

## Sermon at St. John's, September 2, 2007

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From the Letter to the Hebrews:

"We can say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper: I will not be afraid.  
What can anyone do to me?'"

"Fear not." This is one of the major themes of both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament. And it was the last pope's missionary message to much of the world: "Be not afraid."

Fear can grip and cripple us - as individuals, as a society, and as a world population. The irony is that fear can also be the spark that produces life-saving breakthroughs, as in medical research, in engineering, and, hopefully, in ecology.

Fear can even be regarded as a virtue, as in the Jewish affirmation: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" - where fear is understood not as cowering and loss of nerve, but as wonder and insight.

"The Lord is my helper: I will not be afraid." This immediately recalls for so many of us the opening lines of the 23rd psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." The wording is slightly different, but the message seems the same, especially when we include the later lines: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

But what about the words in the Letter to the Hebrews that follow "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid" ? How do we hear and react to the declaration: "What can anyone do to me?"

Twice in my lifetime our country has been directly attacked - at Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7th, 1941, and in New York and Washington on the day we call 9/11. In both cases Americans felt the horror of what some one could do to us. And with that horror came fear.

When we as a national people are threatened from without, I'm not so sure we hold up all that well. Is it because we've lived under the illusion of being invulnerable due to the protection of two massive oceans? Being shocked out of that illusion, we can

over-react. The shame of incarcerating Japanese-American citizens here during World War II still haunts us. The sad truth is that this draconian measure was ordered, if not conceived, by the same leader who, a decade before, had bravely told us that, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself."

In these past years since 9/11/2001, we have been told again and again that we must fear. That fear is essential to our survival as a nation. And, in the name of fear, we as a people have allowed ourselves to become engaged in military and civilian policies and actions we now seriously question, and which leave many deeply troubled. We as a people are beginning to see why we should fear "fear itself."

But enough of focusing on fear. We're here to worship in a Christian church. And we all deserve an answer to the question: Does our Christian faith offer any real challenge to fear? Any real challenge? Other than telling us, in that old stand-by phrase, to "Trust in the Lord"?

Yes, our faith does. And no one expresses this challenge better than John Dominic Crossan in his book *God and Empire* to which Susan referred in her sermon last week. He contrasts what he sees as "the traditional policy of all civilizations", which inevitably is built on fear, to what Jesus called "the kingdom of God." Civilization, from the earliest days, has valued peace. In Jesus' day it was the famous *Pax Romana*. But...! The way empires have established peace, has been through the imposition of power. And that promotes fear. Could that be any more clear than in Iraq today?

Crossan calls this way "First victory, then peace." Or, "Peace through victory." Winning is most important. It must come first!

Jesus, in his teaching and in his life and death, presented a different way. His way was to affirm and embody justice. For Jesus it was, "First justice, then peace." Or, "Peace through justice."

To understand Jesus' way, embodied in his actions, we must erase from our minds any images we might have of justice primarily as a courtroom, judge and jury affair. Jesus understood justice as establishing the opportunity for individual and collective human dignity. And this is faith's challenge to fear. Reaching the hearts and minds of the people. We heard that proclaimed back in the Vietnam war, and we've heard that proclaimed in our involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. There's everything

right with that goal. It's vision is the spread of justice. But it so easily loses its priority to the drive of imposing power - and winning!

Consider this: Striving to overcome poverty and disease in the world is a non-violent, effective way to help free others from the awful fear these conditions impose. And, to the degree that persons are freed from fear of their own condition, the rest of the world has much less reason to fear them, to fear the desperate acts that desperate people often take.

Moreover, in trying to alleviate the fear that unjust conditions inflict on others, we lose our over-preoccupation with our own fear. By taking the offense - a non-violent and effective offense - we avoid becoming mired down in a perpetual frantic, self-defeating defense.

As I reached this point in the development of this sermon, I received the kind of help that really helps from my wife. She listened to me, then asked if I'd read the current edition of *Episcopal Life*. Seeing my blank expression, she went and retrieved it from the pile where I'd tossed it on returning from our vacation. The whole edition is dedicated to two extraordinary programs: *The Millennium Development Goals*, and a movement entitled - *The One campaign*.

*The Millennium Development Goals*, or MDGs for short, is a world wide United Nations program whose aim is to lift millions of people out of extreme poverty and hunger by the year 2015. Other goals include universal primary education; the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women; and combating HIV/AIDS and other diseases. Virtually all the world's countries have pledged their support. So far only five donor nations are fulfilling their commitments. We're not among them.

The *One* campaign is a movement of Americans committed to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. This movement recently launched a One Vote '08 initiative here in Washington, with the purpose of mobilizing citizens to engage presidential candidates to "make the fight against global poverty and disease a key foreign policy and security issue at the 2008 ballot box." As the *One Vote '08* tagline reads: "We're not asking for your money. We're asking for your voice."

You can find out how to learn more about these two programs, and how one might become involved in them, in this week's *Crossroads*. Although I believe that if I didn't get involved myself I'd be something of a hypocrite, my intent here is not to try to sign you up. What I am trying to do is point you to something concrete that is a faith

inspired way to help overcome fear in the world and in ourselves. The alternative is to rely solely on the long tried but unsure policy of "First victory, then peace." At present, this policy alone seems to promote more fear, not less.

Jesus believed we could do better. He knew that fear, human as it is, finally robs us of our humanity if we succumb to it. His way was to engage himself fully in diminishing fear wherever he encountered it.

To engage ourselves in diminishing fear wherever we encounter it - is there a more worthy goal for you and me, as individuals and as a congregation?  
To engage ourselves in diminishing fear wherever we encounter it - is there a more loving and faithful goal? Amen.