

Sermon: “The Wolf at the Door”

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You’ve got dragons. I know you do. A couple of them tagged along with me to church today. Raise your hand if you brought one or more of them here with you this morning. I hope you did. Because church is an excellent place to bring them. We welcome dragons here. Dragons belong here.

There’s a BIG old dragon that’s trailing around behind us these days – peeking out behind the gas pump, lurking in the frozen food aisle, eyeing us as we send in that mortgage payment or rent check... Breathing fire on our 401Ks and threatening to incinerate them. As our children’s story said, the worst thing you can do with a dragon is pretend it’s not there. That’s just exhausting... and it doesn’t make it go away. Talking about it, on the other hand, can help. Facing our individual and collective anxieties about the financial crisis we’re in is tough. It’s frightening. But here’s the thing: We’re all in this together.

I’m not even going to try to talk about how we got into this mess, or even how we’ll get out of it. It’s way beyond me. I do know that we will get out of it... sometime, somehow. And I do know that, in the meantime, we’ll rediscover strengths we may have forgotten we had. That we’ll do whatever we have to do, with as good style and grace as we can summon. I do know that every living system seeks equilibrium and the world economy is no exception. We are out of economic balance, but we will right ourselves in time. The question that concerns me is how we will behave, how we will stay emotionally and ethically and socially and spiritually balanced until that time.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, under rather similar circumstances, that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. Now, I’m a big fan of FDR, but I don’t think he was being quite straight with the American people when we said that. There was a lot more to fear than fear. There was unemployment, hunger, breadlines, homelessness... But he also had a point. Fear does make us do crazy things and make unwise choices and treat others badly and generally makes us more miserable than we need to be. It’s much better to take a good hard look at the dragon, get to know it, even try to befriend it, or at least tame it.

Now, forgive me if I switch animal metaphors at this point. The title of this sermon is, after all, the wolf at the door – that proverbial image of poverty, of serious, painful want that waits just outside when during lean times.

We hear a lot these days about who let the wolf out... Those foolish folks who committed to mortgages they couldn’t keep up with; those greedy lenders who exploited our hopes and dreams of home ownership; bad policies, uncontrolled and self-indulgent consumerism, a general lack of self-discipline. But really, at this point, what difference does it make who let the wolf out? In fact, scapegoating is one of the dangers, one of those spiritual and social costs of economic crisis that we can simply refuse to pay. Looking for someone to blame divides us when we most need to be united. It’s an

ultimately fruitless game that quickly becomes very ugly. This is the time to practice compassion for one another – those in our little circle and those outside it. Suffering – and the fear of suffering – is a universal human experience. This is the time to remember that we truly are all in this together.

Barring the door, pushing the dresser up against the front door, is also not going to keep the wolf out. Along with scapegoating, another danger we may fall into when we are in economic distress is the tendency to isolate ourselves. In this country, as in most of the world, the amount of wealth we have is closely, if dubiously, linked to our status and identity – to our very worth as a human being. Poverty, or the threat of it, is a shameful thing to many of us – even those of us who know better. Individuals and communities alike – perhaps even nations -- tend to lose their moral center in isolation. Now, more than ever, we must resist becoming self-involved and mistrustful. We are likely to ignore the reality that others are suffering far worse than we and need our help.

It is exactly at such times that we need each other. We need to break old taboos about talking about money, and taboos about asking for help and support. Families that hide their need add to the stress they are under when they isolate themselves from friends and relatives. And families in isolation are prone to self-destruct. Our challenge in these tough times is to reconsider the standards by which we judge the worth of others – and of ourselves -- and to resist the learned and often unquestioned equating of human worth with financial worth.

Yelling through the keyhole at the wolf won't make it go away either; nor will waving a shotgun at it through the window. Fear and frustration and helplessness are a toxic mix of ingredients that produce a poisonous potion: anger, intolerance, even violence and rage. Taking all of this personally – thinking that the wolf has singled us out to terrorize out of some malevolent desire to hurt us or as retribution for our moral failings or financial naiveté is not only unhelpful – it's untrue.

Hiding under the bedcovers? Not going to help. Depression and even despair may cause us to want to do just that, but that's another very real danger that is a byproduct of economic depression. And the wolf will just seem to get larger and toothier with every passing day.

Giving in to an understandable feeling of powerlessness won't help us, either. Refusing to do what we can to help ourselves and others – especially others – is a kind of helplessness that withers the soul – the wellspring of compassion and, ultimately, of hope. This may be especially difficult for people of relative privilege and power – people like the American middle class; people who are used to feeling a degree of control over what happens to them. But our inability to control the impersonal forces of the economy does not mean that we can control nothing. This is no time to lose sight of vision – the vision of who we want to be: people of generosity and caring, people who don't run from responsibility or commitment. People whose lives embody our principles.

With the help of ones we trust, ones such as the friends and potential friends right here in this room – we can discern which things we can control and which we simply must accept and make the best of.

Anxiety is lessened when we take action, no matter how small. And anxiety is lessened when we have a plan. A plan that may require compromises – maybe painful compromises – but that does not compromise our core beliefs and values and sense of self.

As a congregation, we may be called to stretch ourselves to better care for those among us and to better serve the larger community. I am not one who believes that suffering makes us wiser or better people. When I hear someone say, “Suffering makes you stronger,” I add under my breath, “Yeah, sometimes, and sometimes it just leave you really twisted and bitter.” Suffering doesn’t necessarily bring us closer to God. Suffering, in my opinion, is something to be avoided whenever possible.

That being said, when it can’t be avoided, we can, if we keep our wits about us, make careful and conscious choices about how we will respond to it. Who knows, this congregation may discover new ways to serve: a free breakfast program, or support groups for the unemployed, or childcare for parents working the night shift. Who knows? We may choose to become the beacon of hope we have always said we want to be. In the face of helplessness, we may choose to claim our power – our power to serve and to save.

One thing I’m sure of: With humor, love, gentleness with ourselves, with loved ones and with strangers; with fearless honesty, with vision and faith in the ultimate dependability and goodness of life, we will survive this crisis. Our church will continue to offer companionship and spiritual nurture and support.

You are not alone, as long as this community exists. . It may not be easy. For some of us, it will most certainly not be easy and, for some of us, times are already hard. But we are in this together. We are all in this together... And together, we will come through this.

So what to do when we hear that wolf snuffling around our front door? Open the door and let him in. Give him a warm fire to sleep by and a big bowl of wolf chow. If he’s going to be there anyway, we’d better make his acquaintance and learn to live with him. He may be a bit smelly and not entirely housebroken, but he has his points. He’s certainly less scary in the house where we can keep an eye on him. He might even grow on us. Not that we won’t be happy to see him leave... But in the meantime, if he must be part of our lives, we can tame him just a bit and learn to make accommodations.

So, dear fellow wolf-tamers, let us be brave, and hopeful, and kind to one another. Let us remember that our worth lies deep within us; that is cannot be measured in dollars and cents. Let us be faithful to our vision, to our ideals, to each other, and to the life we share with all beings – to the interdependent web which has never more apparent than at

this time in history. Let us come though this radiant with compassion and hope. Let us come through this shining!

Amen