

Mindfulness for the Moment

Luke 21:25-36

The other day, while Wendy and I were doing our normal preparations for Thanksgiving dinner, we had the Macy's parade on in the background. What caught my attention (in the midst of peeling potatoes and cutting up turnips) was when a reporter asked a young boy about his state of mind, given the Paris attacks and extraordinary security presence in Manhattan. It was clear the reporter was fishing for an answer, for he was surprised by the boy's claim that he wasn't afraid. "Why not? Why aren't you afraid?" the reporter asked. The boy responded, "Because I'm watching a parade."

It struck me funny because it was a perfect response; the reporter immediately went onto someone else because, apparently, there's not much drama to report if terrorist threats haven't somehow paralyzed New Yorkers. I wondered, exactly who's stirring the pot of paranoia?

The world is often a scary place, as we know, but it seems to me to make little sense to allow it to be more frightening than it already is. FDR's famous quote: "The only thing to fear is fear itself" rings true today as much as it did in the shadows of the Great Depression and the rise of the Third Reich. Every day you and I navigate through social cultures shaped by the media, entertainment industry, politics, and security concerns that foster more alarm in us than can be accounted for in whatever we do or whomever we meet. In other words, we are constantly being influenced on so many levels to live in fear.

I'd like to think that this kid's response was reflective of the vast majority of Americans, but given public opinion polls and the political campaigns that feed off them, I sense it is not. In an article citing anti-Muslim bias, published a week ago in *U.S. News and World Report*, the author noted,

[d]espite an extremely low statistical likelihood, when surveyed, half of Americans said they were very or somewhat worried about themselves or someone in their family becoming a victim of terrorism, according to Gallup. While those fears haven't yet reached 2001 levels, they have increased steeply since 2011. And the expression of those fears seems to roughly correspond to heightened incidents of hate crimes or disparaging opinions about Muslims. ¹

Mind you, what happened in Paris didn't cause this upward trend; but it has validated the angst many feel.

I don't think this will change anytime soon. It brings back memories of what happened in the wake of 9-11. Terrell Arnold, a retired Senior Foreign officer for the State Department, wrote back in 2004 a fascinating analysis of what he termed, "the fear market,"—a relevant descriptor and prescient of our present time.

We have entered the fear market, where mainly ignorance and mere perception drive our thoughts, emotions, and responses. This place demands our close attention, because we are seldom given enough information to make specific defensive moves credible or useful. Terrorists seldom announce their moves in advance; quite often the announcement is the attack. They cynically scare us and move on. Governments are compelled politically to say they are well informed about the matter and are on top of it, but in reality they are seldom either. The next real attack is likely to catch everyone by surprise, and no amount of warlike preparation significantly alters that prospect. ²

This assessment rings true. As a reality check, though, it doesn't generate much comfort, to be sure. Yet, the statistical probability that

¹ Lindsey Cook, "Data Show Links Between Fear of Terrorist Attacks, Anti-Muslim Bias," *U.S. News & World Report*, November 20, 2015.

² Terrell Arnold, "Terrorism and the Fear Market," February 17, 2004, found on www.rense.com.

any of us will be directly harmed by terrorism is infinitesimal (app. one in 3.5 million³). According to the CDC, we have a higher likelihood of being struck by lightning or attacked by brain-eating parasites. Consider those odds.

Nevertheless, this rise in public fear has paralleled all sorts of apocalyptic forecasts, especially by those who capitalize on people's anxieties to sell their version of salvation. "End-times" enthusiasts, of course, have established their niche in the Christian world for generations (despite their record of repeated failure), proclaiming eschatological passages of Scripture as biblical evidence of a divine plan to judge and destroy the world sometime in the near future. In each generational cycle, it's much the same: ancient prophecies are interpreted as being played out in real time, using fear of the future as a motivation for people to be warned and repent before it is too late. With spiritual insecurity as their calling card, they manipulate texts to prove the legitimacy of their message to the uninformed and afraid.

Unfortunately, this doomsday approach toward reading Scripture has resulted in two things: a counter-cultural rejection of the world by many Christians and a distorted sense of what Advent means. We are well aware that there are many devoted Christians who live in fear of the world around them and eagerly anticipate a cataclysmic Armageddon that will destroy the earth as we know it. They study the book of Revelation as if it's a cosmic riddle about current or future events, without really understanding the original

³ "The Terrorism Statistics Every American Needs to Hear," *GlobalResearch*, October 23, 2015: "Between 1970 and 2007 Mueller and Stewart asserted in a separate paper published last year in *Foreign Affairs* that a total of 3,292 Americans (not counting those in war zones) were killed by terrorists resulting in an **annual risk of one in 3.5 million.**"

context, or appreciating the ancient symbolism, or the intent of the narrative itself.

Websites, televangelists, all the way to backwater preachers compete for who has the most accurate and authoritative understanding of how and when Christ will literally return out of the clouds to judge the earth, and how leading up to that moment, the world will be divinely punished through a series of cataclysmic warnings (some claim a nuclear holocaust; others say it will end with a massive tidal wave; even others, predict a some enormous asteroid crashing into the earth). It's absurd. I get this stuff in the mail and through email, probably because I'm a Baptist preacher and they assume I must agree. But I don't and I often wonder why anyone does, since their detailed timetables are proven wrong every time the calendar pages turn.

