

Sermon by the Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori Presiding Bishop and Primate, The Episcopal Church - Saturday, June 30, 2007 – Yale University Woolsey Hall.

Consecration of Laura Ahrens at Yale University, Connecticut

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Sermon by the Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori
Presiding Bishop and Primate, The Episcopal Church
30 June 2007, 10:30 am
Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 100; Hebrews 5:1-10; John 20:19-23

Well, are the doors locked? Maybe they should be, maybe they would be, if we were really serious about what we're doing here. We ought to be trembling, but not out of fear of those outside, even if there may be a chase scene going on out there. We ought to be trembling out of anticipation of what will be blessed here. We're going to recognize and publicly bless what God has already begun. We're going to call down the spirit on Laura Ahrens so that we can ask her to send us out with the same charge those disciples received, "as the Father has sent me, so I send you." And we are, once again, going to claim that God has said the same to each and every one of us.

We're sent out to engage Isaiah's vision of God's restored creation: "I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." It is work we all share by virtue of the faith tradition we claim to hold in common, even though it will be worked out differently in each of us -- indeed, with fear and trembling, like those disciples in the locked room.

Our ability to engage that mission and do that work has the same root as what Jesus hears at his own baptism. Hebrews' version of it is, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you" -- begotten for that work of restoring all creation: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations."

There is a lot of sending in these readings for the ordination of a bishop. Jesus himself says to the disciples, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' May that dream of shalom be planted in you, and now you as well are being sent out into the world to "bring forth justice to the nations."

Heady and daunting stuff, powerful words that ought to set us to trembling. Do you know who you are, and whose you are, and why you're here? The beginnings of answers are all here -- chosen, servant, sent, to bring justice to the nations.

Laura herself tells us she has known since childhood that she was called to this kind of work -- beginning with preaching peace to her stuffed animals, and continuing in new and yet related ways over the many years since. You have called her to this new room of trembling because you have seen the spirit already at work. Together, you expect that you and she, and your other bishops, will continue to urge this community called the Diocese of Connecticut into that peace-making work.

That kind of vast and world-transforming vision of bringing forth justice to the nations ought to make us tremble. I would suggest that trembling is not necessarily a bad thing. Just before I left Nevada, I read a fascinating book called *The City of Trembling Leaves* by Walter van Tilburg Clark. The title refers to the quaking aspens that can be found all over the West at higher elevations. Signs of water, they are often almost the only trees that survive in the higher desert. They also survive and thrive in many other temperate environments across North America, including here.

There's something important about those shaking leaves. They are signs of water's presence, and they are themselves connected to that living water through the miracle of tree and root and the soil's capillary action. They may shake in the wind, but they do not fall off the tree until their season of life is past. Their ability to shake in the wind actually strengthens the tree, as the wind's energy is dissipated by the way their flattened stems let the leaves respond. The trunk and main branches can be a bit stiffer and less bending because of the leaves' mobility --trembling actually makes the tree stronger.

Aspen are both relatively small trees and enormous organisms when they exist as cloned populations. They have both an individual and a collective identity. And despite that frequent strategy of vegetative reproduction, they are among the most genetically diverse species of plants. They also depend on the disturbance of regular cycles of fire to maintain healthy populations.

Quaking aspen are known to scientists as *Populus tremuloides*, and if you will pardon the word-play, we, too, are created and baptized to be a populace that trembles. There's something blessed about trembling leaves that can apply equally to us. If we're going to exhibit to the world what it means to live like the Body of Christ -- with the kind of gospel reality that Hildegard of Bingen and other medieval mystics called *viriditas* -- literally, greenness -- we have to stay connected to the source of living water, and be flexible enough to survive and even strengthen the tree. That flexibility is not the same as fear that paralyzes. It is born of a healthy awe and respect for the creator of all that is, and it does not collapse in the face of earthly evil.

The Christian life is meant to produce in us an ability to move in the wind without losing our connection to the tree and its well-watered roots, and an ability to thrive in the face of regular disturbance -- both wind and fire. We, too, are meant to strengthen the whole body by our ability to tremble -- appropriately.

We're here today to ask Laura publicly if she'll help us tremble. We expect her to be a mover and shaking leaf herself, and to help us all to grow in ways that serve to strengthen the whole organism -- as the Catechism says, to act in Christ's name for the reconciliation of the world and the building up the body of the Church. Her ability to tremble and maintain her rootedness, like the ability to gather anxiety and still hit a clean shot off the tee, is learned only with practice and by the grace of God.

How do we grow a body that can be strengthened by trembling wind and cleansing fire? Those prospects terrify most of us, yet as the folks who live near wildfire country know, when the fires are suppressed disease often takes over. When fires are suppressed for too long, the one that eventually does burn is far more destructive. Regular fires bring new life and riots of color as seeds sprout and flowers bloom -- none of which can happen until the heat of the fire opens the seed pods. That insight is behind what the gospel says about binding and loosing. If sins are forgiven, new life can emerge. If sins are retained overlong, only sickness and destruction result.

Jesus invites us to a life of greenness that builds strength out of trembling and peace out of fear. A small example. A couple of days ago I asked Bishop Curry about the pectoral cross he was wearing. It's a large and unusual metal piece. He told me it is made of old gun parts. And he showed me another piece at the diocesan office, called The Saxophonist, also built from dismantled weapons. Artists in Madagascar are turning instruments of destruction into objects of beauty, in a project they call Arms to Art. That certainly has something to do with bringing prisoners out of the dungeons of fear, and it is part of the ancient dream of greenness that beats swords into plowshares. I also heard about another piece that is meant to be a tree of life. The leaves are made of the magazines of old AK-47s. Leaves that have gone from making others shake to bringing peace, from trembling in fear to shaking with mirth and deep joy.

Peace be with you, my friends. Laura and you and I are sent out to do likewise.