

Against All Odds

Ancient Paths

Here's a story I love and I think tells what we will be doing together over the news weeks as we begin a new series: "Against All Odds!" I think you could call this story "Against All Odds!" See what you think. This is a story author John Eldridge tells...

One of the most haunting experiences I have ever had as a man took place on an early summer day in Alaska. My family and I were sea kayaking with humpback whales in the Icy Strait, and we stopped on the shore of Chichagof Island for lunch. Our guide asked us if we wanted to go for a hike into the interior of the island, to a clearing where grizzlies were known to feed. We were all over that invitation.

After a twenty-minute walk through a spruce forest, we came into what appeared to be a broad, open meadow about four hundred yards across. Being midday, and hot, there were no bears to be seen. "They're sleeping now, through the afternoon. They'll be back tonight," he said. "C'mere — I want to show you something."

The meadow was actually more of a bog, a low-lying jungle of brushy groundcover about two feet high, barely supported underneath by another foot of soaked moss and peat. A very difficult place to walk. Our guide led us to a trail of what seemed to be massive footprints, with a stride of about two feet between them, pressed down into the bog and making a path through it.

"It's a marked trail," he said. A path created by the footprints of the bears. "This one is probably centuries old. For as long as the bears have been on this island, they've taken this path. The cubs follow their elders, putting their feet exactly where the older bears walk. That's how they learn to cross this place."

I began to walk in the marked trail, stepping into the firm, deep-worn places where bears had walked for centuries. I'm not sure how to describe the experience, but for some reason the word holy comes to mind. An ancient and fearful path through a wild and untamed place. I was following a proven way, laid down by those much stronger and far more prepared for this place than me. And though I knew I did not belong there, I was haunted by it, could have followed that path for a long, long time. It awakened some deep, ancient yearning in me.

Eldredge, J., "Fathered by God," Thomas Nelson 2009 p ix-x

"An ancient path through a fearful and untamed place."

I don't know about you, but I have found this last five months a huge challenge. It began with simply trying to figure out what it actually meant to be in lockdown when it was announced that we were, in fact, in lockdown! If I'm being really honest, one of the first things that got me was the thought of not being able to get a haircut. It seems silly now, but I actually woke up in the middle of the night one night, trying to figure out what I would do with my hair!

Other far more serious challenges became apparent. How would we get food now everyone was taking all the delivery slots? I began to worry about being able to find food like rice and bread. The shop shelves were bare. I began to be concerned about my work as a chaplain at East Surrey Hospital and the thought of visiting patients who were ill with the virus. I began to realise the risks for people far more involved than me on a day to day basis in hospitals and health care work. I became concerned about my mum, living on her own through the challenges of lockdown. How would she cope?

Then there was the realisation that work might well be affected. Like many other charities and businesses, Relate, where Lisa works, lost 90% of its income overnight. Would it survive? How would we manage? I watched, as, like many others, Lisa battled every minute of every day to figure a way through so that when, or if, lockdown ended, Relate was still functioning.

And then church! It suddenly became radically different to anything I'd known. Technology is great and has been great, if you understand it and know how to use it. I knew neither. It was a massively steep learning curve. How on earth do you do church if you can't gather? Like many, many people, I found pretty much everything I knew and understood turned upside down. And too, like many of you, I found myself working harder than ever trying to make life work.

It turns out, I wasn't alone.

The Office for National Statistics recorded that in late March this year, over 25 million adults were affected by high levels of anxiety as we entered lockdown. They found that the number of people reporting deep levels of concern and stress has more than doubled since late 2019. People were understandably concerned and worried about their jobs, their health, their finances and their families. The Covid pandemic has caused many to suffer from anxiety in the last 5 months.

