

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: April 3, 2016
Sermon Title: Faith in the Face of Terror
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Selection on "Faith and Fear"

My goodness! Last Sunday was wonderful! Almost a thousand people in church for our three Easter services, the fragrance of lilies filled the air, the music soared. We even had a tent for the overflow crowd with a live feed for TV. What a splendid Easter! So why follow that up with a sermon about terrorism and fear? That's life, isn't it? Yin and yang, up and down, good and bad, it's all there in our world.

Last Sunday it really was great, and in our house, that euphoria lasted for almost half the day. My wife is a University of Virginia basketball fanatic. Need I say more? By early evening on Easter, Virginia basketball had thoroughly destroyed our Easter high. In the maddest of March Madness, Virginia killed Syracuse in the first half, drubbed them, not even close. And in the second half, Virginia collapsed, totally, and lost badly, and Alida handled it . . . not well! Whatever resurrection Easter promised was outdone by the total death of Virginia basketball. That's life. Interestingly, when the Virginia coach, a classy guy, when he was interviewed, he quoted from the Bible: "Weeping may come at night, but joy cometh in the morning." (Psalm 30:5)

That's life, too. So, with the joys of Easter still fresh, let's think about terror, but not so much terror as our faith in the face of terror. What's our response? What's our anchor? What's our perspective? Obviously, what got me thinking about this was the latest terrorist bombing in Brussels. Of course, that's not the latest now. Last Sunday, Easter Sunday, while we were rejoicing wholeheartedly, terrorists attacked a park in Pakistan, a park full of Christians, killing and wounding hundreds of moms and children. And you know what? I didn't even send out a prayer or a pastoral letter to all of you.

After 9/11, we had 10 days of church services and an anniversary service every year. After Paris, we gave over our whole Sunday service as a memorial, even singing the French national anthem. After Brussels, we

wrote a letter, then a prayer. After Pakistan, nothing. It's starting to feel as if that's life, that's the way it is, especially over there. Except, "over there" seems closer and closer every day. I was reading *The New York Times* on Tuesday morning, March 15, and these were the articles I read:

"Putin Orders Syria Pullout, Citing Success"

"Migrants Form Human Chain Across Greek River, But Some Are Swept Away"

"Sweden Charges Syrian Tied to Killings"

"North Korea Threatens Nuclear Test, Defying U.N."

"As More Immigrants Arrive, Anxiety and Resentment Rise in Britain"

"Witness Recalls Ivory Coast Terrorist Attack: Shooting, Then Boom, Boom, Boom"

"Turkey Almost Certain That Kurdish Militants Bombed Ankara, Premier Says"

"Israel Calls on U.N. to Punish Iran for Missile Tests, Saying It Violated Nuclear Pact"

"Amid ISIS Battles, American Surrenders in Iraq"

"Is the U.S. Now at War with the Shabab?"

"Putin's Syria Surprise"

All of that in one day's newspaper, before I got to page 12!

That's life. When these terrorist things happen, I always call them "the Slaughter of the Innocents," a concept straight from the Bible, two stories that we never like to mention. One comes during the birth of Moses, the other during the birth of Jesus. In Exodus 1, we read that the Egyptians started fearing the Israelites. They were "becoming too numerous," so they enslaved the Jews and "worked them ruthlessly."

But that wasn't enough. So the king of Egypt, the Pharaoh, ordered the "midwives to kill every male baby," and when that failed, he ordered "every boy born to be thrown into the Nile." Then, when Jesus was born, the same thing. King Herod, like the Pharaoh, was afraid that some Jewish baby would grow up and challenge his authority, so Herod "gave the order to kill all the boys in Bethlehem who were 2 years old and under."

The Gospel of Matthew reports that this fulfilled the words of Jeremiah, who warned of a day when "A voice is heard weeping and mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted because her children are no more." (Matthew 2; Jeremiah 31:15.) Sadly, that's life. There are a lot of "Rachels weeping and mourning, refusing to be comforted because their children are no more."