First and foremost, one has to understand the original context of these ancient texts. Virtually all of this “prophetic” material in the New Testament relates to two specific moments in early Christianity: 1) the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, and 2) the periods of persecution that occurred for early Christians in the Roman world. None of this is about some ultimate end to the world, at least as we know it. Much of it is based on material inherited from Daniel, which came from the latter stages of ancient Judaism in the period of the successful Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid king, a couple of hundred years before Christ (commemorated in the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah).

The “Son of Man” imagery came from Daniel 7, and is intended as a symbol of divine intervention for Jewish freedom—hence,

messianic—something that was then carried over from the Maccabean era to Jesus' day to apply to Roman domination. It was a religiously-inspired hope for a new social, economic, and political order ending not the world, but the corrupted systems of power and influence that maintained imperial rule over Isrel. It was apocalyptic as much as “apocalypse” means, “that which is revealed.”

So, for me, it mischaracterizes the Advent message to make it one that just leads to Armageddon. I prefer to search for signs of Christ's coming not out of the clouds on some cosmic Judgment Day, but of Christ's presence every day when we see good emerging out terrible times, or redemptive acts that express mercy. Otherwise, what would be the point of Jesus' teachings to love our neighbors and our enemies, or to turn the other cheek, or not to judge others, or to do good to those who harm you, to forgive as we have been forgiven, or to share generously even with strangers, when in the end, Christianity only amounts to divine judgment and human destruction? Do we disregard the teachings of Jesus because in the end, God's plan is to destroy the earth anyway?

So what difference did Jesus' life and ministry make if, in the end, he only comes to represent divine retribution toward those whose faith or life's circumstances don't fall under the Christian influence? How is it just if Christ only returns to save a few when, according to John's Gospel, God is supposed to love the whole world (Jn 3:16)? In other words, all of this is bad theology—nihilism disguised as redemption—inconsistent with its original revelation.

A truer sense of the coming realm of God would be when the divine will, as revealed through the teachings of Moses, the prophets,

and Jesus and others were fulfilled in the daily lives of people and in the social, economic, and political structures and order of society. This is what it was about in its original context. It's a hope, to be sure; an eternal dream, perhaps; but it's the spiritual quest that keeps us, as followers of Christ, faithful to the task, generation after generation.

So, for us to do this with integrity, we cannot be swayed or overwhelmed by all that seems to counter the Christ-like vision of goodwill, justice, and peace. We can't succumb to the religious tribalism and racial fears that dominate our world, or reflect the lack of love and generosity that results when people are afraid and defensive. How do we do this? By deliberately looking for signs of redemption and goodness, and we discipline ourselves to be mindful to the moment.

Fear is a defensive reaction based on anxiety over what could possibly happen, regardless of the likelihood. Mindfulness is being aware of what actually is present and happening in each moment—it's watching the parade, as the young boy did, instead of fearing what might be there.

Buddhism articulated mindfulness as a spiritual practice to detach oneself from that which controls a person; but it is found in virtually every religious tradition in forms of solitude, meditation, and prayer—Christianity included. It's taking notice of all that influences us, or to which we are attached, psychologically and spiritually. Mindfulness can also mean mentally and emotionally being aware of each moment to observe what's really going on in

other people, in circumstances, in all its dynamics and amazing synchronicities, so as to act, rather than react.

This is where we are called to be and to live—in a spiritual space that is not attempting to control the future through worry, or through fears of loss, but living in the present to act generously and graciously, responsively and responsibly. “Do not worry about your life [Jesus said]...but seek first the kingdom of God and righteousness, and all these things shall be given to you.” The Advent signs are what we see of Christ’s coming to us in each and every moment of our lives.

I came across a very touching illustration of this in a story that was being shared around the internet in the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks and the global fear generated from it. I reposted it on my Facebook page, so some of you may have already seen it. It’s the story of a Palestinian-American woman in an airport terminal, where mindfulness to the moment transformed a tense situation with shared compassion and care. I offer it as a sign of Advent hope in the world today.

After learning my flight was detained 4 hours, I heard the announcement: If anyone in the vicinity of gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately. Well—one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. [With some trepidation] I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. “Help,” said the flight service person. “Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be four hours late and she did this.”

I put my arm around her and spoke to her haltingly [in Arabic]...The minute she heard any words she knew—however poorly used—she stopped crying. She thought our flight had been canceled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for some major medical treatment the following day.

I said “No, no, we’re fine, you’ll get there, just late. Who is picking you up? Let’s call him and tell him.”

We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her—Southwest. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends.

Then I thought, just for the heck of it, why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her. This all took up about 2 hours. She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life. Answering questions.

She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies—little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—out of her bag—and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the traveler from California, the lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There are no better cookies.

And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers—non-alcoholic—and the two little girls for our flight, one African American, one Mexican American—ran around serving us all apple juice and lemonade and they were covered with powdered sugar too.

And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world [not one filled with suspicion and fear]. Not a single person in this gate—once the crying of confusion stopped—has seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.

--story told by Naomi Shihab Nye, 2015

That's the kind of world I want to live in, as well—in a world of Advent hope—looking for signs of grace and deliverance from terror—not frightened by the future. A world like this is possible. Jesus claimed it was possible. Like Advent, we just have to make it real.

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