

Fear Not!

Let's start when the rooster crowed. Simon Peter had declared to Jesus, "I'll follow you to the death! I'm willing to die for you!" And Jesus had replied, "Peter, before the rooster crows tomorrow morning, you will have denied three times that you even know me." *Fast forward...*

It was a chilly evening in the courtyard at the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem, and Peter was warming himself by a fire. After the mob arrested Jesus in the garden, he followed, and was trying to be invisible; but, somebody recognized him. "He's one of them! He's with Jesus!" And Peter denied it. Three times he denied it. And then the rooster crowed.

The next several days were a nightmare for all Jesus' followers. No more discouraged people could be found than that bewildered, broken, frightened little group of disciples.

Of course, they had good reason to be afraid; some of those who'd had Jesus crucified still stalked the streets, redneck holdouts from Friday's mob violence. And so, the disciples hunkered together, peeking through the curtain, cringing at the sound of every step on the stair. "Blow out the candle! Lock the door!"

Then came Pentecost. The Holy Spirit covered them and filled them, and suddenly those who'd been cowering behind locked doors were out in the street preaching and healing and doing all kinds of things Jesus had done. And whatever they did or said, they always included, "...in the name of Jesus."

One day Peter and John were about to enter the Temple for the 3:00 o'clock hour of prayer. A man was lying on a pallet at the Temple gate, begging. Everyone in Jerusalem knew him. He'd been crippled since birth. But, on this day Peter stopped and said, "I don't have a nickel to my name, but I'll give you what I do have: in the name of Jesus, get up and walk!"

And suddenly the man was leaping and dancing and praising God and creating a general disturbance. A crowd gathered, and Peter seized the moment and proclaimed the Good News of Jesus.

Well, the commotion got the attention of the Temple authorities, who arrested Peter and John for disturbing the peace, and jailed them overnight. The next morning the council gathered to hear their case. We join the story in Acts 4:

ACTS 4:13-20 (NRSV) *Now when they saw the boldness—did your get that word: "boldness?"—of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. ¹⁴When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. ¹⁵So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. ¹⁶They said, "What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been*

done through them; we cannot deny it. ¹⁷But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.” ¹⁸So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; ²⁰for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

Our circumstances are different: unrestrained vigilante mobs don’t stalk the streets; we’re free to speak or act in the name of Jesus. Still, our culture—and in a large sense our world—is a culture of fear. That fear frequently looks like anger, hatred, even rage—or stress and anxiety; but those traits and the behaviors they generate are symptoms—tactics by which we try to avoid and deny a basic fear.

It’s a strange phenomenon: the way our culture relates to fear—avoiding and denying it on the one hand, while fortifying our homes with locks and alarm systems and weapons of defense; but, on the other hand, an almost morbid fascination with fear. Horror movies hover near the top of the list of favorite—which is another way of denying fear: “See, I can go to this horror movie. I’m not afraid.” And yet, it’s almost a badge of honor to post on Facebook: “I went to this movie and had nightmares all night...” Halloween is as big as Christmas; the scarier and more grotesque, the better. Fear is a component—in some ways and in some quarters a major component—of our culture today.

How did we get here? Was America suddenly slam-dunked into a culture of fear on 9/11? or December 7, 1941?

In his new book, *Christ in Crisis*, Jim Wallis says a spirit of fear always leads to hatred and violence. He points out that the rise of the fear culture in America coincides with a decline in American Christianity: a decline he identifies as the result of a distance that exists between Christians and the daily practices of Jesus.

I don’t know if Wallis will draw a direct cause-and-effect relationship. I haven’t finished the book. But the parallel emergence of the rise in fear with the decline in Christianity at least deserves investigation. In the opening to his first letter to Timothy, Paul wrote, “*God did not give us a spirit of fear, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*” (I TIMOTHY 1:7 NRSV) Wherever a spirit of fear dominates, God is not present.

It seems relevant that in the gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus the first words the angel uttered to Mary were, “Fear not.” It seems relevant that in Joseph’s dream he was told, “Fear not to take Mary as your wife.” It seems relevant that the angel’s announcement to the shepherds began with, “Fear not.” It seems relevant that at the empty tomb, an angel greeted the women with, “Fear not.”

And it seems relevant that, when we move to the Acts of the Apostles, the story begins in fear; but within two chapters those who had been cowering behind locked doors were in the streets, fearlessly proclaiming the name of Jesus. And

when Peter and John were brought before the council, Luke says they "saw the boldness of Peter and John."

As I re-read those first chapters of Acts, again, I repeatedly found them speaking and acting "in the name of Jesus." And in the text today, when the council sent Peter and John out of the room so they could decide what to do about them, it seems relevant that they weren't as nervous about these "uneducated and ordinary men" as they were about the name of Jesus. And so they ordered Peter and John to stop speaking in the name of Jesus.

But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; ²⁰for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard."

The disciples faced immediate, tangible threat to their freedom, and even to their lives. Most of us face a totally different kind of fear: one that's less immediate and tangible, more conditional—if things go one way... but if they go another... But the strength Peter and John found, and the promise offered to us through the gospels and verified through their story, are one and the same. That strength is related directly to the closing of the aforementioned distance between Christians and the daily practices of Jesus.

While "turning it over to Jesus" is exactly what we need to do, that phrase has become such a cliché that it's hardly helpful any more. What does that mean: "turn it over to Jesus?" How do you do that?

We start by eliminating the idea that Christianity is accomplished by saying the good confession and getting baptized. Marriage is not accomplished by saying, "I do." That's a wedding. For years I have included in premarital counselling—especially when the wedding is big and elaborate—the statement: "If you'll put as much thought and preparation and work into your marriage as you have into your wedding, your chances increase of having a long and healthy marriage."

Of course a marriage begins with a wedding; and of course Christianity begins with the good confession and baptism. In fact, the New Testament uses the language of marriage and family to describe Christian living. But both marriage and Christianity are long-term, life-long relationships that involve love, commitment, preparation, and daily devotion—and work.

In recent years (and this is a good thing), couples end telephone conversations with, "I love you." They say, "I love you" when they go to bed, when they leave for work, or when they leave the room. It's become a cultural thing (a good one).

That same kind and level of daily devotion will close that distance between Christians and the daily practices of Jesus. I have found in the gospels eight times Jesus said, "Fear not." I'll be gone next Sunday; but, after that, until Advent we'll explore those eight "fear not" passages, and work on closing that distance.