But there is a sad truth that lies beyond the statistics of these last five months. And this is not to try to soften the impact of the anxiety many have experienced, and are still experiencing due to the pandemic – there are real concerns about health, finance and job security. But an article in the Independent in 2018 found that cases of stress and anxiety had soared in the decade to that point. According to the article, based on data from the NHS, there has been a 28% increase in hospital admissions for stress and anxiety in the last decade. According to one study, one in every three people is likely to feel stressed for at least an entire day, every week. The ONS reports a rise in cases of stress and anxiety at work too – a rise of 34% over the past decade. And the same study states that 44% of all work-related illness is connected to stress and anxiety. Ten years ago it was 35%. One founder of a company quoted by the Independent stated: "Stress and anxiety are now a problem that we – as individuals and as a country – can't afford to ignore."

The truth, it seems, is that we are becoming more anxious. So... how are you doing?

Anxiety is not always a bad thing. In fact, anxiety, or a level of anxiety, is often needed to help us be at our best. Think of it this way. Who hasn't been at least a little

anxious when going for an interview? In this kind of situation, being anxious can help us. In this kind of situation, being anxious can keep us alert, able to listen attentively to questions asked, help us to recall information that will be critical to answering the questions asked. A level of anxiety will help prevent us from coming across as complacent. Perhaps not a quality that will serve us well in an interview.

I get anxious every week, without fail, before every livestream or service, and especially before I preach. Sandra and I had the privilege of taking part in the service to celebrate the life of Monica Thornton this last week. I've done it many times before – speak at a funeral. But before I spoke my heart was pounding and my mind racing. I was quite anxious. But, in that context, it helps me to focus and say clearly what I hope will be words of comfort and encouragement.

There are many circumstances and situations where a level of anxiety helps us to be at our best. But there comes a point where a high level of anxiety can be unhelpful, destructive and even harmful. We all experience anxiety. For most of us, most of the time, that's fine. But for some of us, some of the time, and for some of us, most of the time, anxiety becomes unhelpful. Anxiety, perhaps best described, asks "what if?".

Maybe you recognise that. You find yourself asking: "what if?". What if I lose my job? What if this goes wrong? What if my health suffers? What if I don't have enough money? What if my children turn out differently to how I would like? At its worst, anxiety can dominate our thinking, affect our behaviour and cause our wellbeing to suffer.

And here's the challenge. I want you to be very wise about how you choose to hear what I am about to say. I realise that some of you will hear what I say and it will cause you to be anxious. That is not my intent, but it may happen, because you are already anxious. If that happens (and if I'm honest, I might find myself in that place if I was listening to me right now), I invite you to stay with me for a moment and hear me out!

The challenge, the truth, is that God does not intend for us to live in a heightened state of anxiety. Anxiety can be a gift that brings out the best in us, but God has no desire for us to live in a state of anxiety that becomes destructive or harmful. Now, my best guess, those of us who wrestle with this right now, may be thinking of ourselves as a failure. Let me say this to you. This is not about condemnation, it is absolutely not. This is about love. He loves you because He loves you... Jesus said that He had come to bring us life to the full. God's desire is that we live well – even in second choice worlds. God has our best interests at heart.

If you struggle with a high level of anxiety, there may be some work to do, but that is because you are greatly loved with a love that makes you beautiful. I want to say something else that's really important here. Sometimes, praying with a friend will help to calm our anxiety. Sometimes it will not. And for some of us the way to healing and wholeness will be through God's gift of a trained therapist, counsellor or psychologist, or through medication. The point, and it's an important one, is that we might need to seek the help of our GP and others – and we would do well to think of that help as a gift from a loving heavenly Father.

Now, truth be told, I'm a little anxious right now that some of you are thinking "Well Ian's lost the plot – this is supposed to be a sermon!" Well friends, the challenge remains, for all of us. In Luke 21:34, Jesus warns: "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down... with the anxieties of life!" How are you doing? Psalm 37:8 says "Do not fret, it only causes harm." (NKJV) Right in the middle of the sermon on the mount, Jesus says "don't worry about life!" We live in a world that gives us lots of cause to worry and be anxious.

The world is changing at breakneck speed. It's always changing. According to research, the world's environment and social order has changed more in the last 30 years than in the last 300! Life moves faster and faster despite all our modern technology. Many of us live under the pressure of simply making life work: jobs, health, family... with all the challenges and joys. And right now, we live in a time with a very uncertain future.

