

IN THE FACE OF FEAR
© The Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: Psalm 27: 1- 5 (NRSV)

**The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh –
my adversaries and foes – they shall stumble and fall.
Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.
One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.
For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.**

On Wednesday of this week the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Homeland Security issued warnings to America's transit systems, entertainment venues, and hotels of potential terrorist activity. This follows more than a week of surveillance and the arrest of Najibullah Zazi, a 24 year-old man who is suspected of organizing a terrorist plot against these and other venues. His father and an Imam from Queens, New York were also arrested. The FBI reports that there may be as many as two dozen others involved in the plot. One agent expressed real worry about the depth and potential danger of this case. On Friday we learned that the F.B.I. foiled terrorist attacks in Dallas, Texas and Springfield, Illinois. Both of these terrorists parked trucks in front of buildings

thinking they were loaded with explosives, similar to the bombing of the Alfred Murrah building in Oklahoma City. On Friday the President of the United States challenged the Iranian government on its secret nuclear enrichment plant with the potential of making nuclear weapons. And this morning on National Public Radio we learned that Iran tested two short range missiles, and has plans to test a long range missile on Monday. Such a missile would be within the reach of Israel.

This kind of fear has been palpable in the United States since September 11, 2001. But such fear is not a stranger to our nation's history. We knew such fear when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941; when influenza killed 500 to 650 thousand people in 1918; when an earthquake struck San Francisco on April 18, 1906 and set off a fire that killed 3,000 people; when blood soaked American soil from 1860 to 1865; when the British marched on Boston on March 5, 1770. We could troop down the aisle of history and never escape the manifest fears that human beings have faced in every community and nation.

In every one of these examples a real and present danger faced human beings. You can well imagine that those people were filled with fear and dread. Fear is a rational response to an objective and identifiable danger. In general terms we say that this rational response to danger is

one of flight or fight. It is also the case that the innate reaction to danger or threat is panic or a state of immobility. We freeze sometimes in cases of extreme danger. Sometimes we run away, sometimes we fight, sometimes we are immobilized. Stephen Crane's, *The Red Badge of Courage*, magnificently describes the rule of fear on the battlefield and how one soldier manages it in a period of hours.

I am not speaking of neurotic anxiety. Anxiety can be as strong a feeling as fear. But anxiety is a response to a danger that is internal. Often it is not identifiable and is not shared by other persons in the same context or situation. Fear is a response to some thing or some one that can endanger your life or the lives of your loved ones.

You may have experienced danger and fear on the battlefield, in an automobile accident, in your line of work, or in a variety of other situations. Dread calls in the middle of the night when a police officer knocks on your door to tell you some bad news; or when your doctor's appointment takes place in her office and not an examining room to talk with you about the spot on your lung; or when the captain announces that you are to return to your seat, fasten your seat belt and put your head between yours knees. In these and other situations it is reasonable for you to be afraid.

Fear is such a powerful reality that the ancient Greeks gave it the status of deity. Fear is like a god that rules our lives. In Greek mythology fear was a set of twins, Deimos and Phobus. Deimos was the god of fear, dread, and terror. Phobus was the god of panic, fear, and flight. In the Greek mind there was little distinction between dread and the impulse to flee. Before an actual battle would begin it was the custom to generate as much fear as possible. The ancient Greek author, Hesiod, describes the psychology of battlefield fear in his description of the shield of Herakles:

He lifted the dazzling shield,
 a marvel to the eyes,
 the shield no man's spear-thrust
 had ever shattered or broken.

On its rings of ivory,
 of white enamel and electrum,
 overlaid with folds of blue enamel,
 were a dimmer foil
 paling before the gleaming gold.
 from its center Fear (Phobus)
 carved in the blue steel,
 unutterable Fear,
 cast side glances of fire.
 White, glistening teeth
 gilled his mouth
 in awesome and repulsive array,
 while on his horrid forehead
 perched harsh and dreadful Strife,
 ever ready to rob mind and senses
 the men who would battle Zeus' son
 face to face...

On it loomed the figures of Attack and Counterattack,

battle Din and Murder
 and Manslaughter glowering,
 as Strife and Confusion scuttled about;
 and Death, the destroyer,
 held a man freshly wounded
 and a second one unharmed
 and dragged a dead man by the feet
 and back into the fray.
 Strife's shoulder was caked
 with the crimson of men's blood
 and glaring awe, she raised the howl
 of clashing bronze.¹

Before Herekles has even raised his sword above your head his shield has
 proclaimed your defeat. The battle trumpet has not been sounded but the
 very shield of Herekles sounds your slaughter.

Who has faced danger and not met the demigods named Fear,
 Strife, Attack, Din, Murder, Strife, Confusion, and Death? Their reality is
 so palatable that we have no doubt about their reality and we know them
 deep within the bones of our existence. Fear lies within the human soul
 because death is our destiny. We may not think about it constantly but it
 is never removed from our conscience. We are starkly reminded of death
 in moments of danger or threat. But fear is often more subtle. The threat
 of nuclear war has been a reality since 1948, and nuclear proliferation
 remains a significant national and international issue. Though we may not

¹ Hesiod, *Shield*, translated by Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press: 1983), pp. 129-130.

think about it on any given day, fear is a reasonable feeling given the danger that human civilization faces in the prospect of a nuclear exchange. Today's terrorist threats amplify that concern.

But do death, danger, and fear occupy the only thrones in our souls? Is there not some presence – some other existential reality – that meets fear on its own terms? Where is the place of courage in being human? By courage, I mean something deeper than those involuntary responses of fight or flight that are resting in the reptilian cortex of our brain.

