

THE POLITICS OF FEAR

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

Genesis 1:1-10 NRSV

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Matthew 14:22-33 NRSV

On September 12, 2001 after repeated attempts to call my friends in New York, I got through the overloaded phone lines. My friend Colleen answered the phone. I was scheduled to interview on September 14 with the church where her husband was senior minister. I don't recall too many of the specifics of the conversation—two men in the church who worked at the World Trade Center were missing and presumed dead, several others in the church narrowly escaped with their lives, scores of people in their Long Island town were missing and so on. One thing Colleen said sticks in my memory, however. "I've never felt like anyone wanted to kill me before, and now I feel there are people out there who want me and my family dead."

Perhaps it was at that moment when I realized that I was living in a different world than I had previously known; a world where fear took a new form and walked among those whom I care about most. The church in New York skipped my interview and told me to come up and start work; the need was too immediate. (Besides, many at the church had met me on a previous visit and the airports were shut down anyway.) I arrived a few weeks later too late to understand the terror of 9-11 directly, but I did get to experience its aftermath—grief, anger and fear.

In the following days, weeks, months and years, not only New Yorkers but all of America learned we had good reasons to be afraid, and in our quest for security, we gave up on and gave away the lessons that fear had to teach us about who we are as a nation and as individuals. We entered not just one war against a nation sheltering those who attacked us but also a second one against a nation that had not. When questions arose over these uses of our military power, those asking the questions were branded as unpatriotic. When people stood ready to sacrifice for the greater good, we were told that the best thing we could do was to go shopping. In our fear, we allowed rights to be taken away, people to be imprisoned with no chance for a trial and torture to be carried out in our name.

In moments of fear, all kinds of things become acceptable that are unthinkable in calmer times.

I think the Jedi master Yoda said it well, when he told young Anakin Skywalker who would later grow up to be Darth Vader, "Fear is the path to the Dark Side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering." Yoda may be a fictional character portrayed by a puppet and CGI, but I think he has a point.

Of course, the anger, hate and suffering that can spring from fear is not just for nation states; it is also for small towns. Recently, I decided to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. It was assigned to me in the eighth grade, but like most of the great works of

literature I was assigned in school, I only read the Cliff's Notes about it rather than the book itself. For some reason, I picked it up again recently. There's a great scene in it that depicts what happens when fear and prejudice take hold of a community.

The book takes place in a rural Alabama town during the Depression and centers around the trial of a black man, Tom Robinson, who is accused of raping a white woman. Robinson is defended by Atticus Finch, the father of the book's narrator, the young girl Scout. As the trial nears and Robinson is moved to the city jail with its lax security, Finch stands guard outside the jail, unarmed except for a newspaper he reads under a single light bulb. A mob of white men show up to take Robinson out of the jail and presumably lynch him. As they confront Atticus, his son Jem and daughter Scout run out of the darkness to stand with their father. In the end, the mob leaves when Scout, not understanding what is going on, speaks to one of the men, Walter Cunningham, about his own son who happens to be her schoolmate. Cunningham then does a strange thing. He bends down to Scout and tells her he will pass on her greetings to his son. Then he orders the mob of men to back down and head home.

The next day as Scout begins to understand the danger they were in, she questions why men she knows as good people from the town would be so filled with hate. Walter Cunningham is the father of her schoolmate and the client of her father; she had thought he was a friend. Atticus tries to explain the situation to her and says,

"A mob's always made up of people, no matter what. Mr. Cunningham was part of a mob last night, but he was still a man. Every mob in every Southern town is always made up of people. . . It took an eight year-old child to bring 'em to their senses, didn't it? That proves something—that a gang of wild animals can be stopped, simply because they're still human. . . you children last night made Walter Cunningham stand in my shoes for a minute. That was enough."¹

Fear enables mobs to happen, but mobs are made up of people. Mobs can wage "pre-emptive war" and lynch a man with the wrong color skin. Mobs can assassinate the character of another with gossip and mobs can make people remain silent when jokes are told about blacks, Hispanics or gays. Nonetheless, mobs are made up of individual people.

