

**FRANCES JANE CROSBY (1820-1915)**

**Interpreter of the Faith**

**Psalm 95: 1-7; Luke 19: 37-40**

**February 29, 2004 - First Sunday of Lent**

**Union Church of Cupertino, CA**

**Art Domingue, Interim Minister**

**In downtown Los Angeles, on Pershing Square, there used to be a Baptist church - perhaps it's still there - that had a large cross made of neon on its facade. Across the transept of that cross, also in neon, were the words: "Jesus Saves!" And they blinked. "Jesus Saves!" - blink - "Jesus Saves" - blink.**

**I don't know you well enough to guess what your reaction might be to such a sign but the first time I saw it I blushed. I was a tender young seminarian and I blushed because might want to connect me, a serious student, with such simplistic slogans. I blushed because I had been reared on the adage that "fool's names like fool's faces are always found in public places," and that was Jesus' name they blinking to a public park.**

**By now I've learned that there is nothing so sacred but someone will reduce it to two words and a song, or make of it a bumper sticker: "HONK IF YOU LOVE JESUS," as if you and I were geese. Now I'm more or less inured to it, but the first time I saw that blinking neon sign, I blushed.**

**And another thing I have found embarrassing in the church is the way some people hide the good news of Jesus in complexity. I have heard preachers who, seeking to raise the esteem of Jesus, have begun their sermons in the sands of the Sinai Desert and then wandered their way forward to Bethlehem. They have digressed into the valley of dry theological bones and headed to a brief lesson in Western Civilization. By the time they took their seat the congregation was exhausted. When a preacher preaches someone ought to get tired but I'm embarrassed if ever it's the congregation.**

**Perhaps I'm overly sensitive but unnecessary complexity makes me blush for my profession. Simplistic jingoism turns me beet red. The gospel we share... the good news of God's love in Jesus... is so precious that we must find ways to share it that neither cheapen nor complicate.**

**I believe two things are necessary in any gospel presentation: Integrity and enthusiasm. Integrity exists when word and deed are together, when everything does not have to be said for a world of good is being shown. Enthusiasm exists when word and deed are still lively, usually indicating that they have sprung from the heart.**

**All of which leads me to tell you about Fanny Crosby - the "sweet blind singer," as one called her, "Aunt Fanny," as she was known to most. Integrity and enthusiasm were her two greatest gifts.**

**Francis Jane Crosby was born March 24, 1820 in Putnam County New York, close to the**

border with Connecticut. At six weeks of age she was blinded by an ignorant country physician who put hot poultices on her inflamed eyes. Her father died when she was one and much of her early care fell to her maternal grandmother who, fortunately, had the time to spend with her walking in the meadow, reading books aloud, and sharing stories from the Bible. When Fanny was five a visit to a specialist in New York City confirmed the family's fear that Fanny's sight would not return. For the remainder of her life - she lived to be 94 - Fanny lived in darkness. But she never stooped to self-pity. One of Fanny's earliest poems, written when she was 8, speaks her heart:

*Oh, what a happy soul am I!  
Although I cannot see,  
I am resolved this in this world  
Contented I will be.*

*How many blessings I enjoy,  
That other people don't;  
To weep and sigh because I'm blind,  
I cannot, and I won't.*

- from Cecilia Margaret Rudin, *Stories of the Hymns We Love*, pg. 60.

Educational opportunities for blind children in the United States were nonexistent until 1831 when the Institution for the Blind opened in New York City. In 1835, when Fanny was 15 she enrolled as a pupil. Instruction was by the lecture method or through reading aloud. It would be 15 years before Braille would be allowed into the classroom. Fanny absorbed everything. She had a phenomenal memory. Before coming to the school she had committed to memory the first four books of both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures. At age 22 Fanny switched from being pupil to being teacher and was hired as a teacher of rhetoric and history. Fanny became a champion and case exhibit for the education of the blind. She got to meet three Presidents. She was invited to recite one of her poems before a joint session of Congress. The last line of the poem was: "*Instruction hath a ray to cheer the blind.*" At age 38 she married one of the other teachers, Alexander Van Alstyne, also blind. The school authorities did not approve of teachers getting married. Both soon resigned their positions. Their one child died in his first year of life.

Mr. Van Alstyne went on to become a successful music teacher and church organist in New York City. Fanny had some musical ability. She played the guitar and the piano but her new work was among the poor. When not at the settlement house Fanny was tatting lace or writing poetry. I have read that her lace was perfect. No one has ever said that of her poetry. One of Fanny's poems, however, "Rosalie, the Prairie Flower," became the text of a hit song. She received more than \$3000 in royalties. Another poem, "There's Music in the Air," was also set to song.

In 1864, when Fanny was 44 she met W.B. Bradbury the composer of gospel tunes which were being used for "He Leadeth Me," "Just as I Am," "Savior Like a Shepherd Lead Me," and, most notably, "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know." Bradbury urged Fanny to write words

for Gospel Hymns. She took his advice and made of herself a virtual praise machine. Over the next forty years she wrote the words for more than 8,000 hymns. Most were published in the Sabbath School hymnals and revival meeting song books published by Bigelow and Main. Fanny got \$2 for every hymn that was published. She would compose the poems in her mind and when she had all verses committed to memory would dictate them to a secretary. Today some of the images Fanny used might seem old fashioned and overly concerned with Christ's blood but it's nothing like what Mel Gibson is offering and many of Fanny's phrases have a cadence to them that stick in the memory as well as an indefatigable portion of hope. Integrity and enthusiasm: these two were always present.

Musicians were drawn to Fanny. Her faith glowed - and her enthusiasm acted like a magnet to their muse.

Mrs. Joseph Fairchild Knapp, wife of the founder of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Co. Came to Fanny with a tune she had written. She played it for her sightless friend and then paced back and forth as Fanny decided what the tune was "saying." The result was the hymn "Blessed Assurance."

William H. Doane, industrialist, inventor, musician, also was a friend to Fanny. One day he brought a tune to Fanny (1868) saying he had but 20 minutes until he had to catch a train. She listened as he played it on the piano. "Why that says to me, "Safe in the Arms of Jesus." She went to another room and 15 minutes later returned to recite the first two verses of what was the most popular of Fanny's hymns while she lived. "Safe in the Arms of Jesus" was sung at countless child-funerals and became imbedded in the human heart. "Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior," "All the Way My Savior Leads Me," "Speed Away," "Jesus is Calling, Tenderly Calling," these may not be great poetry, but their integrity, their enthusiasm touched the heart of a generation and hymns written by Fanny Crosby became a mighty evangelical force in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Christian Church.

Frances Jane Crosby died February 12, 1915, in Bridgeport, CN, just a few miles from where she had been born. Until 1955 the only marker at her grave was a small stone that, on one side, the words, "Aunt Fanny," and, on the other, a quote from Jesus, who when the disciples complained to him that the woman pouring ointment on his head was wasting a lot of money, said, - in effect - "Stifle! She has ministered to me in a way you never did," or, as the King James version and Fanny's marker have it: "She has done what she could."

Not simplistic. No complex. Integrity and enthusiasm were Fanny's greatest gifts. A great interpreter of our faith.