So here's the challenge... again. There is an ancient path that runs through the uncertainty of life in all its complexities. There is an ancient path that can help us, as followers of Jesus Christ, navigate a way through what is often treacherous ground. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul tells us to be anxious about nothing! Actually, he says: "Do not be anxious about anything!" (Philippians 4:6) It might have been more helpful if he'd said: "Be anxious only about the really big stuff." Or maybe: "Be anxious for less!" But he says: "Be anxious for nothing."

He writes it in the present tense. Huh? No... that's good! He doesn't mean be anxious about absolutely nothing. That's impossible. We're human. And we've noted that in the right circumstances and situations, the right level of anxiety can bring out the best in us. What Paul means the way he writes it, is don't live in a perpetual state of anxiety. Max Lucado interprets it this way: "Don't let anything in life leave you perpetually breathless and in angst."

The truth is that the presence of anxiety is unavoidable in life, but the prison of anxiety is optional. And there's the challenge. And the question becomes: How will we choose to live? How will you choose to live? Paul's words "be anxious for nothing" come in a very important context.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

Philippians 4:4-8

In these verses, there are four admonitions (things we are invited and encouraged to do) that lead to one fantastic promise. Here it is: “The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds.” (v7)

We’re going to spend the next weeks looking at these verses, to help us navigate a way through what is often an anxiety-inducing, treacherous world. We are going to talk this ancient path together.

Verse 4 encourages us to celebrate God’s goodness: we’ll explore that together.

Verse 6 invites us to ask for God’s help: we’ll explore that together.

Verse 6 exhorts us to give our concerns to God with thanksgiving: we’ll explore that together.

And verse 8 invites us to meditate on good things – so we’ll explore that together too.

It turns out that the Bible is Kindle’s most highlighted book, and Philippians 4:6-7 is the most highlighted passage. Maybe it’s highlighted in your Bible!

In Alaska, bears follow an ancient path together, a path laid down by those who have gone before them so they can navigate their way through treacherous ground. WE’re going to walk an ancient path together, a path laid down by the God who loves you because He loves you... And the God who has your best interests at heart. And who loves you with a love that makes you beautiful. I’m wondering if what we’re doing as we walk this ancient path together is something like this.

The Keeper of the stream

There once was a town high in the Alps that straddled the banks of a beautiful stream. The stream was fed by springs that were old as the earth and deep as the sea.

The water was clear like crystal. Children laughed and played beside it; swans and geese swam on it. You could see the rocks and the sand and the rainbow trout that swarmed at the bottom of the stream.

High in the hills, far beyond anyone’s sight, lived an old man who served as Keeper of the Springs. He had been hired so long ago that now no one could remember a time when he wasn’t there. He would travel from one spring to another in the hills, removing branches or fallen leaves or debris that might pollute the water. But his work was unseen.

One year the town council decided they had better things to do with their money. No one supervised the old man anyway. They had roads to repair and taxes to collect and services to offer, and giving money to an unseen stream-cleaner had become a luxury they could no longer afford.

So the old man left his post. High in the mountains, the springs went untended; twigs and branches and worse muddied the liquid flow. Mud and silt compacted the creek bed; farm wastes turned parts of the stream into stagnant bogs.

For a time no one in the village noticed. But after a while, the water was not the same. It began to look brackish. The swans flew away to live elsewhere. The water no longer had a crisp scent that drew children to play by it. Some people in the town began to grow ill. All noticed the loss of sparkling beauty that used to flow between the banks of the streams that fed the town. The life of the village depended on the stream, and the life of the stream depended on the keeper.

The city council reconvened, the money was found, the old man was rehired. After yet another time, the springs were cleaned, the stream was pure, children played again on its banks, illness was replaced by health, the swans came home, and the village came back to life.

The life of a village depended on the health of the stream.

The stream is your soul. And you are the keeper.

1 Ortberg J, "Soul Keeping," Zondervan 2014 page 13.

It may feel like a challenge, but let's walk this ancient path together, so that against all odds, we can live as God intended.