Fear comes to us from a very basic and primitive part of our brains called the amygdala. Scientists believe this part of the brain evolved first, long before the neocortex or reasoning part of our brain. The amygdala responds to a threat with a fight or flight

response, so that our ancient ancestors did not end up as some carnivore's lunch. This part of the brain overrides any reasoning so that you are not still sitting there cogitating while the Tyrannosaurus gobbles you up.²

Although fear can cause our brains to act in such a way that gets us away from danger, the amygdala can be easy to trigger, even by calling to mind a fear that exists in the abstract. There is a reason why politicians go negative and speak of threats to our security—militarily and economically—it works on us at a powerful level that short circuits our ability to reason or think. The 18th century British philosopher Edmund Burke wrote, “No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear.” One researcher of politics and psychology gives the example of an economic threat robbing us of our reasoning power: “Fear that you cannot provide for your family because of an economic downturn can translate into hatred for immigrants.”³ Fear can physiologically shut down our ability to reason. For example, in the case of the person afraid of losing his or her job, fear can inhibit that person's ability to consider the facts that economic troubles are caused by many factors and are not the fault of any one group of people.

So what do we do about our fears? If they come to us out of the deepest parts of our brains, deeper than the thinking and reasoning part of who we are, do we stand a chance against them? In some circumstances, we cannot control them and that is a good thing, remember the hungry Tyrannosaurus? In other circumstances, we use that reasoning part of our brain and we stop ourselves from overreacting in ways that lack compassion and decency.

We can learn coping skills on how to deal with a crisis. We can literally re-train our brains how to react when threats arise. That's why emergency response workers train for an emergency, so they can respond appropriately in a chaotic situation. We still need our amygdala and its ability to get us out of danger, but in moments where reason is required, risk of danger is worth taking and avoidance of making circumstances worse is desired, our more rational brains can work.

Yet, when the 9-11's of the world occur and we are confronted by our own weaknesses in the face of death, reason may not be enough. Also, in moments when our own deep-seated understandings of our own identity are challenged by someone different from us—someone of a different race, nationality, sexual orientation or belief system—we can easily and even unconsciously allow our reason to be overwhelmed by fear. In such moments, it is faith or more specifically whom we have faith in that can help us face our fears. I believe at the most crucial moments of life—moments that determine who we are as individuals and communities—moments where we cannot think our way out of our fears—we have a choice between fear and faith.

Fears always seem worse in the night, and it was in the early hours of the morning that Jesus walked on the water towards his disciples. They had been rowing all night with the wind against them, and they were exhausted. They look up and see what they take to be a ghost and they are terrified. In that exhausted moment of fear, Jesus says, “Take heart.

Do not be afraid.” One gets out of the boat, but seeing the wind and the waves he gives into his fears. The others remain in the boat rowing against the wind. To all, Jesus says, “Take heart,” or as another translation puts it, “Take courage.”⁴

The biblical scholar Richard Swanson notes in his commentary on this passage,

“Water is not only water, at least not when the storyteller is Jewish. . . . Water is the tense embodiment of the precarious balancing act that is life in God’s creation. Water was pushed up and back when God made a safe place for human life, according to Genesis 1, but water waits, just on the other side of the sky. . . . Water waits, in Jewish storytelling to return God’s creation to the formless void, the dangerous watery chaos, that existed before God began to create.”⁵

In Genesis 1, the chaotic void that existed prior to God’s work of creation is described as water. All is water and darkness—above, below, all around. God carves out a space in the midst of this water for life to occur. The NRSV describes it as God making a dome to keep out the water above and land to keep out the water below. The world as we know it exists as a capsule in the midst of dark and chaotic waters. Throughout scripture, water and God’s control over it becomes a major motif that hearkens back to creation, yet the waters of chaos and nothingness are never gone, just held at bay and ready to break in at any moment.⁶

We can get too literal here and reject the imagery of Genesis 1 on scientific grounds. To do so is to miss the power of this imagery to speak to the precariousness of life and the danger that lurks nearby for all of us. Just because we reject this understanding of cosmology on scientific grounds does not mean the passage has no meaning for us today. The waters of tragedy can come for any of us at any time. Fear of that rushing water can lead to great pain.

As they proved powerless against the wind and the waves of the sea, the disciples were surrounded by the dark waters of chaos. Like the Spirit or Wind of God hovering over the waters at creation, Jesus walks across the waves to the disciples in order to remind them and us who remains in control of the universe. In the swirling waters of a threatening world, Jesus comes to us and says, “Do not be afraid.”

