

# Living with Terror

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Lewis  
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church  
Columbus, Ohio  
October 12, 2008*

## Children's Message

*The children's story consists of a brief account of the Anabaptist martyr, Dirk Willems, who had been thrown into prison because of what were considered heretical beliefs. Willems escaped from the prison in the winter of 1569. While fleeing from the prison across a frozen pond, he heard cries for help from his pursuer who had fallen through the ice and was in danger of drowning. Dirk Willems turned back to rescue his pursuer. He was then immediately re-arrested and in May of 1569 was burned at the stake as a heretic.*

## Sermon

Our grandchildren are growing up with a word that wasn't even in my childhood vocabulary. The word sneaks up on our 15 grandchildren somewhere in their newspapers every day. As a kid, I delivered daily newspapers in our town, but I don't remember ever seeing that word in newsprint. The word worms its way into our grandchildren's conversations, or the ones they hear, most every day. It's their constant companion, at their side, you might say, as they grow older and try to figure out what "life" is all about...but it wasn't my childhood companion, and I wonder why.

As many of you know, I am much attracted to the notion that the preaching of the church is at its best when it is done, as one theologian put it, with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. A preacher, he suggested, stands in the interface between the two, and must somehow articulate the conversation they have with each other...this Bible and the newspaper. Thus, when Bob Arbogast called me last Monday and asked me to preach the sermon today, I thought of a number of things I could do. But somehow, paying attention not only to the Bible but the newspaper as well, I couldn't get out of my head that word which has so intruded into the lives of our grandchildren...and, yes, the lives of us all. By now I think you may have guessed the word I'm talking about. It's spelled "T-E-R-R-O-R" ...Terror!

## Why Terror Now?

The word is everywhere! Just last Friday evening during an interview recorded on the Jim Lehrer newshour the Director of a non-governmental social service agency described his clients these days as being "terrified." That's probably a true description of what the current credit crisis has become for many people. The current issue of US News and World Report (Oct. 13) approaches that description with a clever cover. It has a close-up of the photo of George Washington that is on a dollar bill. The dollar bill in your billfold displays him with a confident, self-assured, commanding presence. On the cover of the magazine, however, George's visage, brought up-to-date, has changed. He looks startled, not yet fearful perhaps, but on his way to fear, if not terror. So by means of these allusions to fear and terror we may be expanding our notions of "living with terror" to encompass economic realities as well as September 11, 2001. And I repeat, I cannot remember my dad, or my mother, or any of their eight children (of which I am the oldest) ever thinking, or describing, our existence as one of "living with terror."

My family's failure to use the word, by comparison with our ready use of it, strikes me as being somewhat strange, especially when one considers my family's circumstances. After all we were living through the Great Depression and Pearl Harbor and WWII, which, if you believe the news media, are happening again, in some form or other, and therefore justify the description of our existence as "living with terror." Early in the 1930's my dad, who was heir to the family farm and country store in Lewis,

Colorado (which, incidentally, was named after my grandfather, and became the place of my birth), lost all of it as banks foreclosed and closed. After losing everything...my mother told us that in those days, at one point, there was no food in the house, a fact that I was too young to remember...after losing everything, the family moved from Lewis to Shiprock where my father found a job that paid \$40.00 a month, and where my parents were to raise a family of 8 children. Through it all -- through the years of what is called the Great Depression, the likes of which is scaring people silly these days -- through it all I don't remember the word "terror" ever being used to describe our living! It wasn't in the newspapers of those days, but it is today. I am certain that many of you have similar stories to tell. So, I have come to wonder, "Why?". Pondering that will bring us closer to the concerns of this message. A few observations....

### **Concerning Terror**

First, let me say that this sermon will not seek to unravel and explain an economic recession...some are beginning to call it that! I'm certainly not qualified to make any sensible comment on the so-called current crisis or what to do about terrorism in the world, however real these challenges may be. And, as you may already know, clergy, by some critics, have been singled out as being particularly inept at economic matters. Personally, I would not long argue against that point of view! But I will try to put my fingers on some of what might be called the spiritual and moral challenges that "terror," as understood in our time, implies for followers of Jesus Christ. If it's descriptive of our times, how do we live with terror? At the very least, we ought to try to figure that out in that space we occupy between the Bible and the newspaper where we seek to live with God, with each other, and, yes, with terror.

