

Where hope belongs

Psalm 33:13-22

August 12, 2007

Where does hope belong?

What was your second thought when you heard the news of the collapse of the I-35W bridge in Minneapolis? Your first thought was certainly something like mine: *I hope Jeff and Gyobanna are OK ...* all of us concerned for those we love, family and friends, living in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area.

But what was your second thought? Was it something like this: did they do it? Did terrorists make the bridge come down? Was there a bomb? Was it sabotage? Even after knowing for sure it was a structural failure, the doubts persist. Bridges just don't fall down. Could they have done it?

That thought would never have crossed my mind seven years ago ... but a lot has changed in seven years. It's funny, though. The world itself has not changed all that much. Acts of terrorism are no more frequent and no more deadly than they were before September 11, 2001, but that day changed us because it happened to us. Our world has changed. That horrific act of violence was so visible, it struck so close to home, that we don't feel safe anymore even in our own homeland. We feel vulnerable. We feel afraid. We are angry, we are indignant, we are zealous about protecting our way of life, but mostly we are afraid.

But fear does terrible things.

Certainly fear is often an appropriate response. It makes sense to fear an angry bear or a man making threats with a gun or a sheer cliff edge. Fear leads us to use caution, to take precautions. We stay out of the way of angry bears. We try to make sure that threatening men do not have access to guns or that they are quickly brought to justice when they make threats or do violence. We stand back from the edge and put up safety fences.

But precaution in the face of a real threat is something very different from fear. Fear distorts perception and clouds judgment. Fear destroys relationships and robs people of life. Fear chisels away at the pleasures and freedoms of life. You won't fly. You won't swim. You won't go out after dark. You won't sleep in a tent.

Now a person can live a full life without flying or swimming or venturing into the wilderness, but it gets worse. I remember a house in New Haven with shuttered windows and eight deadbolts on the front door. I can imagine an old woman inside, never venturing outside her house, only opening the door a crack to take in delivered groceries, cut off from anything resembling life by her fear.

That's the problem with fear. It prompts a response all out of proportion to the threat. Even if the response itself seems reasonable or is reasonable, it inflicts as much or more damage to life than the threat ever could. We fear death, so we give up life and liberty ... voluntarily.

Or we take life and take liberty from someone else. In our fear security becomes the watchword, the rallying cry, our first, and apparently only, priority. We build fences on our borders, we deny immigrants entry, we gather personal information indiscriminately, and we imprison -- and torture -- those we identify as enemy combatants.

We build bigger armies, we build better weapons, we find ways to kill more efficiently, and it works. We do kill more efficiently. We kill people who mean us harm and we kill people who mean us no harm. That's the problem with war: it works! It kills people, all kinds of people, and usually more innocents than combatants. And those it does not kill, it leaves physically and emotionally scarred, both among its victims and among its combatants.

It works, but it does not work, because security remains as elusive as ever. We are no safer. We are no more secure. Terrorism is by definition unpredictable and unmanageable and even unpreventable. It happens and will happen as long as people who feel powerless and abused and disenfranchised choose violence and fear as a way to get what they think they can get in no other way. Fear is terrorism's most lethal weapon and it's working. It's robbing us of life and liberty almost without a shot being fired. We give up liberty for the appearance of security, and we become ourselves what we fear. In our terror, we fill the world with more terror, in the original sense of the world.

Fear distorts perception and clouds judgment. So we need to deal with the fear itself, and a long-dead songwriter can help us with that because the world is really no different than it ever has been. We face the same threats and choose among the same possible responses. We can run and hide. We can build walls and armies,. We can close in or lash out. We can choose to entrust our security and we can choose to put our hope in ...???

*A king does not win because of his powerful army;
a soldier does not triumph because of his strength.
War horses are useless for victory;
their strength cannot save.*

The songwriter does not suggest getting rid of kings or soldiers or war horses, though someday I know there will be no more need for any of these! He just says they cannot get the job done. They cannot save you. They cannot protect you.

Nothing and no one can save you ... except the Lord! No army, no general, no weapon, no war. Not Mitt Romney, not Rudy Guliani, not Ron Paul or John McCain. Not Barack Obama, not John Edwards, not Hillary Clinton or Dennis Kucinich.

Do you find the whole political process rather peculiar? Sometimes I wonder how so little can be said with so many words! Sometimes I wonder just how dumb they think we are! The YouTube debate was an improvement, I think. It seemed to give the candidates a more human face and a more honest forum, though the questioners selected for the telecast seemed to be chosen primarily for their entertainment value not so much for the substance of their questions.

So much of the political discussion seems to revolve around the same questions, the same issues, the same answers. Are these really the things about which the American people are concerned, or merely the things about which we are supposed to be concerned?

It's like that six-year old girl who was videotaped asking about the viability of social security for her generation! What are the things that really matter to us? And what should we expect of our presidential candidates?

We shouldn't expect them to save us. But we do, and we seem to want them to say they can.

*If I am elected I will secure our borders ...
I will win the war on terror ...
I will protect you ...*

No, you won't! No, you can't! No one can save us, only the Lord! The most we can expect of a presidential candidate is that he or she will do their best to do the right thing, and do their best to encourage us to do the right thing.

*We put our hope in the Lord;
the Lord is our protector and our help.
We are glad because of him;
we trust in his holy name.*

This is where hope belongs! In the face of threat and fear, this is what we say. This is our statement of faith. This is our manifesto.

It seems to me that to say these words, to say them and believe them, has profound implications for the ways we live and act and react in this world. What do you think?