

Be strong and courageous
Bishop John Palmer Croneberger
Assistant Bishop, Diocese of Bethlehem
Sermon at the Chrism Mass
Cathedral Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem
March 13, 2008



Be strong and courageous!

Only be strong and very courageous!

I hereby command you: be strong and courageous! (Joshua 1:607, 9)

I can hear Joshua saying: “O.K. O.K., I got it! Is it going to be like this until we get to the Promised Land?”

This is the word of the Lord that called to Joshua ... and, on this day, to each of us; to the laity, whose lives may also be ordered in Christ as you seek to live into a ministry of servanthood to which you have been called through your baptism, and especially on this day to those whose ordered lives are being lived out as deacons, priests, and bishops.

Be strong and courageous!

Paul's word to the beleaguered Corinthians is: "Since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart."

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When Kevin Martin was at the College of Preachers, he wrote these words about preaching: "*People may admire a preacher for a strength, but they relate to a preacher in his/her vulnerability. Most preaching lacks authenticity, because we preachers are afraid. We are afraid to be open; afraid to risk ourselves; afraid to show our weaknesses; and, most of all, afraid to be 'found out!'*"

Well, along the way to being 'found out,' I believe I have made some progress finding out for myself who this person on the journey really is, and who this God might be that has indeed such a delicious sense of humor to call me on such a journey, a journey of ordination that began on June 15, 1963, in this cathedral as a transitional deacon; to the priesthood, On March 7, 1964, and the episcopate, on Nov. 21, 1998.

The 44 years that have followed this first ordination have in part been a quest for the historical Jack (at times the hysterical Jack) ... and ... unbeknown to me at the start, has been a long, painful and life-giving journey into the presence of the living Christ.

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As a young, single priest in the early 60's, I came into the world of ordination equipped with a big, old ten-room rectory, a full-time cash stipend of \$3,600 annually, and a burning zeal to win the world to Christ ... bringing the truth which only I could grasp, to those poor, unenlightened souls in the area around Scranton. I wrote burial customaries, telling people who had spent their lives learning how to live and die, how wrong they were, and how they had to do it my way ... with not a shred of sensitivity to the culture about me ... never once able to come to terms with the simple truth that, at the age of 24, I was scared, and not adequately-equipped to be the spiritual leader of a community of faith.

I met with the women's Guild. When I learned of their clam chowder, welsh cookies, and rummage sales, leaving no room for a prayer and bible study group ... I called them prostitutes ... selling themselves to keep their doors open. I simply wasn't able to see that beautiful band of women, all 60 + as devoted to their church, with a need for a place to worship, and willing to work so hard to keep it alive. Those and other wondrous examples of my early leadership give credence to the existence and power of the Holy Spirit which continues to sustain the Church ... oft-times in spite of us.

One bright, early moment, I was to meet and marry a beautiful woman who knows me best and loves me anyway, a widow with three small children. (I went to see Bishop

Warnecke, told him I had to get married, I was going to be a father ... and discovered my Bishop didn't have a great sense of humor!)

It did enable me to fill a large rectory, and almost doubled the size of the Sunday school. Most of all, it filled some of the emptiness within me.

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The journey continued. I found myself getting busier and busier.

Starting a new mission in Moscow, building a new church, adding two more children, serving on every conceivable diocesan committee: diocesan council, the planning group, a training consultant. I was filled with all the best of the Human Potential movement: T Groups, Labs, and a host of training skills which at the time we were certain would usher in the reign of God, Evangelism committees lamenting the fact that our evangelism strategy was described as rowing our boat out into the middle of the lake and sitting still, promising that any fish that jumped into our boat we would clean!

I became a deputy to three General Conventions: the change in the marriage canons, the approval of the ordination of women, and the "new" Prayer Book. Busy, successful, a priest, faithful to his ordination vows, concerned, committed: to the confrontation of injustice in the world about me, marching, picketing, protesting, preaching, culminating in a reading of the Beatitudes as the Gospel at a Eucharist in the Grand Concourse of the Pentagon, and being arrested and carried away by two rather large security guards on that sunny June day in the early 70's, taken to appear before the magistrate in Alexandria, (who happened to be the senior warden of a local Episcopal Church ... and very, very angry with us!) The charge, by the way, was "Making a loud and unusual noise."

