



## **Demons And Tigers And Bears, Oh My!**

A sermon preached by the Rev. Susan Russell

February 8, 2009

I grew up on “The Wizard of Oz.” Back before TIVO or VCRs we were – believe it or not – restricted to watching what came on television WHEN it came *on* television ... and the annual airing of the saga of the Friends of Dorothy and their adventures down the Yellow Brick Road was a MUCH anticipated event in our house. Popcorn was popped. Seats were negotiated. And I even made sure I put my own little chair on the landing of the stairs around the corner from the living room so when the REALLY scary part came – the part with the flying monkeys – I could duck out of sight and sit that part out.

Of course, I knew the end of the story. I don’t ever remember NOT knowing the end of the story. Good wins, evil loses. Dorothy and her friends had all the love, brains and courage they needed all along. And in the end they triumphed because they didn’t let their fears of “Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh MY!” keep them from traveling down that yellow brick road.

In this morning’s gospel we hear about another band of friends out on a journey – not down the yellow brick road, but throughout Galilee on a road that didn’t lead to the Emerald *proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.*

The message he proclaimed – they proclaimed – was the same everywhere they went. It was a variation on what Ed has called “Jesus’ Inaugural Address” and others have called “The Year of the Lord’s Favor.” Freedom to the captive. Sight to the blind. Healing to the sick. Liberation to the oppressed. Good news to all.

Yes, they ran into their share of what I think of as the “Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh MY!” folks – the ones who said, “Who are you to speak with such authority? What are you doing breaking the rules by healing on the Sabbath? And look who he’s eating with! Outcasts and Gentiles and Sinners, Oh my!”

The Jesus they followed around Galilee in the 1<sup>st</sup> century is the same one we follow in the 21<sup>st</sup>. The message they proclaimed is the same one we proclaim. And the challenges they faced – the demons they cast out – are some of the same challenges and demons we continue to face today. And right smack at the head of the line is the demon of fear. And that’s where “JESUS SAVES!” comes into the conversation. Jesus came to save us, all right, but not from some judgmental, critical parent God who’s just waiting for us to run afoul of some creed or dogma or doctrine so He – pronoun used advisedly – can cast us into outer darkness or that ever popular destination location: The Lake of Fire.

What Jesus saves us from is the demon of fear. In penetrating the boundary between life and death Jesus assures us that the crossing over at the end of this earthly life is to something very real. With that assurance, Jesus saves us from the fear of death that is such an existential fear that it can paralyze us into trying to control the bits of life we can wrap our hands around rather than letting go to receive the abundance of life God would have us receive. His resurrection tells us that we need not live our life in fear of that crossing over and sets us free ... and free from fear we ARE liberated to embrace the abundant life that God has made known to us in Jesus. Jesus saves us from worrying so much about getting to heaven that we're too paralyzed to get busy helping to bring heaven to earth.

And I think there isn't a single solitary one of us who doesn't know exactly what it feels like to be paralyzed by fear.

It was 1994. I was half way through seminary and I was drowning – and not just in Old Testament reading and Greek verb quizzes. In addition to doing graduate school academic work and discerning vocation in a parish context, I had two boys in grade school – with all the attendant laundry and homework and soccer practice challenges – and a husband whose career as a financial executive had become collateral damage of the Savings & Loan crisis. While it pales in comparison to the current economic meltdown, I remember what it felt like to sit at the kitchen table having to decide, “What shall we do this month: feed the kids or insure them?”

In the middle of all this I found myself at the spring conference hosted by the Diocese of Los Angeles Episcopal Church Women where the keynote speaker was a bishop from Massachusetts.

Her name was Barbara Clementine Harris and her election as the first woman bishop in the Anglican Communion in 1988 had, according to the “Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh My!” folks (stop me if you've heard this one before!) irreparably rent the fabric of the Anglican Communion and abandoned the faith received from the apostles. Anyway, it was my first exposure to Bishop Harris and she gave a keynote address that knocked our socks off!

It was filled with humor and hope and a palpable sense of the transformative power of God's love using her and her witness to call this church and communion out of fear and out of the woods. Hearing her story of overcoming obstacles and the consistent gift of God's grace and empowerment throughout her life gave me hope that maybe – just maybe – Julian of Norwich was right and that ... somehow, in spite of lots of evidence to the contrary ... all would be well indeed.

