

Beyond the Scourge of Fear

One of the dominant themes of this Christian season of Advent is hope. Another is love. One of the clearest evidences that we hardly live in a Christian world, or a Christian nation, is that we are people driven by fear, rather than hope and love.

Let me briefly re-visit the familiar Christmas story in the Gospel of Luke. The very first thing the divine messenger says in this Gospel is “Fear not.” Spoken to Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, this exhortation is later also spoken to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and then to the shepherds, who are the first to hear tell of Jesus’ birth. “Fear not!” says the angel. “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”

Those who look to Jesus as a manifestation of God’s presence in the world have been overtured by good news, a message of hope and faith and joy and love. They should never be driven by fear. Fear is evidence of a lack of faith and trust in God.

Psychologists and other students of human behavior recognize that fear often distorts our perceptions and impairs our judgment. It’s hard to think straight when beset by fear. Fear also makes it hard to care about others, to express love, or to live in hope.

If all people who profess to be Christian understood this and lived accordingly, we would respond very differently in the face of the various threats we encounter, and will probably increasingly encounter, in our perilous world. Whether it’s terrorism, immigration, or global climate change, people of different creeds or colors or nationalities, or death and taxes, we must find some way to get beyond the politics of fear. We need a politics of hope, of possibility, of transformative change.

Unrestrained fear, like anger, eats us up, and yields too much power to that which troubles us. When we respond to terrorism with fear, the terrorists win. When we fear people of another religion, we discredit our own. When we try too hard to preserve and protect ourselves – from death, or mishap, or the “other” – we let fear and death rob us of the life we already have. We imperil our neighbors, our society, and our own souls.

Do you want a better life? Do you care about others? Do you aim to follow a divine path? Then do not be afraid!

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