

## Two Kingdoms

Jamaica Plain, January 11, 2004, Rev. Carl Scovel

Certain dates mark our nation's history: July 4, December 7, January 15, and, most recently, September 11. All but the last date have some positive note, for even the attack on Pearl Harbor was avenged by the defeat of Japan.

September 11 stands alone. The invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the dispersion of Al Qaeda and the capture of Saddam Hussein have not undone its meaning.

It still stands as a day of terror.

Suddenly we knew what we should have always known; that, we are vulnerable and mortal, as persons, as a people, subject to danger, death and deprivation.

Once again we were fearful.

First, we felt our fear as individuals.

And our fantasies dealt with our own particular deaths,  
the threats to our homes, neighborhoods and city,  
our children, spouses, partners, friends, kin and colleagues,.

First, we were alone in our fear,  
ashamed of our fear,  
benumbed by fear  
confused by our fear,  
as fear turned into into anger, guilt, resentment;  
and so we looked for scapegoats –

Muslims, Republicans, Bin Laden, Bush, liberals, militarists, fundamentalists.

But time passed and we realized that in our fear we were not alone,  
that we were part of a fearful people,  
that the terrorists had in fact succeeded.

For, look! - the planes stopped flying,  
folks stopped buying,  
and stayed home - forget Cancun.

Students in law and business schools began to think of other options,  
and applications to monasteries increased.

You and I were part of this.

And as I began to think and pray through my own fear,  
I tried to think about where it came from,  
and in this process I came to this discovery.

We live in a kingdom of fear.

I began to see that the media of public communication –  
newspapers, magazines, radio, television, posters, the internet –  
are essential in creating and maintaining this kingdom,  
essential in communicating collective fear.

It's no accident that most news is bad news.

It's part of creating fear.

But, you know, if life were as bad as the headlines imply,  
and if that news were the only important news,  
we would all have disappeared long ago.  
Culture itself would have disintegrated.

Sometimes that happens,  
as in Bosnia, Cambodia, Rwanda, the gulags, the death camps,  
but those horrors are not yet the rule.

In societies like ours  
bad news creates and maintains the kingdom of fear.  
Read the news,  
watch the ads,  
hear the talk show hosts.  
Am I wrong?

We are taught to fear:  
enemies such as government, terrorists, liberals, conservatives,  
corporations, unions, Republicans, Democrats;  
we are taught to fear disease, ugliness, hunger (the faintest twinge),  
boredom, pain, solitude, silence, inconvenience, discomfort;  
we are even taught to fear the weather,  
and sure it's been cold, but we have a TV channel devoted to dramatizing, even  
demonizing, weather.

The aim of fear is control,  
If the government can convince us that the old Iraqi government was a threat to homeland  
security, then invasion will solve the problem. If the drug company can convince us that  
we can't stand a half-hour of headache, then we must have a faster-acting aspirin; if the  
state can convince us that unions threaten the state economy, why then they've got not  
just the unions, but us as well in their pocket.

Of course, the liberals do the same thing;  
I find I'm often put out by the people I agree with,  
for they too teach me to fear.  
I passed a wild man on the street,

in rags and tatters,  
his hand out, his eyes unfocused,  
and he chanted almost as a mantra,  
"I am the victim of terrorists;"  
again and again, "I am the victim of terrorists."  
And I thought as I passed him a quarter,  
(a pretty cheap pay-off for wisdom)  
"Aren't we all, buddy? Aren't we all?"

Well, I for one am sick of being manipulated and  
I am sick of the kingdom of fear,  
the fog of confusion,  
the swamp of paralysis.  
I want a way out,  
a way to wholeness.

And at this point the Bible helps me.  
It helps me because it gives me an angle  
from which to see the world,  
an angle I do not find  
in The New Republic and even The Boston Globe.  
The Bible helps me,  
for it points to the source of my dissatisfaction  
with this world of fear.  
It tells me we were made for something better,  
that there's an antidote to fear.

But the antidote is not courage.  
Not courage,  
because it's ambiguous.  
Courage can come from love, but

it can also come from hatred,  
craziness, cruelty, and misguided zeal.

After all, the seventeen men who commandeered those planes on September 11th were all brave men. For at least two years they planned a venture which meant their deaths, and on the given day they acted without hesitation.

Yes, they had courage, but look at what their courage left – thousands dead, many thousands mourning, millions terrorized, a world in tumult.

Their courage brought chaos, as they intended.

That's the purpose of terror. It is theatre designed with minimal effort to create maximum effect.

So what, says the Bible, is the antidote to fear?

"There is no fear in love,  
but complete love casts out fear;  
for fear has to do with punishment,  
and whoever fears is not complete in love."

Here's another translation of that same passage:

"Fear and love don't mix;  
mature love actually expells fear.  
Since fear clips one's wings,  
the one who fears has not matured in love."

Love is the antidote to fear,

But love is a fuzzy word.

