

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Deuteronomy 31:1-8 *Heffalumps & Woozles*

July 7, 2019
The Rev. Dr. Robin L. Carden

(Robin sits down after sermon. About ten seconds of awkward silence.)

Jodie: Um, Robin?

Robin: (Whispering loudly.) Um, Jodie?

Jodie: Robin. It's your turn. The hymn is over. It's time to preach.

Robin: Are you sure?

Jodie: Yes, Robin. I'm sure. This is the part of the service for the sermon.

Robin: But, I don't want to.

Jodie: You don't want to?

Robin: Right. I don't want to.

Jodie: But Robin, you have to.

Robin: Why?

Jodie: Because it's your job.

Robin: Can't you get Perri to do it. She's a really good preacher.

Jodie: Yes. Perri is a very good preacher. But Robin, Perri is not preaching today. You are.

Robin: Are you sure?

Jodie: Yes. I'm sure. Your name is right here in the bulletin.

Robin: (SIGH.)

Jodie: Robin?

Robin: What?

Jodie: It's time.

Robin: But I can't.

Jodie: Why not?

Robin: Because I'm afraid.

Jodie: You're afraid?

Robin: Yes. I am afraid.

Jodie: What are you afraid of?

Robin: I'm afraid of Heffalumps and Woozles!

Jodie: Half-a-bumps and noodles?

Robin: No! Heffalumps and Woozles. I've heard terrible and scary things about Heffalumps and Woozles. They're going to make fun of me and hurt me and steal my shoes!

Jodie: Robin. I don't know what you've heard but I assure you the Heffalumps and Woozles are not going to make fun of you or hurt you and trust me, NO ONE, not Heffalumps, Woozles, or any other creature on God's good earth is going to try to steal your shoes.

Robin: Oh, yeah? How do you know?

Jodie: Because. There ARE NO Heffalumps and Woozles and you are the only one who would wear those shoes!

Do you know about the Heffalumps and Woozles from Winnie the Pooh? They are characters in the nightmares of Pooh and Piglet. Heffalumps look like elephants.

But, in nightmares illustrated by Disney artists, they transform from gentle giants into plaid, striped, or spotted villains who try to steal Pooh's honey.

Woozles are weasel type creatures, kind of like, well, wolverines, with long noses that also feature strange markings. Nightmares of Heffalumps and Woozles haunt the sleep of Pooh and Piglet at night and worries about them cast a shadow over the waking hours of the inhabitants of the Hundred Acre Wood.

But, in A. A. Milne's stories of Winnie the Pooh, Heffalumps and Woozles are not real. Their existence is limited to dreams and worries. And yet, fear of the Heffalumps and Woozles limit Pooh and Piglet's ability to fully enjoy life in the abundant glory of the Hundred Acre Wood. Pooh hoards his honey away in fear that the Heffalumps will steal it. Piglet goes into an absolute tizzy when he thinks he has stumbled upon a Woozle's tracks but Christopher Robin points out that it's not the prints of a Woozle that Piglet has discovered, but rather the prints are actually Piglet's own because he is walking in circles around a gorse bush.

And so it is that Christopher Robin helps Pooh and Piglet recognize that their fears of Huffalumps and Woozles are, like so many of our own fears, unfounded. It's

likely that you've heard me say it before and you'll hear me say it again . . . within the pages of our sacred scriptures, some variation of the words "Be not afraid" appear . . . anybody remember how many times? (365) That's right, three hundred sixty-five times, that's once for everyday of the year.

And why do I keep reminding us that the Bible says some variation of "Be not afraid" three hundred sixty-five times, once for every day of the year? Because so many of the messages "out there" in the news and world around us promote fear. So many people "out there" are trying to make us afraid so that we'll buy something, or do something, or say something . . . This fear mongering divides us, makes us suspicious, and generates poor decision making. We need to be reminded of the Gospel's message that we do not need to be afraid.

Indeed, two of the three hundred sixty-five places a variation of the phrase "Be not afraid" occurs in scripture is in the thirty-first chapter of Deuteronomy, passages from which Roberta read for us this morning. In this passage we pick up the story of the Exodus that began when Moses confronted Pharaoh and declared "Let my people go!" After a series of plagues, Pharaoh relents and releases the ancient Hebrew people from slavery. Moses leads them out of Egypt, crossing the Red

Sea, and then guides them through a forty year exodus through the wilderness as they make their way towards the Promised Land.

But, the Promised Land is not a massive vacant lot. People are living there, already enjoying the milk and honey that flows freely. Those inhabitants of the land aren't going to step aside gracefully and let the Israelites have at it. Moses knows this next part of the journey, the actual settling of the Promised Land, is going to be difficult. And, he knows that he is not the one to lead them through those battles. And so he chooses his successor, Joshua, to lead the Hebrews on this next part of the journey.

Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the presence of all Israel, "Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the LORD swore to their ancestors to give them . . . The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."

And while the Good Lord likely isn't calling us to lead a people into battle, it's likely that all of us are facing battles of one kind or another. Most of us have fears

and anxiety. And, just like with Joshua, the “Lord’s own self goes before us and will be us, God will never leave us nor forsake us. We do not need to be afraid; we do not need to be discouraged.”

And yet, if you’re like me, you are afraid sometimes. You do get discouraged. I don’t think having faith means not having any fear. I also don’t think that if you feel fear it means you are somehow lacking in faith. Fear is an emotion and it’s hard to not feel an emotion.

However, there is a difference between feeling fear and acting on fear. I can’t help but wonder if that isn’t our take away here. That, as people of God, we may have fear, but our faith is bigger than our fear. Fear is, perhaps, the largest stumbling block that any of us face on our faith journey—the fear of what people will think of us, the fear of what might happen to us, the fear of losing something or someone we hold dear, the fear of change . . . Fear is powerful. The only thing that can really overcome it is the facing of it. Hiding from or trying to avoid that which we fear is the genesis of anxiety and sucks the life out of our faith. Facing the fear almost always diminishes the fear and builds our faith.

There is another children's tale, not unlike the tale of Pooh and Piglet facing their fears of the Heffalumps and Woozles, this one from Ethiopia that illustrates the point.

Once upon a time in an Ethiopian village, there lived a boy who was so fearful of the world around him that his family called him Miobe, frightened one.

"Why do you call me that?" the boy asked his grandfather.

"Because you are afraid," he answered.

Miobe pondered these words and decided he must find a way to conquer fear. That night he packed a sack and set off into the world to find out what he feared and to conquer it.

He walked until the sun began to rise. "I am becoming brave," he said as he walked on.

He came to a village and thought, "I don't know these people. They might be unkind."

But he straightened up and walked right into the village square, saying aloud, "I will conquer you, fear."

He found the village elders gathered, muttering among themselves. The elders sighed unhappily. "We are finished. Our village is being threatened by a monster up on the mountain."

Miobe followed the old man's gaze to the top of the mountain.

"See him, there," the old man said.

Miobe squinted. He did not want to insult the man, but he saw nothing there.

"Look," the men spoke all at once. "It has the head of a crocodile!" "It's like a dragon!" "It breathes smoke!"

Now Miobe began to see the monster, the smoke and fire, the wrinkled skin, the fiery eyes. "I see," he said, but silently he promised himself he would not be afraid.

Children were scared and didn't go to school. Farmers were scared and stayed inside. Everyone just hid inside, afraid of the monster on the mountain.

Miobe decided it was up to him to destroy the monster. "I wish to conquer fear," he announced, "and so I shall go slay the monster!"

"No!" the elders, farmers, and children cried. "You will die."

Miobe shivered and his heart fluttered, but he was determined. "I must conquer fear!"

At the base of the mountain, he looked up and felt a chill of fear run down his spine. That monster looked even bigger and scarier than any dragon or

crocodile. He remembered the days when he had been afraid and he didn't want to be like that anymore. And so, he took a deep breath and began to climb.

As he climbed, he looked up, but now he saw the monster seemed to be growing smaller.

"How peculiar," he said aloud. "My eyes are deceiving me."

He continued to climb. He squinted, shielding his eyes, but the monster's eyes no longer seemed so fierce, and the flames no longer shot from its snout.

"The closer I get, the smaller he looks." He continued to climb, pulling his dagger from its sheath.

As he came around a bend, he saw the summit before him. He gasped. The monster had disappeared.

Miobe turned and looked behind him. Surely the creature was going to sneak up from behind to attack.

But when he turned, he saw nothing. He heard nothing. He looked left. He looked right.

He continued to climb.

At long last he reached the summit and all was empty and quiet. Nothing was there.

Suddenly he heard a sound at his feet. He looked down and saw a little creature, a toad with wrinkled skin and round, frightened eyes.

He picked it up. "Who are you? How did you become so small?" But the monster said nothing, and so Miobe cradled it in his hands and walked down the mountain.

When he reached the village, the people cried, "He's safe!" and they surrounded him.

Miobe held out his hands and showed them the tiny wrinkled toad. "This is the monster," he said.

The creature croaked, and the elder looked up at the crowd and said, "This boy has conquered the monster. Its name is fear."

Miobe went to the top of the mountain to face his fear and discovered the monster was only a toad. Pooh and Piglet went into the Hundred Acre Wood, even though they feared the Heffalumps and Woozles and, with Christopher Robin's help, discovered they weren't really real. Facing their fears freed them.

Facing our fears frees us, frees us to live the abundant life Christ intends for us. And, the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that we never face our fears alone. *The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; God will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.*"

Thanks be to God.

