

It Is I; Do Not Be Afraid

"What is fear? Is fear ever necessary or even useful? When is it harmful and destructive? What does it mean to live in a spirit of fear? What does it mean to have a sound mind, and how do we cultivate that? Who are we taught to fear?"¹

And, why do we deny our fear? We call it everything else: worry, anxiety, stress (that's the popular one)... We fear failure and embarrassment; we fear success (because that requires responsibility and accountability). We're afraid of what other people think (although we really try to convince ourselves that we don't care what other people think). We fear disappointing others, and as a result we're afraid to say, "No!" and end up overscheduled and stressed out and exhausted.

And the world can be a scary place. Fear is a prominent feature of public life today, from one partisan extreme to the opposite. From the left, a progressive Christian writer:

"For the first six months of 2017, I was waking up at 4:30 or 5:00 a.m. and finding it hard to get back to sleep. Astonishing and alarming political events were happening almost daily. They seemed to threaten the poorest and most vulnerable, the progress of racial justice, the status and safety of women, the rationality of government, and even truth, itself. And I heard fear from others: fear of the changing demographics of the country, insecurity about their economic future, fear and resentment of elites who had no concern for them, and concern about their religious liberty. I was being flooded with calls and emails from friends and pastors, and others who didn't know what to do. They wanted to know what I made of what was going on at the highest levels of power in America—and the lack of a serious Christian response thus far."²

At the other end of the spectrum a very conservative Christian preacher, responding to the current impeachment hearings Trump, predicted armed violence in the street, and said "Our country could begin to unravel if an elected president is thrown out of office because of lies and the media. It could be a devastating thing. We're in very dangerous territory."

Where does it start? Fear always has been a primary motivator of human behavior; but consider just the span of years represented in this room: start on August 6 and August 9, 1945, when American war planes dropped atomic bombs on Japanese cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

It has been argued that, while those bombs killed thousands of innocent civilians, they essentially ended WWII and saved, perhaps, hundreds of thousands of lives; but, my point this morning is that those events became the springboard for the current culture of fear that grips America—and to some extent, the world.

Remember the Beatniks of the 1950s? There was a subculture called the "Beat" generation—a sense of hopelessness in face of the threat of nuclear war.

¹ Wallis, Jim. *Christ in Crisis*. HarperOne. Kindle Edition, Location 1920.

² *Ibid.*, Location 127.

Their fear was “the bomb.”

And the cold war was raging: tensions rising between the upstart Soviet Union and the Western Alliances. Nikita Khrushchev said, “We will bury you;” so, another source of fear was the threat of Communism; and Senator Joseph McCarthy led the way into a Gestapo-like culture of conspiracy paranoia.

And somehow, while it ebbs and flows, and labels change, America remains stuck in that culture of fear. It's as if we can't come together as a nation unless there's an enemy to fear. Remember the sense of unity in the days following 9/11?

And one of the things that makes all this so dangerous is that some people have learned how to exploit and manipulate that fear to their personal advantage and to the benefit of their own enterprise—including political parties.

Now not all fear is bad. It's an expression of life's most basic need: the need to survive; and, it motivates specific behaviors. An animal backed into a corner by an aggressor will behave in ways it normally would not behave. A mother who normally is calm and gentle, will take on a professional wrestler to defend her child. And if we didn't care at all what other people think, we'd be a nation of slobs. So, fear is not, by itself, a bad thing.

But people deny fear—call it everything else—confuse it with other motivators and justify overwork and overscheduling—call it making a life for themselves and their families. So, America is the most stressed-out nation on the planet. 13% take anti-depressants, up 65% since 2002. 18% take anti-anxiety medications, and that represents only 36.9% of those who suffer anxiety disorders. Almost 1/3 of adolescents suffer anxiety disorders—38.0% of the girls and 26.1% of the boys. Whatever it's called, fear is robbing more and more Americans of a quality of life.

And some people have learned how to initiate fear—exploit it and manipulate it. And truth and honesty and integrity rarely are related to those efforts.