What does it mean?

The Bible is pretty clear on this, I think.

Love is not something we feel.

We feel a lot of things which we call love –  
desire, pleasure, comfort;

but Bible love is not a nice feeling.  
Bible love is first of all a doing –  
feeding the hungry,  
comforting the sick,  
visiting the prisoner,  
giving one's life for another - not against another.

Love is doing,  
but it's a doing based on being.  
Love begins with being in touch with goodness.  
If we want to live a life of love,  
if we want to live only a day of love,  
if we want to leave the kingdom of fear,  
we must first find goodness,  
and touch it.

And how do we do that?

In my life I've found five ways of getting in touch with goodness.

1. The first is praying, and by praying I don't mean just a church prayer, or some phrase rattled off in private;

By prayer I mean a desire, a searching, questing, yearning for the more-than-me, the more-than-us, the more-than-here-and-now, the mystery with in -around-above us, a mystery that once in a while turns into mercy.

I could preach ten sermons on prayer, but I won't say more than this right now: prayer is a lust and quest for the mystery that turns to mercy.

Prayer works.

I know it from my own life. I know it from the dozens of people who've told me how it worked for them, different by a bit for every one, since God made us with different faces, fingerprints and souls.

The first way of touching goodness is through prayer.

2. The second way is seeing:

seeing the beauty, power and order of the world around us and seeing the loveliness of those around us. Sometimes I get on the subway at Forest Hills and I look at the people around me, and I'm amazed at how wonderful they appear, each with their own story, each with their own particular beauty.

The world without can do the same for us –

the sea, the woods, the hills, the Pond, cemetery, Arboretum, or simply the pageant of the passing clouds, and the wonder of the world in winter.

I remember driving through the Berkshires after September 11, going to an uncle's funeral in upstate New York, and looking at the forests around me, feeling creation in the woods and hills, and feeling defiant against both terrorists and our own government, feeling that whatever happened to me and my loved ones, the fearmongers would not have the last word.

For a moment I was in touch with goodness.

Has something like that not happened to you?

3. The third way of to touch goodness is through reading.

I have been mightily sustained (and haven't you as well?) by reading the words and stories of men and women, filled with love before the face of danger, death and deprivation.

You may know the familiar names in such a list:

Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Julian of Norwich, Oscar Romero;

but let me add to these a few names that I know from the uncountable congregation of the righteous: Alexander Men, Therese of Lisieux, Edith Stein, the martyrs of Atlas, Teilhard de Chardin, Seraphim of Sarov, Maria Skoptsova, Charles Foucauld, the virgin of el Mozote, Godofredo Garcia, Martin Royackers, the sainted and amazing Father Arsenii the whole great company of desert fathers and mothers.

Here are two quick samples of people like this:

Steve Coombs, the custodian at the Manning and Curley schools, a man who loves the children, teachers, staff, his work, who works tirelessly for them and coaches track as well.

Here's one more:

Alexis von Roenne, an enemy of Hitler caught by the Gestapo in the fall of '44, wrote on the eve of his execution – "My dearest beloved, In a moment now I shall be going home to our Lord in complete calm and certainty of salvation. My thoughts are with you, all of you, with the greatest love and gratitude."

That's just a taste from the feast which feeds me and so many of us, who read the lives and words of those in touch with goodness.

Such reading lifts us up because we're not just reading of what others have been, but of what we may yet become.

4. The fourth way to touch goodness is through conversation.

My friend Sarah Wright says, "Spirituality is a matter of the company you keep."

So the question is, "Whom do we talk with and what do we talk about?"

We talk about work with our colleagues, life with our family, problems with our therapist, and the Patriots with our neighbors.

But with whom do we talk about silence, solitude, our souls, our walk through life, our life with God?

If we don't discuss those things with anyone, can they exist for us?

Without conversation can they be more than a flickering thought in a kaleidoscope of thoughts?

How can we have a life with God if we cannot share that life with someone?

Being in touch with God means we must have a human friend in God.

I suppose this why we have prayer groups, Bible study, retreats, spiritual direction, even monasteries.

Conversation is a fourth way to touch goodness.

5. And finally, we touch goodness by doing, showing compassion, speaking against evil, reaching out to those in pain and befriending the angry and isolated.

And when we do these things, we join the company of those in touch with goodness.

In this company we face our fears without shame, without confusion.

We live with our fears, and at times forget them. The kingdom of love is alive and well and we can find it, if we will seek it.

Why do I say these things to you?

To encourage you to face your fears and know their source.

To remind you that of the resource beyond your own will and wisdom.

To tell you what you know already,

that you were born from goodness

and in touch with goodness

you may be reborn.

That is all I have to say today.

Let us pray:

O God, you have promised us

that if we ask, we shall receive;

that if we look, we shall find;

and if we knock the door shall be opened.

Give us grace to trust our hope and quest for goodness

and find the freedom that is our true being.