

Fear Not

Fear is a foe of action, fruitfulness, and accomplishment. It invites anxiety, often flirts with paralysis, and delights in anger. No one knows better than God how much fear can control a human heart, rendering one to be frustrated and stuck in their ways. In fact, throughout the Old and New Testaments of our Bible, God implores his followers to trust him, and fear not. But we humans are not easy to convince. Too often, we prefer holding onto and controlling the reins of our lives, reluctant to trust anyone, not even God. We would rather be racked with anxiety than give up control of our lives. It makes no sense, but we do it all the time.

This summer witnessed a dramatic and horrible increase of radical Muslim terrorist activity in the western world. A suicide bomber's objective is to create terror, paralyzing fear and unrelenting anger in the hearts of those being attacked. Terrorism is designed to create mass confusion and irrational thought. Generalizations leading to demonization often become a way of life as a result of terrorist activity. People lose control of their minds and hearts as they struggle to make sense of the overwhelming horror.

There are approximately 1.6 billion Muslims in the world. Experts estimate that about 10 percent of them are radical, fundamentalist, or militant. That means there are 160 million very angry people poised and ready to target and eliminate their opposition. Many are congregated within organizations such as ISIS, Al Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, Boko Haram, Taliban, and Al Shabaab. And joining them now are unpredictable cell groups and even individuals in the seclusion of their living rooms looking at computer screens becoming radicalized in ways undetectable to common policing and surveillance. The average person in the United States is left with the perplexing question of what to do. Many Americans are asking themselves these days "how in the world can I tell the difference between a peaceful, moderate Muslim and one who is on their way to becoming a terrorist?"

As I contemplate this question, I often think of Jesus when he traveled the countryside with his disciples. One of his disciples became a traitor, filled with greed, distrust, and evil intent. Nevertheless, Jesus somehow handled that situation with calm. He was not tempted to think that all his disciples would turn out perfectly. He knew that life on this side of eternity is filled with potential peril. Jesus did not allow Judas to paralyze him, or cause him great anxiety. Not by any means. Jesus was peaceful and powerful, always. He trusted God the father with every



Judas betraying Jesus

moment of his life, even when Satan was prowling around him. He remained focused on his mission. He never stopped moving or loving the person in front of him. He refused to be terrorized. He knew that the power in him was greater than that of the world.

In my work I've become aware of Christians who are jailed and tortured in countries where religious freedom is virtually non-existent. I think about these people all the time, confined in small, unhealthy jail cells, on the brink of death each day. Usually, the government officials involved have sold the person's property and confiscated all of their wealth. If they are ever released, these suffering servants of our Lord return to a life of poverty or little possessions. Yet, they survive through their incredible faith, often becoming witnesses in jail for their Lord.

In 2009, I was particularly moved by the mass demonstrations in the streets of Tehran, Iran, when citizens protested in great numbers, claiming that the elections had been rigged in favor of the hard-line conservative candidate. If you recall, the Ayatollahs, other religious leaders and Revolutionary Guard had brutally cracked down on the demonstrators; many were jailed and tortured. Christians were one of the targeted groups. An Assembly of God pastor, Farshid Fathi, was arrested in 2010 and spent five years in prison. He was just released last December and reunited with his wife and children. Faithful, praying Christians around the world celebrated his release from captivity.

Farshid emerged from prison to find a completely different scene in his country - one where hope is slowly beginning to replace the dark pessimism that has prevailed in Iran since the revolution of 1979. In recent years, the underground church in Iran has become the fastest growing church in the world, now numbering three million believers. What his jailers had intended for evil has become a source of hope for other Christians in Iran. Farshid and thousands of others who have been jailed and tortured for their faith have not let radical Muslims in their country paralyze them with their terrorist tactics. On the contrary, they remain on the march, and they will not stop until every citizen in Iran has gained access to the Good News of Jesus Christ. They have a vision that Iran will become the first Muslim country to become Christian. May we come alongside them in this dream!



Farshid Fathi with his family

This is an hour for the American Church to remember the words of our Lord - to not fear. We cannot allow terrorists or radical Muslims to jumble our minds and cause

us to become friends with evil. The only thing that will bring a radical Muslim to his knees is the power, love and grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ. We cannot allow fear to enter our souls and extinguish our faith or hope in our own country. Fear has no place in the Gospel. But if the American Church becomes increasingly tepid in its faith, or allows the temptations of secularism or agnosticism to overwhelm it, terrorists will surely gain the upper hand and the prospects of peace will slip even further from our hands.

When the Israelites were facing the doom and judgment of the Assyrian army in the eighth century BC, the prophet Isaiah implored them to keep the faith and return to the days when they had once trusted their Lord. The Israelites were panicked and fearful to their cores as enemy armies surrounded them. It was in this context that Isaiah wrote of God's promise to them; "...Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior." (Isaiah 43: 1b-3a)



The Prophet Isaiah

In the first century AD, 50 years after the crucifixion of Jesus, the Roman army was increasingly chasing down Christians, stoning, jailing, harassing, and killing them. Within this environment, the last remaining apostle, John, wrote epistles, urging Christians to trust the resurrected Jesus, not to give into fear, and continue to share the Good News through acts of courage and love. In his epistle we know as 1st John, the apostle John wrote these now famous words; "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." (1 John 4:18)

As you end summer vacations and return to work, school and daily routines, check your heart for what you fear. Ask God to help you know your fears and to deal with them. He more than anyone wants you to live a life devoid of fear. As Isaiah wrote; "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." (Isaiah 41:10)