This is *not* a sermon about Islam or terrorism. In the last six months, we have had two outstanding speakers on Islam. And last year I wrote an extensive "white paper" on "Islam, Christianity, and the U.S." There are 100 copies of it in the narthex, along with two sermons I preached last year and the year before on terrorism. If you want to know what I think about terrorism, or going to war, even "boots on the ground," or about Islam, it's all there. No need to repeat it. Nothing's changed. In fact, maybe nothing's changed since the dawn of civilization.

"The slaughter of the innocents" in Moses's time was 3,700 years ago. "The slaughter of the innocents" in Jesus's time was 2,000 years ago. "The slaughter of the innocents" in Pakistan was last Sunday. Forever, it seems, there's somebody who thinks they know better than everybody else and kills whoever thinks otherwise. Forever, it seems, there's somebody who hates freedom, hates the human spirit, hates, I dare say, God, hates God and all that is Godly. Part of our challenge is to *not* go crazy ourselves.

Even preparing this sermon, I realized I didn't want to maximize terrorism by devoting a whole Sunday to it again; but I also didn't want to minimize terrorism by ignoring it. That's life. It may have been around forever, but that doesn't lessen our fears. So my sermon for today is about faith enough to overwhelm our fears.

In fact, let's do our Scripture Lesson right now, in the middle of the sermon.

Scripture Reading ~ Read Responsively
"Faith and Fear"

Pastor:	Perfect love drives out fear.	(1 John 4:18)
Deacon:	<i>So do not fear, for I am with you.</i>	(Isaiah 41:10)
Congregation:	Delight in the fear of the Lord.	(Isaiah 11:1)
	The fear of the Lord leads to life.	(Proverbs 19:23)
	Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.	(Proverbs 9:10)
	The fear of the Lord is pure.	(Psalm 19:9)
	To fear the Lord is to hate evil.	(Proverbs 8:13)
	I will fear no evil.	(Psalm 23:4)
	You will not fear the terror of night.	(Psalm 91:5)
Pastor:	Live your lives in reverent fear.	(1 Peter 1:17)

Deacon: *Fear the Lord your God, walk in all His ways, love God, serve God with all your heart and soul.*
(Deuteronomy 10:12)

Congregation: **Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them. For God goes with you; God will never leave you or forsake you.**
(Deuteronomy 31:6)

Pastor: Do not be afraid or discouraged because of their vast army, for there is a greater power with us than with them.
(2 Chronicles 32:7)

Deacon: *Stand firm in one Spirit, contending as one for the faith of the Gospel without being frightened by those who oppose you. This is a sign that they will be destroyed, but you will be saved – and that by God.* (Philippians 1:28)

ALL: **Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord is my strength and my song, my salvation.**
(Isaiah 12:2)

The opening and closing are crystal clear: "Perfect love drives out fear." "The Lord is my strength, my song, and my salvation. I will not be afraid."

That's a conscious choice to face life unafraid. There's only so much room in any of us. We can fill it with love and all the things that go with love, or we can fill ourselves up with fear and all the things that go with fear. "Perfect love," a life plum full of love "drives out fear," there's no room for fear. And since the Bible says, "God is love," then what we're saying is once you're full of God, full of love, full of Godly love, fear can't squeeze its way in.

You will notice there are two uses of fear in there. There's the fear we don't want, the fears that make us afraid, the fears that cancel a school trip to Germany, fears that make us opposed to immigrants, that make us suspicious of a woman in a hijab, that make us "see something, say something," that make travel a nightmare; the fear of sickness, surgery, dying, or death itself; the fear of the unknown, the stranger, or of change itself.

Fear is my middle name. This week I had what is euphemistically called a "minor medical procedure." Yeah, right. Minor for those not having it. For me, and for poor Alida, it was a week of my talking about Joan Rivers, do-not-resuscitate orders, planning my funeral, and whether Alida should still go to Florence, even if I die. I'm not exaggerating. So, believe me, I'm not

making fun of fears. We all have them. And the Bible offers a way to face them: with faith, with God at our side, with the byproducts of God's love, trust, confidence. Yes, I'm talking to me!

