

Monastic Scribe LXXVIII: September 27, 2024

NOLI TIMERE!

If there is one line that repeats itself over and over again in the Bible, in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, it is “Do not be afraid” or “Fear not!” The Latin version is “Noli timere” (or the plural, “Nolite timere!”). The Lord calls Abram to have faith and says, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield...” Jonathan warns David that his father, Saul, wants to kill him but says, “Do not be afraid...” (I Sam. 23:17). The angel Gabriel said it to both Zechariah and then to Mary, when he was announcing to her the birth of Jesus, (Luke 1: 13, 30). There are numerous other times in the Bible when the Lord or an angel counsels “Do not be afraid...”

We have all been afraid at times. It is a natural emotion in the face of someone or something that frightens us or might be able to harm us. This is instilled in us and our primitive brain is a help to us when we need to fight or flee. Thus it might be good to fear in the face of a real threat. Feelings are natural to us and it depends on how we react and what we do with our feelings that brings our greater human abilities into play. Violence, retribution and vengeance are all possible reactions to fear. It sometimes takes more courage and strength to face fear directly and decide to go through it. Jesus was overwhelmed with fear in the agony in the garden (Mark, 14)!

Right now, in our history, there are pseudo leaders and politicians who induce fear and even doom to frighten us to react to some situations and directs us to face these threats in singular fearful, retributive ways. How we react to migrants seeking asylum in our country is a prime example. They are, first of all, our human brothers and sisters. They are in need. Yes, some legal restrictions are needed to deal with hordes of people seeking our shores. But a wholesale rejection of them is contrary to all Biblical teaching and to all that the Church teaches us today.

We are encouraged to be fearful as a prime tool to frighten us. The recent characterization of Haitians in Ohio as eating dogs and cats is such a negative use of leadership. We can refuse to be feared, to face our problems, to fight for good immigrant legislation, but also, and first of all, to treat fellow human beings with respect. Pope Francis has placed the American treatment of migrants as the most glaring lack of pro-life attitudes in our country in addition to abortion.

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But there is another meaning to fear in our Biblical traditions. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” is often repeated such as in Psalm 111 and in Proverbs 9. In Psalm 2:11, we read, “Serve the Lord with fear and trembling....” This is not a fear of a God who will harm or punish us. It is a fear that might better be named awe. After Jacob encountered God in a dream while resting on a mountain (Genesis 28), he awoke to say “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” When Christ multiplied a catch of fish after the apostles had spent the night catching nothing, Peter, overcome with awe, cried “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man....” Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid...” (Luke, 5).

This is a recognition of the majesty of God, of the beauty of God, of the goodness of God. It opens us up to realize that this God is totally love, that he loves every human face and every created being. In prayer we put aside all our words and let God gaze upon us and love us. In turn, we honor and love this God who is so far beyond us and yet is in an intimate relationship with us.

If we know this kind of fear, the fear or awe of a majestic, beautiful, loving God then we will not be overcome by any fears here on earth. Yes, we feel the fear of sickness, of suffering, of the collapse of civility and democracy, of the threats to the environment, of feeling for the poor people of Gaza, Lebanon, Israel, the Ukraine and other countries, in fact of all the poor. We should feel all this and do what we can to help those in need. But fear should not overwhelm us or drive us to despair. It is our faith that makes us trust in God. It does not give us a Pollyanna view of life in which we expect everything to be smooth and easy. “Do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul...” (Matt. 10:27). Suffering too is part of the love we learn in life that becomes part of our human story. But suffering, setbacks, even sin and evil, cannot overcome us if we have this real fear of the Lord. We do not flee but face all of life. And we have to seek others to share our pain.

Do you have anything on fear in your life to share? Drop me a line at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org. Do not be alone in your pain and your fear. There are others of us who are with you and God as well. Psalm 4 encourages us with these words: “Tremble, do not sin; ponder on your bed and be still. Make justice your sacrifice and trust in the Lord.”

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.