

Insurmountable November 25, 2007

Bev Kearney is the highly acclaimed women's track coach at the University of Texas, and she is a person who has had to overcome a lot of obstacles in the course of her life. She was the sixth child of an alcoholic mother who had seven children with five different men. Bev said, "Sunday through Thursday, my mother was the most loving, giving person, but on Fridays and Saturdays, I don't know who that wild woman was who showed up drunk, cursing and fighting."

Kearney moved often with her family, but they finally settled in Tampa, where she became a high school basketball and track star. She won a scholarship to Auburn University and was eventually named the school's top female athlete. After graduating with a degree in social work, she did some coaching here in Indiana, and also in Tennessee and Florida, before taking the job at Texas in 1993.

One of the greatest obstacles she was to face still lay ahead of her. In December of 2002, the car in which she was riding outside of Jacksonville was involved in a rollover accident. Two other passengers were killed in the accident, and Bev Kearney was airlifted to a hospital with life-threatening injuries. It's been a long recovery, but through determination, hard work and an indomitable spirit, she is accomplishing her goals of walking again unaided as she continues to coach the team. She is one who faced seemingly insurmountable odds, but kept clawing away until she could overcome those odds.

We may not have stories that are identical to Bev Kearney's, but my hunch is that we all have stories about times past, or even things we're going through currently, that feel insurmountable. I know that there are those here who struggle daily against the powers of addiction and substance abuse. I know there are those sitting among us this morning who facing serious financial difficulties, who wonder if tomorrow will be better. I know there are many who are dealing with problems with children—no matter what age, and who are

at a loss to know what to do next. And I'm well aware that there are those who are silent about their struggles, but who fight a constant battle to overcome enormous obstacles in their lives.

The reality is that we all face hardships of one kind or another, and many of the difficulties we encounter seem to find us short of the strength, wisdom, courage we need to confront. We look for a safe harbor, for calmer waters, for less turbulent times, and we feel as though we're thwarted at every turn. We ask, "Why is life like this?" "Why is this happening to me?"

I hate to put this in a crass way, but frankly, that's the way life is. It is filled with beautiful, mountaintop moments, but there are plenty of times when we wind up floundering, feeling as though we're going down for the last time. The truth is that we'd prefer the good times, and we'd like to get by without the tough times, but it just doesn't work that way. Life is filled with ups and downs, and we have to accommodate ourselves to whatever state we're in. As Orison Marsden once said, **"We win half the battle when we make up our minds to take the world as we find it, including the thorns."** And so it is.

And the honest truth is that we learn and grow in the tough times more than in the times of smooth sailing. It's hard to hear that when we're in the midst of a frightening part of life, but in retrospect, most of us can usually gain a tidbit of understanding or compassion or wisdom from what we've been through. It seems to me that there's always some little piece of positive that can lessen the pain and struggle we face, but that's only something we can experience when it's past. It's impossible to see anything good at all when we're right in the middle of a mess. We can begin to understand what Henry Kaiser was talking about when he said, **"Problems are only opportunities in work clothes,"** but we can only see the reality of that sentiment in retrospect.

I suspect most of us remember the story of Christopher Reeve, the movie actor who starred as Superman, who was paralyzed from the neck down as a result of a riding accident. And many of us are probably aware that, not long after his death, his wife also died, leaving behind

their son to be loved and cared for by others.

In the book that Reeve wrote after his accident, entitled *Still Me*, he shared an observation that described both of them and many others who face some of life's most difficult struggles. Chris Reeve wrote, "When the first Superman movie came out, I was frequently asked, 'What is a hero?'...My answer was that a hero is someone who commits a courageous action without considering the consequences...Now my definition is completely different. I think a hero is an ordinary individual who finds strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles."