So, what does all this have to do with Christian faith? 86 years ago FDR said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear, itself.” It's always fear that does a people in—not so much by overestimating the evil we confront, but by underestimating our ability, with God's help, to overcome it. Maybe we can move into the faith dimension of this topic through a story in JOHN 6:16-21 (NRSV):

<i>When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹When they had rowed about three or four</i>	<i>miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. ²⁰But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” ²¹Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.</i>
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“Be not afraid” occurs eight times on the lips of Jesus. In fact, 365 times the scriptures command us to not fear or be afraid in reaction to the world, or

people, or the events around us, or storms at sea or storms in our lives. 365 times! That's enough for a reflection every day of the year!"³ "Be not afraid."

Paul wrote to, a young pastor in Ephesus (and it's the text for this series of sermons), "...for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." (2 TIMOTHY 1:7 NRSV) Easy for him to say. Right?

The writer of the first epistle of John says, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear..." (4:18 NRSV) Again: easy to say.

In one of the most beloved scriptural writings, the psalmist wrote, "Yay, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me." (23:4 KJV)

And in today's story from John's Gospel, Jesus says, "*It is I; do not be afraid.*" Interestingly, when the disciples first saw Jesus, they were terrified. In Matthew's version, and Mark's, the disciples thought he was a ghost! What would you think: you're on the water and the storm is raging and the waves are crashing and the water is foaming and the boat is tossing; and you look up and see Jesus walking on those demon-infested waves as if he were taking a Sunday afternoon stroll.

The disciples were terrified. Just seeing Jesus wasn't enough. But then he spoke, and they recognized his voice. You see, they didn't just know about Jesus. They hadn't just heard stories about him—sermons and Sunday School lessons; hymns and contemporary Christian music. They had spent time *with* him—talking—listening—before the storm. They didn't just know about him. They knew him.

It's almost a cliché that Christianity isn't a religion; it's a relationship. It's true; but what kind of relationship is it? On Facebook, I have relationships with several people I've never met face-to-face. I've seen photos of some of them; but, if we passed each other on the street, I'm not sure I'd recognize them. I've never heard them speak. I wouldn't recognize their voices.

Do you see where I'm going?

If you wait until there's a storm—until you're afraid—or stressed out—or anxious—or worried—or anticipating the worst—you may not recognize the source of calm and peace; you may not recognize the voice that takes away the fear.

That's why it's so important to spend time—every day—in that relationship: studying, meditating on the Word, praying... and not just any prayer—not just the kind of prayer in which you do all the talking.

Prayer is not summoning your personal genie; it's not a magic formula: "Bipity-bopity-boo" and you're suddenly without fear and full of power and love and self-discipline. It's that relationship thing. It grows; it matures through the daily

³ Wallis, Jim. Christ in Crisis . HarperOne. Kindle Edition, Location 1928.

practice of those spiritual disciplines: prayer, meditation, study and worship.

So, when you ask *God* to speak to you—to guide you—to fill you with that “Spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline,” expect an answer. Listen. Wait. *God* will respond. And eventually—it may take days or weeks; but, eventually, if you persist, you’ll hear that voice, and believe it: “It is I. Do not be afraid.”

(Prayer Slide)

Pastoral Prayer

O Lord, you are the one who made the seas and all that lives within it. You are the one who made the world and all who dwell therein.

We delight in honoring you this day with our worship and praise. Each day we wake up to the stresses of this life. Each day we rise to face new challenges, to address new questions, to weather new storms. Often, we find ourselves adrift on an unpredictable sea. Sometimes we seem so far from shore; but your gospel is a lifeline for us. Your good news is an anchor, for you have come to us in Jesus, and you keep on coming to us: entering our dilemmas, sitting with us, staying with us, reassuring us.

Because you reassure us, we are bold to ask for ourselves and for all those who are in some great storm in their life, that you give us a faith like Peter's, when Jesus urges us to risk the seemingly impossible. And we ask for faith and endurance to wait for your deliverance in the storm. And we ask, each day, for awareness of your presence, and for the confidence within your presence we are never alone.

We know your presence with us. We know you have heard our concerns and our joys. Now use us as vessels of your overflowing love. Through us, touch our brothers and sisters with healing, with wholeness and with joy. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.