

Fear and Faith
(Mark 4:35-41)

Is it possible to be scared to death? There's a lot of scientific and medical evidence that says we can actually die of fear. During the 1994 Northridge/Los Angeles earthquake, over one hundred Californians literally died of fright, according to Robert Kloner, cardiologist at Good Samaritan Hospital in L.A.

His research has shown that fear can cause sudden cardiac death. In many cases the terrorized brain triggers the release of a mix of chemicals so potent it causes the heart to contract so fiercely it never relaxes again.

Coroners studied the hearts of 15 assault victims who died even though their assailants had not wounded them badly enough to cause their death. The chief medical officer for New York City determined that 11 of the 15 had torn fibers and lesions in their hearts most likely caused by mortal fear.¹ While fear is hazardous to our physical well-being, fear is equally dangerous to our spiritual well-being – to our faith. Please pray with me.

Awesome God, you are present with us in all the moments of our lives – minute to minute, hour to hour, and day to day. But all too often we let fear – not you – control our lives. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and the word proclaimed. Help us to confront fear with the full knowledge that you are with us until the end of the age just as you have promised us in Christ Jesus. Amen.

What are you afraid of? What scares you the most and why?

The disciples feared for their lives as the storm on the lake raged on, threatening to capsize the boat and drown them. And all the while Jesus was sleeping, unaffected by the chaos surrounding his partners in ministry. Unable to confront their fear, the disciples woke Jesus from his sleep.

Probably irritated at being disturbed by the faithless disciples, Jesus commands the wind to cease and directs the sea to become smooth as glass. As the calm settled in Jesus then turned to the disciples saying, "Why are you afraid? Don't you have any faith at all?" Fear displaced the disciples' faith and they cowered in its presence. And then their fear was transferred to Jesus and the awesome power he exhibited in the face of the storm.

Have you ever been really scared – so scared that you actually feared for your life? Have you ever been unable to confront your fear, allowing it to displace your faith – to control your life? I recall a time when I was almost that scared.

I was in New Delhi, India with a friend. We had hired a car and driver to take us to the town of Agra and the Taj Mahal. Less than an hour into our eight-hour-long round trip I began to fear for my life. From the back seat my friend began hitting the driver on the shoulders telling him to "slow down, move over, or stop the car." After one of these episodes, our driver did pull off the road. In frustration he got out of the car and walked away. We began to consider what we might do if he decided not to come back. But we agreed that we were safer off the road without a driver than back on the road confronting the dangers of traveling the national highway in India.

¹ Citation by Jerry De Luca, Montreal, Quebec; source: *New Scientist* (March 6, 1999), page 35.

I have never in my life wanted anything more than for that trip to end. Like the disciples on the boat I was faced with confronting my fear. I was faced with confronting circumstances I couldn't control. Like the disciples on the boat I couldn't just get out of a moving car. And like the disciples, my fear displaced my faith.

Fortunately, my friend and I survived our fear and didn't end up like those one hundred Californians that died of fright in the Northridge earthquake. But at times I had my doubts.

We all react to fear in different ways. But most all of us have one thing in common – we let the frightening emotion of fear displace our faith and we forget who is really in control. Jesus taught the disciples this important lesson right after he calmed the storm. "Why are you afraid? What happened to your faith? Surely you don't think I would let you die on this lake? Not at all. God has greater plans for each of you."

Fear is defined² as "a distressing emotion aroused by impending danger, evil or pain whether the threat is real or imagined." The threat to the disciples on the lake was probably real. The threat to my well being on the road to Agra was probably real. But sometimes our fears are more subtle or imagined as the definition of fear allows. Consider what it means to be living in the post-9/11 world and the growing global threat of terrorism.

Today we live in a world that has been radically changed since the events of September 11, 2001. Today, almost eight years later our fear may have subsided somewhat in complacency, but we still live in the shadow of the unknown possibility of future attacks.

One fear we have had to confront since 9/11 is the increasing presence of

the Muslim community in the United States. Immediately following 9/11 an attitude of suspicion spread across America and the world. We reacted out of anger over the attacks. But we also reacted out of fear of the unknown future. And unfortunately, we reacted out of ignorance.

The people who perpetrate violent acts in the name of Islam are not Muslims of faith. They are not even fundamentalists adhering to strict principles of faith and values. The people who carry out events like 9/11 are hyper-fundamentalists. Hyper-fundamentalism exists in all faith traditions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

Just what is a hyper-fundamentalist? There are four characteristics hyper-fundamentalists all have in common – whether they are Muslim or Christian or Jewish.

The first characteristic is a one-dimensional or literal view of scripture. There is one and only one understanding. Scripture is not to be read critically and cannot be called into question for any reason. It is not subject to interpretation.

The second characteristic concerns the hyper-fundamentalist's attitude toward women. For them, there is no place in religion for women to be in authority over men.

The third characteristic is authoritarian male leadership that extends beyond the church to secular society as well as the home. Finally, the fourth characteristic is the ideology that there is no place for interreligious understanding or dialogue. A hyper-fundamentalist does not accept or tolerate other faith traditions.

Contrary to popular belief, hyper-fundamentalism is not a religious problem. It's a human problem – a social problem. Some human beings need rigidity and certainty in their lives. They are compelled to insist that everyone must believe in what

² Webster's College Dictionary (Copyright © 1995, 1992, 1991 by Random House, Inc.), page 487.

they believe in. “It’s my way or the highway” mentality.

The fact is the percentage of hyper-fundamentalists in the Muslim faith is very, very small. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. It’s even growing faster than Christianity in the United States. This has instilled fear in many Americans – a fear that is imagined and not real. It’s a fear that is founded on a general lack of understanding of other faith traditions.

The events of September 11, 2001, were heinous and cruel. They were the acts of hyper-fundamentalists not Muslims of faith. If we turn back the hands of time to the year 1099 we could talk about another sect of hyper-fundamentalists. This group was Christian. They were on a mission they perceived as God’s mission – to purge the Holy Land of Muslims. It was quite simply a heinous and cruel act. Thousands of Muslims were killed in the name of Christianity an act that God would not sanction anymore than God would sanction the 9/11 attacks.

If we are to remain true to the gospel message we must not let our fears displace our faith. The best way to deal with terrorism in the 21st century is to become educated. We need to understand that Muslims are not terrorists. Hyper-fundamentalists are not people of faith. The best way to become educated is to be in conversation with peoples of other faith traditions.

One-on-one encounters allow us to get to know other people as people – not as simply a member of a particular religion or ethnic group. Although they may be different from us in many respects, when we take the time to be in conversation with others we usually find that we have much in common. For starters, we are all children of God. Remember, if you will, that one of the characteristics of a hyper-fundamentalist is that there is no room for

interreligious understanding or dialogue. If we take care to see that fear does not displace our faith we can welcome interfaith dialogue and conversation.

Interfaith dialog is one of my passions in ministry. I believe it helps us to dismiss our fears and suspicions and extend hospitality to people of all ethnic backgrounds and faith traditions, to understand our differences, and to embrace those things we have in common. Interfaith dialog begins with education and understanding. Beginning in August we will be offering a study of world religions. As a part of that study, we will be seeking out other faith traditions to begin a dialog of understanding and love. It is my hope that we might be able to establish an ongoing relationship with one of those traditions.

I hope all of you will consider participating in this study. Come and learn more about the other ways peoples of the world have come to know God. Come and put an end to imagined fear as we seek to be in conversation with those other peoples. Come and see that fear need not displace our faith as we welcome interfaith understanding and and conversation.