

Nothing to Fear but Fear

sermon digest

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Matthew 10:24-39

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Writing a month after the attack on the World Towers in New York City, Walter Wink addressed the “apocalyptic mode” that emerges with events of terror in our lives: “For those trapped in the Twin Towers or the Pentagon, that fiery hell must have seemed apocalyptic. . . . For those who watched in horror, on the streets or on television in their homes and offices, it must have looked as if a mini end-of-the-world Apocalypse had descended” (*Christian Century*, Oct 17, 2001). We no longer have to speculate. We lived through this global crisis. We remember the immediate shock of disbelief, the cold grip of fear, and the open displays of defiance and anger. We know that this infamous event not only destroyed a segment of pride in the nation’s largest city but radically changed our way of life and threatened our very existence. It was the catalyst that launched a global war on terror and set in motion initiatives for the war in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq. Like so many events in world history, the wounds of 9/11 left scars that continue to change our lives even as they heal. One fallout of recent vintage is the NSA surveillance scandal challenging civil liberties and the right to privacy. Increasingly we are led to wonder about the future, must we exchange liberty for safety?

Apocalypse is a Bible word, the Greek behind the word *Revelation* the final book of the Bible addressing final events in the history of the world. Apocalyptic theology was born of national crisis and despair in Jewish history. When the pride and hope of the nation seemed lost, Jewish prophets developed a new theology of hope. Reliance on military might in a sanctuary of promise was no longer credible. Israel was gone; Judah had become a pawn in the hands of superpowers. The only hope for God’s people was from above, for God to break through veil of mystery—Apocalypse! Unveiling! God had to change the world.. The world that we know would be destroyed and replaced by a new heaven and earth where God’s people could live in eternal peace.

As a pastor, I have always been curious about teen age fascination with the Book of Revelation. I suspect that the interest of youth runs along the same lines of their embrace of horror movies, violent TV shows, and terrorizing rides in amusement parks. In the struggle to understand the real world, our children must come to terms with a world filled with terror. Unfortunately fear becomes a game. The entertainment industry classifies its products as “thrillers,” selling an emotional high from adrenalin like drugs or alcohol. I am not sure whether terror as entertainment is preparation for the real world or a distraction from reality in the pretense that frightening events are always fiction. At some point in life, we must come to realize that terrors in this world are not subject to our remote control buttons.

The Ebola threat to world health is not a game. The raging wars in the Mid-East may not be our wars, but the threat of ISIS to our peace and the suffering of innocent children and powerless adults is our concern. The invasion of privacy through the internet and the electronic theft of your property and your identity has given birth to the fear of criminal invasion that was once a question of locked doors and secure banks. The old threat of nuclear holocaust born of World War II has not come to an end. The nuclear threat has only changed dimensions and locations. Will the next terrorist event be a terrorist nuclear bomb of sorts, or will the insanity of North Korea or Iran be unleashed on the world in an act of suicidal anger? If the world scares you, or if you have been scared so many times that you are numb, you are not alone.

The gospel was born in a world of terror. A central event in the ministry of Jesus, recorded in three of the Gospels was the commissioning of disciples to go into the villages and cities to heal the sick and to proclaim the good news. Jesus warned that they were going into a hostile environment. They were being sent as sheep into wolf territory. They would be arrested, flogged, betrayed, and hated, and why not? Jesus faced persecution for the sake of the kingdom. Is the servant above the master? By the time the Gospel was written, Christians had witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus and the expanding threat of Christian persecution. The Gospel was not speculating about the future; it was describing the real world in which the first readers lived.

Three times in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus said, “Do not fear.” *Do not fear* to bear witness in this hostile environment. The truth of the gospel must be revealed from the housetops. *Do not fear* people who can only end your physical life. God transcends life and death, heaven and hell. *Do not fear* for your personal worth. God knows the numbers of the hairs of your head and the birds of the air. The

God of grace sustains us. God is greater than fear.

Does this reassurance from the distant past speak to the terrors of our world? Does the Gospel contain the confidence we need to manage our fear?

I was mesmerized by Ken Burns' recent PBS presentation of the Roosevelt eras of our national history. I grew up on stories of the Great Depression, the threat to national survival, and the effect on my family. Like many of their peers, my parents looked upon Franklin Roosevelt as a messiah sent by God to save the world. When Franklin became president in 1933, the whole world was in a state of economic collapse, and his first inaugural address was loaded with religious overtones. The national crisis had the character of an apocalyptic event. The new president described one terror after another as if they were supernatural evils that had suddenly gained control of humanity. Then, in concern to bring calm and confidence to a people in panic, he spoke the famous line: "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Burns portrays the president as an eloquent orator who had mastered the art of communicating through the newborn technology of radio. His "fireside chats" were personal, humorous, entertaining, and reassuring. He spoke as a father in control of the situation to children living on the edge of chaos. Like Jesus speaking to disciples moving out into a hostile world, the word of the hour in 1933 was "fear not."

In retrospect, the call to calm was not justified by world events. The worst was yet to come. When the US was forced into the World War by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the crisis of poverty was compounded by the sudden surge of a war for which the nation was unprepared. As a teenager, I recall the humorous plaque on the wall in our church minister of music's office. It read: "If you can keep you head while everyone else is losing theirs, maybe you don't understand the situation." I have often thought of that sign on the wall when personal and global crises have come along, and some Polly Anna suggests that the answer to the immediate threat is "fear not."

Fear is a natural response to danger. No reasonable parent wants to remove the element of fear from the child's experience. Corporal punishment, "spare the rod and spoil the child," has been vastly abused by parents; yet it is based on the need to instill fear of real dangers in the world. The healthy fear of snakes, fire, and high places has been expanded in the modern world to fear of automobiles, slick-talking strangers, and internet chat rooms. We need a healthy fear of tobacco, recreational drugs, and alcohol abuse to grow a healthy society. I recall the day when Arthur Godfrey publicly announced that he would no longer participate in advertising Chesterfield cigarettes. His own health crisis had brought to light that tobacco products were a threat to human health and ought to be feared.

The Psalmist (111:10) represents an attitude of worship in Israel: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." The Old Testament does not advocate an attitude of cowardly resignation from involvement in life because of an all-powerful God. The element of fear was real. God is the author and transcendent Lord of life, the God of power and might. But the fear of God also has the character of reverence, deep commitment, and total respect in recognition that God transcends both life and death. The fear of the LORD becomes an attitude that is basic to the walk of God's people. That, in a nutshell is the counsel of Jesus to disciples going into the hostile world. The call to overcome fear is a call to trust in the God who is greater than our fear.

The challenge to disciples to fear not is a positive call to trust in God. The word has a positive thrust that we cannot ignore. I recall an early experience as a pastor with a family that was nearly destroyed by a naive literalism in response to the dangers in the world. The mother was chronically disabled by emotional illness that repeatedly required hospitalization. Her teenage daughter responded to the dysfunction of her family with acts of self-destruction. She had grown up on a theology of protection that does not work in the real world. She was constantly told that God would protect her from all harm. Her awakening to reality was not easy and involved unnecessary pain.

I am reminded of the second temptation of Jesus in Luke. Jesus is tempted to leap from the pinnacle of the Temple with the promise, "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash you foot against a stone." The word of Christ to his disciples was anything but a promise of protection that would prevent all insults and injuries. In fact, the whole passage was based on the harsh reality of pain and suffering and even death that would come from their venture into the hostile world. What Jesus promised was a God who is bigger than suffering and bigger than death. To "fear

not" is to trust God's love and care.