



ELCIC National Bishop Susan C. Johnson's Sermon

Closing Worship Service at the 2008 ELW Quadrennial Convention July 13, 2008 – Calgary, AB

Ruth 3:6-13

So she went down to the threshing-floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came quietly and uncovered his feet, and lay down. At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! He said, 'Who are you?' And she answered, 'I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.' He said, 'May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, **do not be afraid**; I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman. But now, though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another kinsman more closely related than I. Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do so. If he is not willing to act as next-of-kin for you, then, as the LORD lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning.'

Psalm 56

Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me;
all day long foes oppress me;
my enemies trample on me all day long,
for many fight against me.
O Most High, **when I am afraid,**
I put my trust in you.
In God, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I am not afraid;
what can flesh do to me?
All day long they seek to injure my cause;
all their thoughts are against me for evil.
They stir up strife, they lurk,
they watch my steps.
As they hoped to have my life,
so repay them for their crime;
in wrath cast down the peoples, O God!
You have kept count of my tossings;
put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your record?

Then my enemies will retreat
on the day when I call.
This I know, that God is for me.
In God, whose word I praise,
in the LORD, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I am not afraid.
What can a mere mortal do to me?
My vows to you I must perform, O God;
I will render thank-offerings to you.
For you have delivered my soul from death,
and my feet from falling,
so that I may walk before God
in the light of life.

1 Peter 3:13-18

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. **Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated,** but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit,

Luke 8:43-48

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her haemorrhage stopped. Then Jesus asked, 'Who touched me?' When all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you.' But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me.' **When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.'**

Note: The following is the outline the Bishop used to deliver her sermon at this service.

1. It's a privilege and pleasure to be here with you as you have met together these past days under the theme, *Be Not Afraid*.
2. I'm not surprised. The women of ELW have always been women of strong faith and courage.
3. I had the privilege of being in South Africa at the end of February for meetings between representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the International Lutheran Council and I was honoured to be asked to preach at the Cathedral in Soweto on the Sunday. I noticed at several points during the service that people were making a certain hand gesture, raising up an arm and shaking their hand back and forth. I wasn't sure what they were doing and was afraid to join in lest I be making some rude gesture. At the end of the service I asked about it and was told that they don't think it's polite to clap in worship and so they use this gesture instead. Let me take a moment to thank you all for your energy and faith and enthusiasm over these last few days. Why don't you all join me in trying it out?
4. Frankly, I hear the theme and I want to say *Be Not Afraid* – are you nuts??
5. There are a whole bunch of things I am afraid of. And I'm sure there are things you are afraid of too. I invite you to turn to your neighbor and share with each other the things you are afraid of.
6. So why does God keep showing up, or sending angels or prophets or Kelly Fryer to tell us not to be afraid? By the way, did Kelly tell you that she knows when it is God asking her to do something because she always wants to throw up???
7. And we know that God doesn't come to us with messages saying keep up the good work, don't make any changes. God shows up asking us to do new things and they are usually hard and scary things.
8. So why do we say *Be Not Afraid*? Are we just trying to be delusional?
9. I think what we are saying is, Do not be paralyzed by your fear. Having courage doesn't mean not being afraid. We're saying, Take a risk, Do what you know you have to do, act even though you are afraid. This morning the words of a hymn came to my mind and I'd ask you to join me in singing verse four of hymn 808, Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song.
10. Gospel lesson today, a story of a woman of great courage. Suffering from a haemorrhage for 12 years. And finally seizing the opportunity to gain healing by reaching out and touching Jesus garment. And was she not afraid by this huge risk, this huge audacity that she took? Of course she was! The gospel reports that she was trembling and falling down. But she didn't let her fear paralyze her. She acted in faith and received the healing she needed.
11. Let me tell you another story. Some of you have already heard it. On the day of my ordination as bishop, I was terrified. And in the opening part of the service I couldn't keep

that ad from IKEA from running through my head. You know, the one where the woman looks at her bill, thinks she's ripped them off because she has received such a good deal, and heads out to the parking lot screaming "Start the car! Start the car!" In my head I had counted the number of steps from the pew where I was sitting to the side door and out to the parking lot. Maybe it wasn't too late to run away!

Then we came to the part of the service, like every ordination service, where I was kneeling at the altar rail and the congregation was singing "Come Holy Ghost our hearts inspire". And I am praying with a fervency I have never experienced before, asking God for the wisdom I need, and the strength and courage and grace I need to do this new thing that God and the church have called me to do.

And I was praying with my eyes closed, but suddenly it was as if I opened my eyes and saw that someone had come up to me without me noticing them. And because they are standing right in front of me and I am kneeling I can only see them from about mid-chest to the knees. But it was Jesus. And Jesus didn't say anything to me. All he did was reach forward and wrap his arms around me. And I could feel the pressure of his arms on my arms and on my back. It was an amazing experience.

The message that came through to me was that I was loved, deeply loved, just the way I am. And the other message was that Jesus loves you, each one of you, just the way you are as well. And that Jesus is holding you in a strong and loving embrace as well. You may not feel it, and I know that I was blessed to have that experience. But our God has you wrapped up and does not let you go 24/7 whether you are aware of it or not.

12. *Be Not Afraid*. Because Jesus loves you. And will be with you with arms wrapped around you even as you do the scariest thing imaginable. It's kind of like we are given water wings or a life preserver in our baptism.
13. Thank you for your partnership in ministry. Thank you for your witness and tenacity. Remember that you are in my prayers and I know I am in your prayers as well. As we together try to live out being a church *In Mission for Others*, let's hold hands and pray together "*Be Not Afraid!!*"