Secondly, we find that fear, even "fear and trembling" (which must be close to terror) is both recommended and rebuked in the Bible, proper in one sense for God's people and not in others. On the one hand we are told that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, while we are also told there is no fear in love (I John 4:18), obviously a highly recommended virtue. We are told by Paul "to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling because God is working in us (Philippians 2:12), and yet the universal message on Easter morning, from Jesus and angels alike, is "fear not." Clarifying these seemingly contrary uses of the word would take us far beyond the limits imposed by this sermon. We can say, however, with a reasonable measure of security, that the way the particular words "fear" and/or "terror" are used in the Bible doesn't really help us much in the interface between the Bible and the newspaper as we ask questions about "living with terror."

Third, let's agree that words gain their meanings from the historical contexts in which they are used. The word "love" provides an obvious example. It's meaning changes radically when one compares its use in the Bible to that of a steaming paperback novel. The same can be said of "terror." The meaning of the word changes with the times. That helps to account for the difference between the childhood of myself and our grandchildren. So we have to go back to the newspaper if we want to know what "terror" means to people living in 2008. In our day the word principally rests on 9/11 and people's perceptions of radical Fundamentalists. We didn't have reference points like that when I was a child. Other people (In Darfur, the Holocaust, genocide of native North Americans) know, or have known, what it was like to live with terror. Now the circumstances of history have brought the word to our doorstep. And so the question, "How to live with terror," becomes a real one for us too.

Fourth, let's explore the differences between then and now a bit more. During the Great Depression and WWII Americans never lost their basic optimism. We mostly believed a president who said we had nothing to fear but fear itself. And we were quite certain that WWII would be won by the allies. Some Britains may have doubted that during the dark days of the London blitz, but we sure didn't have much self-doubt in the good old USA. For most Americans, the WWI song by George M. Cohan put everything into proper perspective.

### **“Over There”**

Johnnie, get your gun,  
Get your gun, get your gun,  
Johnnie show the Hun  
Who’s a son of a gun.  
Hoist the flag and let her fly,  
Yankee Doodle do or die.  
Pack your little kit,  
Show your grit, do your bit.  
Yankee to the ranks,  
From the towns and the tanks.  
Make your mother proud of you,  
And the old Red, White and Blue

Over there, over there,  
Send the word, send the word over there -  
That the Yanks are coming,  
The Yanks are coming,  
The drums rum-tumming  
Ev’rywhere.  
So prepare, say a pray’r,  
Send the word, send the word to beware.  
We’ll be over, we’re coming over,  
And we won’t come back till it’s over  
Over there.

You better believe that song was taken out of mothballs during WWII. It perfectly described the triumphalistic mindset of Americans throughout the 20th century and not even a Great Depression made a lasting dent in that optimism. “The Yanks are Coming!” That’s the way we have handled most of the problems in the world!

Fifth, that all changed with 9/11. Like a nightmare coming out of a dark alley, the collapse of the World Trade Center Towers, symbols of America’s prestige and power, crumbled into a twisted mass of meaninglessness, and with it America’s confidence in its ability to predict and manage the future took a major hit. That’s the difference between my childhood and those of our grandchildren. In the 1930s we still believed that we were in control of our lives. That’s no longer so! With all that’s happening in the Near East and with the credit market collapse it has become more difficult to convince ourselves and our children that the “Yanks are Coming”! This turn of events lets an agenda for terror, or panic, out of its cage. So, we live with terror. Increasingly, Americans know that we live with the unknown, the unpredictable, the uncontrollable. That’s what makes today different. There is no place to hide. It’s somewhat like living in a dark room that has no exit...and the walls seem to be closing in on us. Pundits and political leaders, and presidential candidates, may try to tell it’s not so, but a growing scepticism on the streets of our towns and cities eats away at the foundations of their arguments.

In 1919 Wm. Butler Yeats, with the prophetic insight of a poet, described the terror to come with words that seem to appropos to our times today, these 89 years later!