Now, you were probably surprised to see at least seven verses that were very pro-fear, advocating for it, endorsing it, urging us to "delight in the fear of the Lord." *Delight . . . in the fear of the Lord*. And the Bible goes on: "The fear of the Lord leads to life." "The fear of the Lord is peace." "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." "Live your lives in Reverent fear." Well, that last one's a little better, softer. "Reverent fear." There is the sense in the Bible that we should stand in awe of God. Awe, reverence, Respect with a capital R.

We don't really get that in 21st-century Protestant Greenfield Hill New England Congregationalism. I'm not going to get into a long theological riff on the "fear of the Lord" today except to say this: the Bible isn't saying to be "afraid" of God in the sense of cowering or being frightened. Jesus takes our relationship with God to a whole other place, inviting us to see God, to know God in Christ—not fearsome in the frightened way, but loving, in an "awesome" way.

The Bible is saying that God is special, the ultimate special, different from anything else in the universe, and we ought to think of God with a specialness, a uniqueness, a deference, an awe, a humility unlike any other feeling we have toward anything else. That perspective, the Bible is saying, puts all other fears in perspective. It's another way of saying, "Remember what's important." When we are afraid of something, we let it take over our life. Am I right? I won't speak for you, but I'll confess it: whenever I'm afraid of something, it takes over my life: medical, personal, travel, work.

And, of course, that's what terrorism is. The idea of terrorism is to terrorize, to take over our lives, to paralyze us with fear, to stop us in our tracks. To stop our pleasure, to stop our way of life, to stop our freedoms, to stop our travel, to stop our dreams.

To that terror, the Bible offers two solutions. First, if you want something to dominate your life, let it be Godly and Godlike and God itself. Because, second, "God is our strength, our song, and our salvation." We will "not be frightened by those who oppose us," we will "not be discouraged because of their vast army," we will "not fear the terror of night." We are *not* in control of terror. We *are* in control of whether we're terrorized.

A lot of us in this Church have been thinking about Anita Schorr. Anita is a Holocaust survivor, perhaps the most loved speaker in the history of our high school youth group. This week she decided to stop her chemo

treatments and allow her life to come to its close. The same day I heard this, I finished reading the most heart-wrenching Holocaust memoir I've ever read. Deeply, deeply sorrowful, each page a masterpiece of heartache, almost too hard to read. *But You Did Not Come Back: a Memoir* by Marceline Loridan-Ivens.

Two women, same Holocaust, great horrors, both survivors living long and full lives. Anita filled her life with love. She exudes joy. She loves young people. She embraced life. Marceline lived a life of brokenness, of bitter, shattered dreams, of cold emptiness, forlorn, haunted. Yet, hers was a brilliant, accomplished life, by most measures, but her heart was a graveyard of sorrow. To tell you the truth, neither woman was wrong. I will not fault Marceline, who lived her life haunted by the hurts of her youth. I will say that I wish she could have felt the light of God's love touch the darkest places of her heart. I wish that she had allowed or accepted "perfect love to drive out [her] fears."

Marceline's fears were not irrational, nor are ours in the face of terror. But our faith invites us to live above our fears, untransformed by fear, unburdened by fear, unterrorized by terror. We put our faith forward, we put our fears backward. That's life, too.

And now, let us stand and sing our faith together in this beautiful old hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul," No. 561.

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll,
whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.
It is well (It is well) with my soul (with my soul),
it is well, it is well with my soul.*

*Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
let this blest assurance control:
that Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
and has shed his own blood for my soul.
It is well (It is well) with my soul (with my soul),
it is well, it is well with my soul.*

*My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole,
is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,
praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!
It is well (It is well) with my soul (with my soul),
it is well, it is well with my soul.*

*May God haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
the clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
the trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend,
even so, it is well with my soul.
It is well (It is well) with my soul (with my soul),
it is well, it is well with my soul.*