

HERE BE DRAGONS

April 2020

Writing an essay that will appear in several weeks is a daunting exercise in the best of times. Now, with the exponential spread of the COVID-19 Coronavirus, something written yesterday can be out of date. We are learning quickly that we are in uncharted waters.

It does not help that for years now our country has been infected with paralyzing partisanship. It does not help that an atmosphere poisoned by deliberate lies has made getting accurate, factual data difficult. Add to that, that despite being warned repetitively of the possibility, the U.S. health care system seems unprepared to deal with a global pandemic. A narcissistic national demeanor, encouraged by libertarian individualism leaves us ill equipped to respond. We are in uncharted waters.

What can we say to people who are anxious, even scared?

In 1504 a little globe of the world was produced, an astounding act itself in a world where many still believed that the earth was flat. On this tiny copper globe, just 4.4 inches in diameter, at one 'edge' of the globe's map is the Latin phrase, "HC SVNT DRACONES," "Here Be Dragons." It was a warning to would be explorers - "You are in uncharted waters."

We know, of course, that dragons are not real. They are the imaginings, perhaps of early sailors who saw for the first time the leviathans of the deeps, and saw the potential dangers. Their imagination saw a reptilian form - primal, mythical, and dangerous. When we venture into the unknown, when we encounter the unexpected, when we run into the unnamed, our pulse quickens and it is not uncommon to be afraid. Ancient map makers called it 'terra incognita, sometimes warning, 'here be dragons.'

Encountering the unknown reveals to us our strengths and our vulnerabilities, our limitations and our possibilities. It can also invoke our capacity for kindness, compassion, and patience. It also reminds us that we do not and cannot face the unknown alone. We're in this together and any illusion that it doesn't involve us, or that our behavior doesn't matter, is dangerous to everyone. It is a time when we need leaders we can trust and information that is accurate. We need each other, caring for each other with kindness, compassion, and patience. Above all we need an extravagance of hope that looks beyond the shared efforts of today to a future that is worth working for.

In 2008 I was asked to write a hymn text for the 20th anniversary of World AIDS Day. Lest we forget, when the HIV/AIDS pandemic burst on the world scene, its toll was enormous. Forty-two million infected, 25 million dead over a period of 20 years, nearly 15 million children orphaned. The world adjusted, a vaccine was developed, then most people forgot, except those who lost someone. It was for them that World AIDS Day was established, and for whom the text was created. I wrote:

We live in hope, for God is always present,
Despite the hurt and pain we've suffered long.
We live in faith, that God will not abandon
The precious child to whom we all belong.
We live in love, with grace and peace enduring.
As God renews, our spirits are made strong.

Do not lose heart, for God so loved the world,

That life and hope are touched with healing grace.
God reconciles, restores, redeems the broken,
And reunites our hearts in love's embrace.
O God of Hope, our prayers we lift to you:
O spread your love on all within this place.

It is through this kind of hope that we shall endure. It is the map for our future. In our journeys there will always be warnings, 'Here Be Dragons.' But we must continue to live in hope. Let us seek light, life, strength, courage, direction. Working together, we will get through this!

In Psalm 27 we find David's triumphant song of confidence, words for the anxieties of today: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The lord is the stronghold of my life; of who shall I be afraid? I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!" Amen!