Yet, unlike the story of Genesis where God hovers above the waters, what if Jesus did not hover like some kind of alien spaceship immune to the chaos around him? What if, as Richard Swanson writes,

“‘walking on the sea’ means that Jesus walks on the water the way people walk on deep snow: sometimes on the surface crust, sometimes breaking through, sometimes floundering, stumbling as the almost solid-enough snow gives way unevenly? . . . This Jesus gets wet, and works very hard indeed, as he struggles through the storm and the water, sometimes on the

surface, sometimes wallowing almost to his waist, walking to help people who are also tortured by the waves.”⁷

In Jesus, God comes near to help our weakened faith and to help us in the midst of moments when our fears seek to strip away our humanity.

This week our community discovered a real threat in its midst. The chaos of drugs and violence made the front page and the top of the evening news. Police arrested 14 individuals at a drug house when one group of thugs invaded it apparently to rob the dealers inside. I pass this house on the way home every day, and I will pass it going home after church today. This incident presents us with the dilemma of how to respond—out of fear or out of faith.

Did you notice how the *St. Joseph News-Press* ran the story early in the week? The story described the people arrested as “the group of Hispanics and black men,” even though their ethnicity has no bearing on the story. This is not the first time I have noticed our newspaper giving the ethnicity of a minority involved in a crime when there was no real need to do so, but I have yet to see an article where a white criminal’s ethnicity is mentioned. Perhaps it is a small thing, but I suspect it is symptomatic of something larger—a fear that exists just below the surface of our community and that bubbles up from time to time. I believe that many people in town read the coverage of these crimes alongside the article published at the end of the week listing St. Joseph as having the “highest increase of Hispanics in the nation.” Of course, when you don’t have many Hispanics in your town to begin with, any increase will be a big increase. Under the headline, the article did mention that the increase was only around 600 people out of 80,000 or so in our town, nonetheless, I smell fear in the air.

Fear tempts us to treat as a threat anyone who does not look or act like us. Fear tempts us to lash out at those who are different because of the threat they may pose. Fear overrides the reasoning part of our brains that says there are criminals in every ethnic group including my own. Jesus says, “I am in the waves with you, so do not be afraid. Remember the ways of love I have taught you.”

As you know, I have two sons whose skin is darker than mine. With my oldest son, Julian, I have begun to have conversations with him about skin color and what it means and more importantly what it doesn’t mean. This week I read to him a children’s book about Martin Luther King, Jr. The book speaks about the treatment of blacks and whites before the civil rights movement. “Blacks” did thus and so, while “Whites” did this, that and the other. I found the words “black” and “white” sticking in my throat and instead, I found myself saying, “people with darker skin” and “people with lighter skin.” My son would be considered “black” in many contexts, yet I was not ready to put him into a category defined by others. I have tried to teach him that he is my son with beautiful brown skin and I am his father with lighter-colored skin. I am his father. He is my son. However naïve others may view my understanding of our reality, this is what is real to me and him.

We read about Martin Luther King, Jr. and his eyes grew heavy and we talked about how skin color doesn't make anyone better than anyone else. As he drifted off to sleep, I wondered if anything we talked about would be remembered in the morning. The next night my whole family and I went to the playground. There my boys played with boys and girls who were black, brown and white. Some had parents who came from Central American countries, while one brother and sister had a mother from West Africa. As we drive home, Julian spoke from the back of the van, "There sure were a lot of brown children at the playground tonight." The parents in the front seat smiled and said, "Yes, wasn't it great?" Julian replied, "Yes, but just because your skin color is different doesn't mean you are better than anybody else. We're all the same."

As a tear gathered in the corner of my eye, I believe I heard Jesus saying, "Don't be afraid."

Rev. Chase Peeples

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First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), St. Joseph, MO

¹ Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1960), 168.

² Sharon Begley, "The Roots of Fear," *Newsweek* (December 24, 2007). This article is available on-line at <http://www.newsweek.com/id/78178>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See the New International Version's translation of verse 27.

⁵ Richard Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 193-194.

⁶ W. S. McCullough, "Water," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by George Buttrick, et al. vol. 4 (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 806-810. For a contrary view of the threat posed by the waters of chaos, see Terence Fretheim, "Genesis," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander Keck, et al. vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 356.

⁷ Ibid, 196.