### **“The Second Coming” – Wm. Butler Yeats (1919)**

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Am I being unduly pessimistic? Am I giving voice to things that shouldn't be said, that should remain hidden, or unexpressed, from our children? I'm not so sure. It bothers me to think on these things. I wish they weren't so. If there be truth in what I say, I can understand a bit what it was like for Jeremiah who had bitter, unpalatable words for Israel. Maybe we are facing a similar time. In the space between the Word and the newspaper, it is of primary importance that the church (that's you and me) be truthful to both, and to insist that that dual truthfulness be reflected in our preaching. We are called to be skilled in both reading the Bible and the news, whether in the newspaper or on TV. What a sobering task. I can understand wanting to turn off the news. It would be a lot easier to pretend that we are in some other place. But there we are -- in the world but not of it. And we are there together, preachers and congregations. We are responsible together for working at the interface. We may never have realized how painful it can be to live between the Word and the newspaper, but we are getting some lessons in that. In that space we need to endure as followers of Jesus! God invites us to be concerned enough about the interface to get involved together in serious and sympathetic discussion and critique of sermons, and serious study and learning so as to unravel the intricacies of the Word and the news as they talk to each other. Spectator Christians and couch-potato believers will not do!

For the purposes of this sermon we have spent enough time with the newspaper. There's another voice in the space we occupy. It's the Word of the Lord. The Lord says many things and we must attend to all of it. This morning I'm suggesting that the epistle to the Ephesians can be a special blessing. I will endeavor to make a case for that by translating the setting of the epistle to our own times. We usually think of biblical translations as a transfer from one language to another, for instance, Greek to English. An equally acceptable meaning of translation is transfer from one place, or one time, to another. That translation I wish to attempt by imagining that Ephesians is a letter to the congregation of the OCRC in Columbus, OH, in the year of our Lord 2008. By means of the translation we may hear a Word that enables us as followers of Jesus to live with terror. The translation will be brief and selective. It will not be the "Word of the Lord" in the same sense as that which is on the printed page in our Bibles. Hopefully, it will nevertheless speak to us in that sometimes troubling space between the Word and the news. Here goes!

### **Translation of Ephesians**

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints in the OCRC in Columbus, Ohio, the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The God and Father of Jesus Christ is to be praised for choosing you to be where you are from before the foundation of the world, to receive His Spirit and to live to the praise of his glory. I have heard of your faith, and your love for the saints in Columbus, and give thanks for you always. May you come to know Him and his power better every day.

Don't forget. Once you were dead in your sins, following the ways of the prince of darkness, but now you have been made alive in Jesus Christ, made new creatures in Christ for those good works in Columbus that God has prepared for us to do where we live. This means that you are no longer foreigners and aliens in the family of God, but are now full members of His household, one holy temple in the Lord.

Surely you have heard of my imprisonment and sufferings for the sake of the Gospel, which Gospel you have, by the grace of God, embraced and display in your lives. In spite of what is happening in the world and to us, with joyful thanksgiving we can still say, "How wide, and long, and high, and deep is the love of Christ!"

In spite of the turmoil in your world, I urge you then to live lives worthy of your calling, maintaining the unity and integrity of your one body in the Lord, speaking the truth to one another in love. Don't live as others do, darkened in their understanding, indulging themselves in the riches and pleasures of the world. You surely didn't find Jesus living that way, and you are to be imitators of him. Rather you have been taught to leave your old way of living behind so that you can put on a new identity, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Live as children of light in Worthington, Westerville, Dublin, Upper Arlington, Columbus, or wherever you are. Rather than practicing the arts of deception and self-centeredness as other do, do what pleases the Lord...as wives and husbands, as parents and children, as servants and leaders of one another...giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This ends my translation. A summary of what Paul has said comes down to two things: (1) remember who you are, and (2) what you are to do. In troubled times Christians can get distracted and be consumed by terror which shuts out the memory of who they are and what they are to do. Two days after 9/11 one of the women participants of the Theology Seminar which I coordinate came to our usual Wednesday meeting. She said she was consumed by terror, that she couldn't sleep at night, that she wasn't eating, and couldn't concentrate on the work she was to do at her job. For some reason she couldn't keep her eye on (1) who she was and (2) what she was to do. In contrast to her, Dirk Willems, though terrified, knew what he, as a follower of Christ, had to do when a drowning enemy called out for help. That's what Jesus did in Gethsemane and on the cross, terrified though he must have been. So this is the Word for those who live with terror. As they say, don't take your eye off the ball! Keep doing the good works for which the Lord has elected us to do! Don't get distracted by terrorists, no matter who they are, or what form the terror takes.

But how do that? Who among us is up to that sort of challenge? Here's where the final verses of the epistle come to our aid. Living with terror in the space between the news and the Bible let's hear the Word of the Lord with a new sense of urgency. You may wish to turn to Ephesians 6:10-20 with me. These words will bring us back to the essentials of our life with the Lord and others in the world.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

This is the Word of the Lord!