I think he was right, but where do we find the strength to keep on in the face of overwhelming odds? Where do we get the strength and courage we need to endure seemingly insurmountable obstacles? I think we can find a clue in the Bible passage we have for today. This is the prophet Isaiah who is sharing God's loving strength with the people of Israel and with us. In the verses preceding the one we have, the prophet is assuring the people that God knows our troubles and cares that we are suffering, and reminds us that God is the one who never grows tired or weary. After writing that God strengthens those who are weak and tired, we find the words of our passage. It reads this way:

Those who trust in God for help
Will find their strength renewed.
They will rise up on wings like eagles;
They will run and not get weary;
They will walk and not grow weak.

This passage reminds us that God cares, that we are not alone, and that when we put our trust in God, we will find what we need to face whatever the world throws at us. You and I have seen an example of that right here in our own city, and we witnessed the Colts coach, Tony Dungy, demonstrate incredible faith when their son, James, died almost two years ago. Long before the coach authored *Quiet Strength*, columnist Bob Kravitz wrote about it in the *Indianapolis Star*.

As he described the coach just moments before he said goodbye to his son addressing the players who went to be by his side. Kravitz wrote, "This was a team that cared about one another, a team that care about its personable coach, even before the tragic events of December 22. That day, though, the bond was somehow strengthened. All those qualities Dungy had asked from his players—poise, strength of character, determination—were on epic display, deepening the respect player had for their wounded coach."

Player David Thornton said, "We were there to support him, and he ended up supporting us...Honestly, he's inspired me so much...to see him go through such a dark moment and still find the strength through God to encourage his wife and family, and even the players." Dungy found his strength to endure through God, and became a symbol of God's loving every-present strength for many of us.

Those of you who have been around for a while have heard me share the story about the bristlecone pines, but even so, I'm going to share that story again. That's because I had the opportunity to climb up to Windy Ridge on 14,000 foot Mount Bross above Alma, Colorado, last summer for the first time in 5-6 years, and I was once again awed, inspired and strengthened by being among the bristlecone pines that cling to life there. This was and is holy ground to me.

You'll see some pictures of the field of trees that I visited as I share this story, and I know pictures can't always do the story justice, but I hope you will find some strength and inspiration as you hear the stories of these remarkable trees. (I'll forward pictures when we get closer to this Sunday.)

Sometime during the 1950's, researchers made a startling discovery about these trees. Now bristlecones themes are not rare; they're found commonly among the forest trees in many places throughout the state. When these trees receive plenty of moisture and nutrients, they grow into lush, ornamental trees. Unfortunately, when the bristlecones are given tender, loving care, they thrive beautifully, but they do not live long.

However, the ones on Windy Ridge and some others at higher elevations are the truly remarkable ones, because they are among the oldest trees in existence. Scientists discovered the bristlecones only live long lives when they are exposed to the fiercest of the elements. In fact, it has been determined that some of the bristlecones in Colorado are as old as 2500 years!

These trees, as you see, are noted for their twisted trunks and writhing branches; they appear almost dead, and indeed, they probably should be dead because of what they face. And yet, as author Roberta Feister wrote in her tribute to the bristlecone: "They are a monument to a conquering will to survive against all odds."

You see, the bristlecone must fight for existence, and yet seems to thrive on adversity. They endure poor soil, incredibly hot sun, blasting winds, blowing sand, snow, hail and stinging sleet, and yet they live on in a remarkable way. They live because, little by little, they die in all their parts. Almost all the trees will eventually sacrifice everything except for one narrow strip of precious cambium layer. The cambium layer is a lifeline that runs from a living root to the tips of the branches, and this lifeline nourishes new growth. That cambium layer offers the its capacity to endure and live.

Our trust in God is much the same as a bristlecone's cambium layer. When we have that lifeline to God, we will find the strength to endure, the will to survive, and the hope for a new day, and I'm convinced we'll only find that in God.

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that, no matter what hardship and difficulty we are facing today, we will know that cambium layer of God's loving presence that strengthens us and helps us survive.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.