It was about this time when some introspection helped me to see myself as a pretty good humanist; so I began a painful and joyful journey back to the center, and a new and personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

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What more could one do or be as a priest -- God's in Heaven, all's right with my priesthood! Time for a move: to New Jersey? ... to New Jersey. Some guy by the name of Spong was getting a lot of attention (even in 1980) and it seemed like the right place to be, for a time. What does one do when arriving at a new parish? You do what you know how to do. You crank up the parish (just waiting for the crank to arrive!). You get back on the diocesan council, the planning and finance groups. You jump in, you give what you have to give, and good things happen, and people are pleased, and I feel blessed.

And then, one day, the world seems to become one sharp stick that pokes you right in the

eye. A son, 18, quietly decides he isn't needed anymore, leaves a suicide note in his room and sets out to carry out those plans. As life sometimes has it, our son came home. We three – father, son and mother – cried and talked and hugged and cried again, and went for help.

My son is a writer; it is his best means of communication. Among many others, these are two samples of his poetry, which I saw for the first time that night:

Father?

Who is that man?
The one who comes into my house each night to eat,
Then leaves again for somewhere better.

Who is that man?
The one who loves us yet leaves us for another,
The one who spends his life with others,
Knowing we'll always be home; waiting.

Who is that man?
The one who counsels and preaches,
Advises and teaches, yet never realizes
He's needed most at home.

Who is that man?
The one who calls me "son" and buys me food,
Who clothes me and shelters me, and leaves me ... alone.

Who is that man? Where is that man?
He's needed so, and yet he's gone.
Away from here, away from me.

I don't know him. Did I ever?

Yes, I remember.
Pancakes each Saturday at twelve when he rose.
A drive in the car on Sunday after prayer
(we never knew where)

Yes, I remember.
Who was that man? He was my father?
Who is that man? He's just another.

"Son"

Pride and Promises

Father and son;
Such a traditional pair.
Through the years they
Experience everything; together.

And yet my father and his son,

We've experienced life in a
Different way: Apart.

Day after day we travel to our
Separate destinations – together...
In silence.
Night after night we don't have
The chance to hug or share a smile.

In my bed, I lay awake
As my father comes in from
A long day of work.
The T.V. is on and he claims
His time with the box.

Tomorrow's another day,
Another chance.
Maybe there won't be a meeting,
Or a counseling session.
Maybe tomorrow night isn't the
Night for the vestry, or the budget
Committee, or the planning board.

Maybe there won't be a movie on –
He's interested in, or maybe his
Favorite show has been cancelled....
Maybe the T.V. will break.

It's alright though Dad;
Tears will dry,
And days will pass.
And maybe someday
When everyone in the world is cared for;
No one else needs you
As badly as I do,
Maybe then I can introduce
Myself to you.

Until then dad, I'll make you proud.
And you'll make me promises.
8-20-83

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What did I do? I made serious revisions to my life schedule, including a critical look at diocesan and parish commitments. Ever so slowly, Tim and I began to work at a father-son relationship with some substance. We have, I hope, miles to go before we sleep; but with lots of help and support from others along the way, we are in a very healthy place as our conversations and time together deepen.

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In 1986 I faced the task of replacing an assistant, a full-time secretary, a full-time sexton, and an organist-choirmaster within the space of three months. Some of those changes were very stressful. I completed that work, exhausted, but hopeful for the future, excited about the new team.

I left for the Alban Institute ten-day workshop on conflict management and stress reduction with Roy Oswald. One week later, I was in a small hospital in Honesdale with a heart attack. Eventually I underwent an attempted, but unsuccessful angioplasty at New York Hospital, followed with successful by-pass surgery.

