

“Fear Is Obstacle to Faith and Action!”

Aristotle believed that courage was the first of human virtues, because it makes all the other virtues possible. If courage is such an important virtue, why is it not more frequently mentioned in the scriptures of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament? I don't know—but I do know this. Among the most important exhortations throughout the scriptures, voiced especially when the human encounters the divine, is this: “Fear not!”

So says God to Abraham, to Moses, and to the people of Israel. So says the angel to Joseph and to Mary. So says Jesus to his disciples. So says the angel to the women at Jesus' tomb, and to Paul on a perilous voyage.

In the biblical view, it seems, courage is less a separate and distinct virtue than an integral part of faith. I think courage is also integral to hope and love, which together with faith are the three distinctly Christian virtues. This much is clear: fear is an obstacle to faith, and to hopeful action. And, as stated in I John, “perfect love casts out fear.”

Here is a message for a fearful world—and for the fear-mongers among us. Granted, we have much to fear, from tobacco to terrorists. Having crossed the threshold into the nuclear age, having possibly even passed the tipping point toward ecological disaster, we will never live in a world without real threats to human happiness and survival.

Alas! where are the profiles in courage in our public life these days? Politicians pander to our prejudices and fears. The administration trades on terror. Foreign policy is built on suspicion and distrust. We seem to have lost faith in others, and even in ourselves. Have we abandoned the “angels of our better natures” for preemptive war, national security, and economic imperialism? People of religious faith, of all people, should refuse to be terrorized—whether by actual terrorists, or by dire warnings served up by their governments to secure their compliance with policies of greater political repression and social control.

Christianity and rabbinic Judaism were born in the crucible of imperial domination. These and the other great faith traditions are now being tested not simply by the intellectual challenges of modern science and technology, but also by the ideologies—and transient creature comforts—of nationalism, imperialism, capitalism, and corporate globalization. Do not fear to imagine a different, more hospitable world, and a more promising destiny.

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