

## **Fearless: Fear of Violence** Sunday, 5/16/21

Last week we faced the danger we find ourselves in when our fear of running out of something we depend on overshadows our trust in God's daily bread. Worrying about running out of time, money, food, or anything else is misplaced focus and energy. Instead, we need to invest our focus on seeking God's Kingdom in the present moment called today.

This week, we'll acknowledge the brutality that seems to flourish in our world and the resulting fears of violence that seem to be more and more common each year.

When I was a kid, the kind of violence I was most afraid of was different than the fears of today. Back then, there was quite a bit of fear centered on the idea that the Soviet Union would either be incinerating us with nuclear bombs or parachuting in with invading troops. Those were the days when people said things like, "Better dead than red." We were the last of the "Duck and Cover" generation, and instead of holding active shooter drills in school we learned about what to do if an atomic bomb exploded while we were in class. I know that violent hate crimes were happening in the 60's, but as a white kid living in a nondiverse suburbs, I was pretty unaware of things like that. Movies and television told me what to fear, and back then it was nuclear incineration rather than drive-by gang violence or car jackings.

Even my experiences with school bullies were tame in comparison with the stories of today. I was threatened once by a kid with a bow and arrow as I was walking home from school, but I never saw or even heard about guns in schools.

As a young adult I used to watch the morning and evening news on television. The local news was basically a body count from the day's violence while the national news tended to cover political violence. These days I get my news on the internet, but so little has changed as far as the content. Someone coined the term "doom scrolling" to describe the morbid ritual of scrolling through newsfeeds on your computer or phone. It's an almost unconscious rehearsing of the sorrows of the world by ingesting the latest violence inflicted on our neighbors. Some of that violence is inflicted through malice, some by accident, and some through circumstances of the natural world, what has been rather unfortunately referred to as "acts of God." Whatever the form or the cause, I've never seen or read the news without also ingesting a large helping of violence, complete with video and eyewitness

accounts.

Simply hiding away from the news isn't a reasonable solution, because as God's stewards of this world, we do have an obligation to be knowledgeable and engaged in what's happening around us. And this has always been a violent world. Is there a way for us to be aware of the many forms of violence that threaten our wellbeing, without being overwhelmed by fear?

Our first Bible reading from Hebrews 11 recounts some of the well-remembered stories of Bible heroes from Sunday School lessons. Who doesn't remember David bravely confronting the giant Philistine, Goliath? It was David's faith in God's protection that gave him the courage to stand up to Goliath and slay him. Does that mean that any one of us can pick up a sling and a handful of smooth stones and confidently engage in mortal combat with whomever, or whatever, threatens our safety? Of course not. And just to make the point clear, the writer of Hebrews goes on to enumerate a different kind of hero, the kind we're much less likely to hear about in Sunday School lessons: Those who were tortured and imprisoned, stoned, sawed in two, murdered in cold blood, and cast out to wander the world without clothing, homes or friends. That's right, it's possible to be faithful to God, and to still be on the receiving end of the sharp sticks that life sometimes has to offer. Is that bad news?

Well, it certainly means that this business of walking in faith is a bit more complicated than we sometimes care to admit. It doesn't mean that we can't find comfort from our fear of violence through faith in God. It does mean that we need to look at a bigger picture than we're used to, because God works for good across many years and many people. As the author of Hebrews puts it, "Not one of these people, even though their lives of faith were exemplary, got their hands on what was promised. God had a better plan for us: that their faith and our faith would come together to make one completed whole, their lives of faith not complete apart from ours."<sup>1</sup> In other words, we find our meaning and security as a community, as God's people, and not as lone sheep off wandering in the wilderness. Some of God's people win heroic battles. Many of God's people meet ignoble deaths. But

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 11:39-40. The Message.

together, God's people will prevail, and God's Kingdom will be established on earth.

What's more, in our next reading, Jesus reminds us that we were created to live, not just for this life, but for eternity. No suffering in this life can prevent our inheritance of an eternal life with Christ. I'm reading from the Gospel of Matthew, in the tenth chapter, beginning with verse 26, in the New Living Translation. [{Read Matthew 10:26-31 NLT}](#)

Here's an attempt to reduce Jesus's teaching from Matthew 10 to a simple picture. Live for the line, not for the dot. The dot is our finite existence in this life, while the line represents our eternal life to come. The dot does matter, and as we learned last week, Jesus frequently calls us back to the present moment when our fears of the future overwhelm us. But the present moment, and all the other moments comprising the total of our lifetimes, are but the origin of a journey that has a beginning and no ending. I've used this metaphor before when talking about financial stewardship. We should give to the line, not the dot. In other words, we should see our giving as an investment in an eternal future. In the same way, Jesus says, we should judge our fear of violence based on the security of our eternal future, not on our fragile existence in the here and now. What kind of violence are you most afraid of? Biological warfare? Bullying? Sexual violence? Armed robbery? Car accidents? Whatever it is, it may be able to harm your body, but it can't destroy your soul.

One of the classic New Testament passages that speaks to our eternity with Christ is found in Romans 8, where Paul writes, "If God is for us, who can ever be against us?...Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?...And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>2</sup>

Can you feel the power of that truth? There's a reason that I always read that passage at graveside services- it's a reminder that we are Easter People, and that even death doesn't

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 8:31b, 35, 38-39. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition).

get the final word. But it's not just for funerals! We need the power that comes though that promise for facing the of fears of each day. We shouldn't be in a hurry to leave this live, which is a precious and unique gift. But neither should we fear the loss of our life to someone or something outside of our control. Because nothing can separate us from the eternal love of God.

It's been a brutal year of violence, hasn't it? The Allina Clinic shootings here in Buffalo made it personal. The riots and police shootings in Minneapolis and other surrounding communities made it personal. The riots at the US capital made it personal. The rash of car jackings and suicides made it personal. The truth is that we have always lived with the menace of violence, even though technologies have changed and the worldwide visibility of violence has increased with the advent of mass media and the internet. I don't imagine that any number of elections, legislative agendas, reforms, or technological developments will ever free us from the threat of violence. But we can be free from letting our fear of violence drive our attitudes and behaviors. As Max Lucado notes, "courage emerges, not from increased police security, but from enhanced spiritual maturity."<sup>3</sup>

My hope and prayer are that none of us need experience the varieties of cruel violence this world has to offer. My observation is that all of us will, at least in some small ways and at some times, suffer violence. Some of us will commit acts of violence. Certainly, Jesus was no stranger to violence. If you do find yourself in the grip of fear, for yourself or for someone you love, remember that your identity and your worth are not limited by the flesh and bones you're wearing today. Our experiences of today are only the beginning, a prelude to an eternity that will be without fear, without suffering, and without death. And we don't have to wait for the resurrection to begin living as Easter People today; Fearless people of hope because of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Please take some time now to reflect on your security in Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> Max Lucado. *Fearless: Imagine Your Life Without Fear*, pp 95-96. Thomas Nelson (2009).



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