On the third day after my surgery, I was able to walk to the nurse's station and back, and was doing so with my wife and daughter when we heard sounds of a disturbance. A man across the hall, who had similar surgery the day before, was in trouble. The halls were quickly cleared, and it seemed that twenty people and all kinds of machinery were quickly gathered around his bed. I remember saying to Marilyn and Amber, "We all come into this with a different set of circumstances, different family histories, different degrees of wholeness, and a host of other variables. Inevitably some patients will not survive this procedure."

Later that evening the man died. By bedtime the halls had cleared again, and the floor became about as quiet as hospitals get. My roommate had gone home, and I was alone in my room. Just as I was beginning to drift off to sleep, I felt an alarming tightness in my chest, and found it increasingly difficult to breathe. Experiencing a tremendous sense of panic, I sat up in bed and heard myself say, "I'm going to die!" I pushed the button for the nurse. Within moments this lovely, caring person stood by my bed, calmly taking my pulse and blood pressure, assuring me that I was O.K., that everything seemed fine, and that I was not the only one who had been disturbed by the death of the man across the hall.

"But I'm a priest!" I mumbled, more to myself than to her. "Do you realize I have read the burial office more than 70 times during the past six years at the Church of the Atonement," let alone the hundreds of times in the 17 years before that. I have talked and walked with hundreds of families through their time of bereavement. Suddenly it was very clear. It wasn't someone else's death I was facing, sad and painful as that oft-times is. It was my own death, the reality of my own mortality, face to face, and I thought of Dylan Thomas: "Do not go gentle into that good night; old age should burn and rave at close of day; rage, rage, against the dying of the light."

For some time I raged against the dying of that light. I was right in what I said that night. I am going to die, but not that time, and apparently not yet. There seems to be more left for me to be ... and do ... to learn ... to experience ... to be husband ... father ... priest ... pastor ... preacher ... friend ... bishop...

Bishop ... This is a particular time in the life of the Episcopal Church for us not to lose heart. We need to be strong and courageous, striving for reconciliation within the Anglican Communion while recognizing and honoring differences. We need to be strong and courageous, holding fast to the truth that calls us through our baptism to be open and welcoming to absolutely everyone who might be called to participate fully in the life of the church.

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The point of this flood of self-disclosure is to describe why Fred Cunningham's words from the journal, *Weavings*, speak to my heart and understanding of my ordination vows.

*The meaning and value of my ministry are
not based on my feelings, not determined
by the needs of a congregation of the
world, not dependent on personal drives
or ambitions, successes or accomplishments.
Rather, my ministry is rooted in and dependent on God's call.
Yet, somehow with this new insight I thought
there would be more to God's call.
But what I hear, simply is, "I want you to
be a husband to your wife, a father to your children,
and a pastor to your people.
(We might add – "to be wife to your husband,
a mother to your children and a partner to your partner".)
That's my call. That's my vocation.
It does not reflect the needs of ego or the workings of fate.
It is not a matter of being stronger or wiser than other people.
It is simply a matter of what God desires of me.*

Roy Oswald says the church needs new heroes – women and men who can do effective parish ministry in 40-50 hours per week – who can confront successfully their own death and get on with living creatively and joyfully.

The only thing that allows me to share any of this with you today is of course step 26 of the spiritual ladder of the seventh-century ascetic John of the Ladder – which, in case you haven't read it recently, says this:

*"If some are still dominated by their former bad
habits, and yet can teach by mere words, let them teach ...
for perhaps, being put to shame by their own words,
they will eventually begin to practice what they teach."*

Elie Wiesel said that God made people because God loves stories. Our task here and now is to provide opportunities for others to learn and experience more and more of God's story while we are coming to discover that each of us also has a story to tell. The reign of God has something to do with bringing our stories together with God's story. My sisters and brothers... May God richly bless you and me as we continue this painfully delicious journey to which we have been called.

Be strong and very courageous... for our ministries are needed now more than ever...only take these two final words of Paul to heart in your going:

"For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."

The learning and receiving of the truth of those words for me has only taken a lifetime.

+John Palmer Croneberger
Assistant Bishop of Bethlehem