The twentieth century theologian, Paul Tillich, frames the issue like this:

“Courage needs the power of being, a power transcending the nonbeing, a power transcending the nonbeing which is experienced in the anxiety of fate and death, which is present in the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness, which is effective in the anxiety of guilt and condemnation.”²

Death, and all its attendant chamberlains, is the reality and the ever-present threat of nonbeing. If our being was not confronted with the foreboding of death we would not know existential fear and danger. We really would not have anything to worry about. What Tillich wants to claim is the power of being over nonbeing. He begins by recognizing

² Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), p. 155.

that, indeed, the threat of annihilation is, in fact, an affirmation of life.

Death is only an issue because life is so powerfully real.

Courage emerges as an affirmation of life. Courage is the assertion of the self over and against the strident tones of danger and demise. Even deeper, this courage transcends the individual. Courage rises above the human collective and is more than the sum of its individual souls, however courageous. Courage is the radical existential presence of life ever in the presence of death. Deimos and Phobus have their place in stone and metal. They may even frighten us. But courage rises up in the human heart to declare fear and death powerless over the God of life.

Even as we lay dying we are certain that death has no power over our conviction that life is sacred and worth celebrating, defending, and living. I have witnessed the dying and deaths of many people. Most of them wanted to be free of pain but not their dignity. Most wanted to be emancipated from their hospice beds or wheel chairs, but not their love for their families. Most were ready to let go of their diseased bodies but not the hope that life is good. And even though they pass through the gray veil of non-being most believe that they never leave the green pastures of Being, or if you will, they will never leave the green pastures of God. To put it another way, every danger, fear, and death happens

within the presence of God. Every divorce, murder, job loss, or crippling disease occurs within Sacred consciousness. God weeps, mourns, and gets angry. But God never stops loving God's people and refuses to let fear pass the last judgment on humankind.

Courage, I believe, is grounded in the love of God and seated in the human soul. That is the wellspring that causes people to run out into the street and push a child out of the way of an on-coming automobile.

Courage announces to cancer, "You may take my body but not my hope."

Like Gandhi, courage looks tyrants in the eye and declares, "You can break my body and crush my bones. In the end you will have my dead body. Not my obedience!" Courage is Wendell Berry's "Speech Against the State Government," in Frankfort, Kentucky on February 14, 2008.

Berry wrote that "to the Kentucky state government, a wholly owned subsidiary of the coal corporations and of any other corporations that bid high enough, earth destruction is a normal economic enterprise."³

That suggests to me that the existential reality that we call courage is reflected in our principles and in our ethics. Courage identifies that which is highly valued. Courage cherishes life, freedom, integrity, safety, and human dignity. Courage shapes those values into willful decisions

³ Wendell Berry, "Speech Against the State Government," Lanes Landing Farm, Port Royal, KY, February 14, 2008.

that protect others, safeguard human rights, and maintains essential truthfulness in human relationships. In other words, courage does not just mean throwing yourself onto a live grenade. Courage can also mean being present with a friend who is dying or divorcing. Courage helps a person come to terms with self-destructive behaviors or relationships. Courage writes or visits a member of congress to affirm or contest a piece of legislation that violates one's sense of justice. Courage tells someone that you love that they need to be responsible for their own faith and belief and not expect the minister or the church to do it for them. Courage refuses to let someone take advantage of you or your loved ones, whether in terms of money, time, or emotional largesse. Courage confronts fear and looks to the future.

It reminds me of the story of a woman who had been diagnosed with a terminal disease. Her doctors told her that she had about three months to live and should get her affairs in order. She contacted her attorneys and made sure her will was current. She settled her credit accounts. The woman held the essential conversations that she thought were important with her family and closest friends. Then she called her minister and invited her to visit with her.

They discussed all of her hopes for a memorial service. She told her pastor the hymns she wanted sung, scripture and other readings, and the people she had chosen to offer memorial tributes. She informed the minister that she wanted to be buried with the family Bible.

As the minister was about to leave she said, “There is one more thing. I would like to be buried with a fork in my right hand.”

“I beg your pardon?” asked the minister.

The dying woman repeated herself. “I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand. You see, I have been a member of the church all of my life. I have attended hundreds of potluck suppers and fellowship dinners. And after the main course was over and people were clearing the plates from the table, someone would always say, ‘Keep your fork.’ This was going to be the best part of the dinner, which was usually someone’s home-baked apple pie or chocolate cake. Dessert was going to be wonderful.

When people come to my memorial service and see me in the casket with a fork in my hand, they are going to ask, ‘What’s with the

fork?’ I want you to tell them, ‘Keep your fork. The best is yet to come.’⁴

No matter what is served, courage keeps the fork, understanding that the best is yet to come.

I am reminded of this monologue from Eugene O’Neill’s 1956 play, *A Long Day’s Journey into Night*:

I lay on the bowsprit, facing astern, with the water foaming into spume under me, the masts with every sail white in the moonlight, towering high above me.

I became drunk with the beauty and singing rhythm of it, and for a moment I lost myself – actually lost my life.

I was set free!

I dissolved in the sea, became white sails and flying spray, became beauty and rhythm, became moonlight and the ship and the high dim-starred sky!

I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life, or the life of Man, to Life itself!

To God, if you want to put it that way.

May your souls be so nestled in the sea of life! May you be absorbed into the beauty of life, dissolved in the waves of being and all her rhythms.

May you be so consumed with the power of the Creator that you lose your life as creature, belonging to the present moment. May you be filled with the peace and unity of God that no storm or torrent or madding current

⁴ Author unknown. Downloaded from <http://www.GAgirl.com/stories/keepyourfork.html>.

can throw you off course. This is the stuff of courage that fears no gale or tsunami, no brigand or pirate. It is the wild joy of God.

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