And because God is good -- (all the time!) -- I was blessed with the distinct privilege of being seated next to Bishop Harris when we all settled into the cocktail lounge for a nightcap. (*And if you happen not to come from a tradition that celebrates God's presence and power in all things – including cocktail hour – then welcome to the Episcopal Church!*)

It took all the courage I could muster – as a lowly seminarian and all – to actually speak to the good bishop ... but I managed to stammer out some words about how much her

words had meant to me and how much I'd needed the hope and encouragement she had offered.

And Barbara Harris – the first woman bishop in the Anglican Communion whose election marked the end of the church as we know it for some and the beginning of the church as it would become for others – reached out and laid her hand on top of mine and looked into my eyes and said: “My dear, all you need to know is that the power behind you is greater than any of the challenges ahead of you. And when you're kneeling on the floor of your cathedral and your bishop is putting his hands on your head and making you a priest in the Church of God, you remember that the power that brought you to that day will carry you through every challenge you will face and that there is nothing you and God can't accomplish together.”

And I felt like I'd already been ordained. In the cocktail lounge in the Red Lion Inn in Ontario, California. And when I actually *was* ordained – in 1996 – I could hear her words in my ears as clearly as if she'd been there in the church with us that day.

I tell what is essentially a personal story this morning because I believe it has both pastoral and prophetic implications for us here at All Saints Church. Just as the words of encouragement from a bishop gave a seminarian what she needed that day to “keep on keepin' on” each and every one of us has the power to speak words of hope – of encouragement – of empowerment to each other during these times of challenge in our church, in our community and in our communion.

We're pretty good here at All Saints Church about speaking truth to power. And we don't ever want to lose our ability to do that. But today I want to challenge us to “try on” ALSO speaking hope to fear. You do not have to be a bishop to speak hope to fear – you don't even have to be in a cocktail lounge. There are opportunities everywhere to speak hope to the fear that seems to dominate the discourse.

This week alone we heard former Vice President Dick Cheney offering not-so-veiled threats that “the terrorists” are more likely to attack now that the lily livered Democrats are in office. The Anglican Primates warned from their meeting in Alexandria, Egypt that unless we exercise what they're calling “gracious restraint” and comply with those who would have us discriminate against the gay and lesbian faithful the Anglican Communion as we know it may not be long for this world. And the economists are all over the map – my Blackberry may just stroke out trying to keep up with all the “breaking news” alerts filled with dire and contradictory economic forecasts, updates and bulletins.

Make no mistake about it – there's a lot to be concerned about ... to be worried about ... to be sad about ... and we bring it all with us this morning as we gather here at All Saints Church.

In the weekly email I get from my congressional representative, Adam Schiff, the poll question this week was “How is the economic downturn affecting you and your family?” Over 10% responded, “Someone in my family has lost their job.” If the category had been “Someone in my parish family has lost their job” our response this morning would be 100%.

For we are all on this journey together – and whoever we are and wherever we find ourselves on that journey today we share this Good News According to Barbara Harris:

The power behind us *is* greater than the challenges ahead of us. And when we remember that we will remember that we – like Dorothy and her friends – already have enough love, enough brains and enough courage to travel the road WE have been given to trod. We have everything we need to speak both truth to power AND hope to fear ... and most of all we have each other ... to share the highs and the lows and everything in between.

And so I want to close this morning with these words of wisdom *and* hope for that journey – words from Howard Thurman in a poem entitled “The Moments of High Resolve”:

*Despite the dullness and barrenness of the days that pass,  
if I search with due diligence,  
I can always find a deposit left by some former radiance.  
But I had forgotten.  
At the time it was full-orbed, glorious, and resplendent.  
I was sure that I would never forget.  
In the moment of its fullness,  
I was sure it would illumine my path for all the rest of my journey.  
I had forgotten how easy it is to forget.  
There was no intent to betray what seemed so sure at the time.  
My response was whole, clean, authentic.  
But little by little, there crept into my life the dust and grit of the journey.  
Details, lower-level demands, all kinds of cross currents--  
nothing momentous, nothing overwhelming, nothing flagrant--- just wear and tear.  
If there had been some direct challenge-- a clear cut issue--  
I would have fought it to the end, and beyond.  
In the quietness of this place,  
surrounded by the all-pervading Presence of God, my heart whispers:  
Keep fresh before me the moments of my High Resolve,  
that in fair weather or foul, in good times or in tempests,  
in the days when the darkness and the foe are nameless or familiar,  
I may not forget that to which my life is committed.  
Keep fresh before me  
The moments of high resolve.*

And let the people say, Amen.