

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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Cloak of Fear, Cloak of Hope

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For most of us, the day began like any other day. I was eating breakfast, listening to a news program when the first images were shown—smoke rising from a World Trade Center tower. There were unconfirmed reports that a plane had struck it. The heart-wrenching hours that followed are deeply etched into the memories of most Americans. Thousands of innocent lives were lost, and grief remains.

Sadly, the terrible losses of that day multiplied over the past decade. A “war on terror” was quickly declared, and Afghanistan and Iraq were invaded. Over 4,000 American service personnel have died in those actions—more than were killed on 9/11 itself. In addition, tens of thousands have been injured. They will carry physical, emotional and spiritual scars for the rest of their lives.

Less a part of the American consciousness are the massive losses suffered by Afghani and Iraqi citizens as a result of the wars and the chaotic forces they unleashed. Over 100,000 of them have been killed and over 5 million have been displaced from their homes or become refugees—mostly innocent civilians. Their names, faces and stories are largely unknown to us, but their families and communities continue to experience pain and grief.

Post 9/11 losses include vast amounts of money spent on the wars, even in the midst of an economic crisis. Sadly, some have also lost sight of the full human dignity of our Muslim brothers and sisters through stereotyping, profiling and the bearing of false witness against them.

As we remember and mourn the losses of 9/11, we must also ask why losses continue to multiply. A partial answer is that we have viewed the future through the lens of fear. The debate over building a Muslim community center near ground zero reflects the persistence of that fear.

A Vietnam era general said that “war is fear cloaked in courage.” What is true of individual combatants is also true of society as a whole. The war on terror is grounded in fear—fear of the other, fear of the unknown, fear of losing control. A decade of violence has not brought us peace and security. Instead, we have suffered and inflicted grief upon grief.

Faith calls us to shun fear and embrace hope. For those of us who are Christian, our hope is in Christ who taught us to pray for the establishment of God’s realm, on earth as in heaven. Ours is the hope that our labors on behalf of that realm are not in vain; transformation of hearts and minds, of institutions and structures is possible.

Fear causes us to see the other as an enemy to be mistrusted, manipulated and destroyed. Hope, on the other hand, welcomes all as neighbors with whom we seek understanding, reconciliation and fellowship. Fear leads to revenge, while hope nurtures forgiveness. Fear perpetuates a never-ending cycle of violence, but hope seeks peace with justice.

Present life occurs at the intersection of memory and expectation. As we remember the losses of 9/11, let us not be led by the terror we fear. Rather, let the hope of God’s future lead us to transformed relationships, at home and abroad.

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