

BE NOT AFRAID
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Christ the King Sunday
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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John 18:33-37

Then Pilate entered the headquarters and summoned Jesus. [Be afraid, Jesus, be very afraid. You are facing the representative of the Roman Empire who allows no King but Caesar.] "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered: "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here, which is to say, it's not from a headquarters like yours.

Revelation 1:4b-8

And now this, from Revelation, the last book in the Bible. The voice of God, which is say, the voice of Love, says: *"I am the Alpha and the Omega who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."* In other words, there is nothing greater!

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Before we get to "be not afraid" we must start with "be afraid" for that's what most of us are. Scared to death.

We now know that the angry, hateful, crazed, and ruthless agents of ISIS can wreck death and destruction just about anywhere. If they can randomly slaughter defenseless civilians in the heart of Paris they can strike at a restaurant, movie theatre, concert hall, or stadium near you—or your next flight. There is no perfectly safe place unless you hunker down in your basement and never go out.

It hardly helps to cite statistics. But it's true nonetheless: we are more likely to be killed by lightning, by a shark, by a bus, by cancer, or high blood pressure than by a terrorist.

Terrorism aims to provoke fear and panic. And it works. We can't control our reaction. Fear is natural. We can't control our reaction. But we can control our response. We are afraid, scared to death.

Be afraid.

And be afraid that this moment of panic could cause our nation to destroy itself and its ideals more completely than a terrorist attack ever could. To divide the world or our nation into Us against Them is to invite disaster. Pathological dualism fuels ISIS's holy war. The righteous against the unrighteous. The holy against the unholy.

We must not succumb to pathological dualism. We are Them. And they are Us.

Like it or not we are all one human family. We are all capable of great good and great evil. Every nation is capable of great good and great evil. To think otherwise is a sin and a fatal deception. It is to be self-righteous and arrogant. That is not the way of Christ.

Democrats and Republicans both need to take a deep breath and remember that love is more powerful than hate.

That doesn't mean we allow murderous thugs to kill us or our loved ones. To love your enemy doesn't mean to let them trample over you. But it does mean to regard them as a brother or sister gone mad. And love like that is not easy.

If my brother came to kill my children and I couldn't stop him any other way than with a bullet, I would. I am not that kind of pacifist! I would protect my children fiercely. But I would not gloat if my brother died from my bullet. I would cry my eyes out. I would feel deep regret and remorse and eventually ask myself: *what did I and our parents do to contribute to his rage and madness.*

Those murderous ISIS thugs should not be allowed to continue their mad rampage. Our nation along with the nations of Europe and the Middle East must cooperate to stop their vicious, cold-blooded mass murders.

Military force can stop them. It's why our brave men and women serve in the armed forces. But it's only a first step; it's not the final one.

Violence can end violence in the short term; but it can't end violence for long. Violence breeds violence. War can bring peace for a spell. But only justice, political resolve and a conversion from an ideology of intolerance to an ideology of tolerance can sustain peace.

This week I revisited the primal mythic tale of the first brothers, Cain and Abel. It's a profound insight into human nature from the Great Ancestors.

Cain thought Abel was more favored. Cain was angry because rightly or wrongly he felt treated unjustly. Many people, groups and nations know that feeling. Abel was favored. Cain was disfavored. Cain was angry. And so he killed his brother Abel in cold blood.

What if Abel had seen it coming? What if Abel had intelligence that warned him? What if he had packed a knife that day? What if he had struck first and killed Cain? Would Abel have rejoiced? Would he not feel regret and even remorse and ask questions of himself and his parents?

Cain could not overcome sibling rivalry and hatred. Anger got the best of him. But, according to the tale, God did not reject Cain. God provided a way for Cain to come home, to come to his senses. God, in this ancient tale, is more of a parent than a judge.

According to legend, Abraham's son Isaac, born of Sarah, is the father of the Jewish people. Ishmael, his half brother, born of Hagar, is the father of the Muslims.

Isaac and Ishmael had reason to hate the other. One was more favored than the other, so each thought. They grew apart. But years later when their father Abraham died they stood side by side, reconciled. They had found their way home. Brothers in love.

Isaac's twin sons, Jacob and Esau hated each other. Each thought the other more favored. Esau swore he'd kill Jacob but by the time the whole tale is told out,

they are reconciled, hugging and kissing each other. They found their way home. Brothers in love.

These narratives from Genesis are about one family but it turns out to be a narrative about all families, tribes and nations. We may be one family but we are all capable of hating and killing each other if anger gets the best of us. Real or perceived injustice against ourselves, or the ones we love ignites anger. That's a normal, healthy human reaction. We can't control our reaction; but we can control our response.

And that's where our faith tradition comes into play. Life is hard, sometimes cruel but grace abounds. There is always a way back home, a way toward reconciliation.

Love is great. But love is not enough. For love can and does play favorites. It's particular.

So love is not enough. It's necessary but it's not sufficient.

And thus our faith tradition urges justice as well for justice is the social and political expression of love. Justice can be universal in a way that love can't. As the prophet Micah put it: *What does the Lord require of us but to love kindness, do justice and walk humbly.*

We walk and act humbly knowing that even our sworn enemy is truly our brother and sister. It may be virtually impossible to empathize with ISIS, to stand in their boots for even a second, but love requires the effort. Even Cain won God's sympathy and grace.

Loving one's enemy is not a platitude or sentimentality. It's a practice that requires a change of heart and outlook. It takes courage. It takes faith. It takes a faith community to keep us faithful.

Are you a king, Pilate asked Jesus?

No, not your kind of king, Jesus replied.

Pilate represented the kingdom of Rome, a system of domination and violence. The Roman Empire, like all empires, wanted world peace and it would kill anyone who got in the way. That world is a world of endless revenge and retaliation.

If my kingdom were of your world, my followers would take up arms and fight. But my kingdom is of another sort, said Jesus.

The way of Jesus is to overcome group and national rivalry with a vision of universal kinship. We are all children in one great and diverse family. We look, think and pray differently but we are all kin to one another.

Still, for the time being, we must keep a standing army and a police force and hang on to the sword. But we must hold it sadly until the day when all swords will be turned into pruning hooks and we learn to study war no more.

This week I've been reading *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. In that book he tells this story.

On Friday January 9th of this year, two days after the attack on Charlie Hebdo, an Islamist terrorist entered a kosher supermarket in Paris and killed four Jews. A Muslim employee, Lassana Bathily, saw what was happening and, out of sight of the gunman, hid twenty Jewish customers in a cold storage room, saving their lives.

When Lassana was commended for his courage, he replied: "We are all brothers and sisters. It's not a question of Jews, Christians or Muslims. We were all in the same boat. We had to help each other to get out of the crisis."

And maybe that's why the French are still willing to accept 30,000 Muslim Syrian refugees. That may be humane but it is also quite rational. If only our nation would be as rational.

Of course, there could be a terrorist or two lurking in that number. But more likely there are hundreds if not thousands of *Lassanas* who will one day thwart a terrorist attack and save French lives again. Or find a cure for cancer.

We are in the same boat. We have to help each other get out of this crisis.

I so wish our nation would embrace such a vision of kinship again.

Be not afraid, says our Beloved Lord Jesus. Be not afraid because heaven only knows there are so many reasons to be afraid, scared to death.

Do not be afraid.

May we hear those words this morning and take them to heart. May the deeply frightened people of France and Mali hear them. May the badly broken Syrian refugees hear them. May our deeply wounded and religiously crazed ISIS brothers and sisters hear them and take them to heart.

Be not afraid. I am with you. I will lead you home. I will lead you back to your lost brothers and sisters.