “The Tree of Life”. We each drew trees. On these trees, we placed words and each piece of the tree represents a different part of our lives.

From the roots – where our families come from, the solid trunk is our strengths and core values, the branches – our hopes and dreams, the leaves – those who are important, and the fruits – the gifts those people bring to us.

The goal was to create an image of family as something strong, something that offers protection and shelter. The deeper the roots run, the stronger the trunk and the branches, the healthier the tree and the more resilient to the harms that come its way. Sitting as individual families and listening to each other tell stories, name people and values . . . helps to create a sense of identity, support, and strength.

For me, I was surprised when my kids wanted to have their teachers and coaches in the leaves . . . those who inspire and support. It gave me some neat insight into their worlds and what is important to them. It also made me happy when Avy said that spending time together and travel were a couple of our core values. I really hope some of the other families had that same experience.

Then, at our morning worship we shared them. Then we had a forest of trees, protecting and sheltering each other. We are stronger together, we are stronger in community.

So, overall, what do we have? What is the message that we are bringing from family camp to Peace?

We exist in a world of corruption and rot. While we are susceptible and sometimes succumb to it, we exist in community with others, which gives us strength and support. But in the end, we have a God that is opposite of the beasts in the world that causes us pain and suffering. A God for who we are enough and a God that will be there to lovingly wipe every tear from our faces.