

1 Sermon, June 30, 2013

Texts: Psalm 91:1-8, 1 John 4:17-19

Title: "How to Combat Terror"

1. Two stories in the newspaper
2. Terrorism — Fear that's imposed on us by others
3. The Bible has an imperfect record on terrorism
4. The stories of Jesus are consistent – "Be not afraid"
5. To combat terror, trust in God, not weapons
6. God will be victorious

1. Two stories in the newspaper

On Monday, this last week there were two interesting stories about faith and fear.

The first one was about Nik Wallenda, whose family has made their living by doing risky things for generations, walking across the Little Colorado River Gorge near the grand canyon on a 2 inch steel cable.

I don't know how afraid Nik Wallenda was on his tightrope walk, but he was almost constantly praying to Jesus as he walked across the cable.

You might ask if it's fair to God to decide to do something really risky and *then* ask God for protection. But this is really the Wallenda family business, and prayer is an important part of facing fear, and asking for calm.

The second story was about Karen Klein, the older woman who was harassed and verbally abused by four seventh-grade boys on a school bus. Ms. Klein was a bus monitor, and was trying to do her job. She also had to face down fear, anger and disgust as she dealt with those boys, one of whom said to her that "her family all killed themselves because they didn't want to be near you."

A video was taken of this bus incident, and put on the internet to millions of viewers, and 32,000 people sent or pledged money. She has now started the Karen Klein Anti-bullying Foundation, which promotes its message through concerts and books.

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Karen Klein and Nik Wallenda experienced some of the same emotions as they worked their jobs. They needed courage in the face of something threatening.

But Nik Wallenda *chose* the challenges he faced. He had practiced and practiced. Karen Klein did not. I imagine it was more terrifying for Karen Klein, because she didn't know *what* these seventh graders were going to do.

2. Terrorism — Fear that's imposed on us by others

That's what terror is: fear of the unknown. It is fear that comes by surprise from a source you didn't expect. Terrorism is like that – it is perpetrated by strangers, at a time and place that is unexpected. Its very unexpected nature causes people to fear that something *else* unexpected may happen, and the anxiety about an unseen enemy increases.

Terrorism is a real challenge to faith, because it can lead to a paralyzing worry.

3. The Bible has an imperfect record on terrorism

The Bible itself has an imperfect record on terrorism. In Numbers 31:13-20 we read the story of Moses himself condoning genocide in the name of the Lord. Moses became angry at the officers of the army, because in battle they had not killed all the women. Moses said:

These women here, on Balaam's advice, made the Israelites act treacherously against the LORD in the affair of Peor, so that the plague came among God's people. Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man by sleeping with him. But all the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourselves. Camp outside the camp seven days; whoever of you has killed any person or touched a corpse, purify yourselves and your captives on the third and on the seventh day." Numbers 31:13-19, NRSV.

That's the really ugly side of the Bible. Moses permitted the killing of women and children and the enslavement of young girls. But it was OK as long as they performed rituals of purification. Yecch! If people look at the Bible and read that story, it would be understandable if they had some distaste for religion.

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4. The stories of Jesus are consistent – “Be not afraid”

But the stories of Jesus are different. Jesus did not use power to intimidate or frighten. Jesus got angry at the money changers, and drove them out of the temple, but there was no sneakiness or manipulation. The moneychangers and temple authorities were the ones who worked behind people’s backs, not Jesus.

Instead, the story of Jesus is one of facing terror and manipulation without fear.

When threatened by the people of his hometown and almost pushed off a cliff, Jesus walked through the midst of the crowd and escaped.

When the Pharisees tried to trap him by asking him questions they thought he couldn’t answer, he turned the tables and asked them questions.

When he was teaching in the temple, he knew he was a target. But he went on teaching. After he was arrested, he asked the religious authorities, why didn’t you arrest me during the day when I was teaching in the temple? Why do you have to come after me at night with clubs?

When Jesus was brought before the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, he did not panic. He did not argue his case. He faced Pilate without fear, knowing what the outcome would be.

The stories of Jesus show him facing terror without fear. And when Jesus is unable to speak for himself, the angels come and say: “be unafraid.”

At his birth, the angels tell the shepherds: “Be unafraid.”

After his resurrection, the angels tell those who come to the tomb: “Be unafraid.”

5. To combat terror, trust in God, not weapons

I was reading recently in the Christian Science Monitor about how the Experience of the Boston Marathon bombing was different than the experience of 9/11.

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Instead of massive panic, Boston residents cooperated with police in sharing thousands of videos and bits of information that would help catch the criminals.

Then thousands of people turned out for a healing service held by multiple faiths (including Islam). The service was attended by the mayor, the governor and the president. And there has not been the massive anti-Muslim feeling that there was after 9/11. There is an understanding that the criminals do not represent the mainstream of that faith.

The Boston community has come together in one week and one month anniversaries, bonding people in a "Boston Strong" campaign. There has been a greater emphasis on common bonds, rather than on how different the "enemy" is.

The Boston bombing was treated like a crime, rather than a battle in a war, and that is helpful. In a crime, certain individuals do bad things. In a war, whole groups of people are treated as the enemy.

Eva Nagler, a participant in a prayer vigil in Boston, compared the Marathon Bombing to 9/11. She said,

"For myself, it's more an opening of the heart than a tearing of a big wound inside me. It feels different that 9/11."

Since 9/11, police have been much more vigilant about things that could lead to a terror attack. The general public has been more wary and better prepared psychologically. At least 150 terror plots have been foiled by police in the years after 9/11.

And when something terrible happens, it just doesn't strike as much terror into our hearts, because we have realized that we are not exempt from the problems that are faced by people in other parts of the world.

The experience of 9/11 has helped our country know that there is no missile shield that will totally protect us. There is no way to keep us absolutely safe. So we need a spiritual solution, one that helps us to face our fear and trust in God. Psalm 20 says,

"Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but *our* pride is in the name of the LORD our God. They will collapse and fall, but we shall rise and stand upright." Psalms 20:6-8, NRSV.

Psalm 44 says:

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"You are my King and my God; ... For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me. But you have saved us from our foes, and have put to confusion those who hate us." Psalms 44:4-7, NRSV.

Facing terror is really a spiritual thing. It is trusting God more than we trust weapons, more than we trust any form of violence, even violence to eliminate other violence.

6. God will be victorious

Maybe the most important way to face terror is to simply trust that God will be victorious. That's the message of the whole book of Revelation. Jesus wins. In the end, Jesus wins.

We can trust in God, and trust that God will be victorious in part because we believe in resurrection, or heaven. We believe that God will bring us personally to victory through the resurrection life.

And we know that God doesn't stop there. God is concerned about more than individuals and whether or not they are going to heaven. God is concerned about the shape our world is in, and God will bring this whole world to a better place.

Ultimately, it is that belief that helps us to combat terror, because we trust in God to make it better, even if it sometimes gets worse than we want it.

Amen.