

This week began with a tempest in a coffee cup. Starbucks revealed red cups for the holiday season; plain red cups; and, social media ran wild. For every post, “It’s a war on Christmas!” There was another post that responded that if we want to win the war on Christmas, we need to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and provide for the poor; meanwhile, a few souls dared to lament, “It’s not even Thanksgiving.”

Then on Friday, we were reminded of what war really is. War is hell. War is streets running red with blood. War is coordinated attacks in the city of Paris in which 120 people, who’d gone out for a concert, or a coffee, or for dinner; 120 people died as ISIS gunmen poured automatic weapon fire into street cafes and a concert hall.

What do we say in response to such a horror? How do we respond in the face of such evil? What in the name of God are we to do?

Unlike our response to Starbucks coffee cups, we’re going to keep our heads on straight, our hearts open, and our wills free from fear. We’re going to speak a word of hope (not despair), because the final word is not death; it is life, eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

1. Let’s Build a Wall!

Walls are very popular these days. China had one first; the Soviet Union had one for a while; Israel keeps the Palestinians out with one; and some of our politicians suggest that we need one to keep immigrants out.

Will Europe now build one to keep refugees from Syria and North Africa out?

It’s tempting. The logic is sound. A wall keeps them out and us in; everyone is safe and sound on their side of the wall.

The disciples were quite impressed by the walls of the Temple: *Mark 13:1–2 (NRSV) As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”*

² *Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”*

Walls sound good; they seem to make sense, but the historical record shows that the one thing that is certain about walls is that they will fall down. Jericho did. Jerusalem did. China’s wall still stands, but it failed to keep the invaders out. The same is true of Hadrian’s Wall in England. The Berlin Wall could not keep the city (and Europe) divided. And have you seen the latest news out of Israel; the streets of Jerusalem are again running with blood both Israeli and Palestinian.

Walls don’t prevent wars; they invite them. That is true for literal walls; that is even more true for metaphorical walls; walls in the sense of closed minds and hardened hearts; walls that will not allow someone with a different perspective, a different faith, a different gender, a different color or a different lifestyle to be seen and heard as they are rather than as our walls define them to be. Walls keep “them” “them” with no possibility of joining “us.”

The tragic irony is that if we build walls in response to what ISIS is doing, if we act out of fear of what immigrants might be and do; we will be acting out of the same kind of close-mindedness that inspired ISIS to do what they do. We will become what we fear.

God forbid that the United States becomes a nation that responds to the challenges of our world by saying, "Let's build a wall!" God bless America with the faith and courage to continue to be the land of the free, the home of the brave, the land that dares to be in Emma Lazarus' words, "The New Colossus:"

The New Colossus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"¹

Lest we forget, the Statue of Liberty on which that poem is engraved was a gift to the United States from France; may we honor the gift by refusing to surrender to the fear that says, "Let's build a wall."

2. Zombie Apocalypse

Talking about a "zombie apocalypse" may seem like a non-sequitur, so a word or two of definition: A zombie is the living dead; a zombie becomes a zombie either through the use of supernatural power to bring the dead back to life, or due to an infection caused by contact with another zombie.

An apocalypse occurs when one world ends and a new world begins. Typically, we think of this in terms of chaos and destruction, but the Revelation to John is literally titled, "the Apocalypse," and apocalyptic thinking in Christian faith focuses on the ways that God's new world is being revealed in this world.

An apocalypse is good news when the world we know is a world in which freedom, equality and liberty are viewed as threats to be eliminated so that our metaphorical walls will not be challenged.

A zombie is what by the grace of God, we Christians are; we were dead in sin; we are alive in Christ; we are animated by supernatural power, and God grant that we are infectious, spreading faith in Jesus Christ with all those with whom we come in contact.

A zombie learns of the terrible new of what happened in Paris and remembers these words of Jesus:

Mark 13:6-8 (NRSV)

⁶ Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. ⁷ When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

¹ <http://www.libertystatepark.com/emma.htm>

Birth pangs? We're afraid it's the end of the world, and Jesus is telling us it is the beginning, the beginning of God's new world, the beginning of the kingdom of God.

It is understandable and profoundly human that when attacks occur like they did in Paris this week or in many other places around the world, especially for us on 9/11, that we would be afraid, and in response to our terror, we would build walls to keep the terrorists out. We would fear that our world was in danger.

"Do not be alarmed," Jesus tells us. "Do not be afraid" is the most often repeated command in the Bible, and no wonder; when we are afraid, we build walls; we turn away from one another; we turn on one another; we hate one another; we kill one another.

We are new to this kind of spiritual challenge; our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world have much to teach us, and we are blessed to be in constant contact with the church in South Sudan through John Tubuwa. He continues to work to bring reconciliation among the warring tribes that have made so much of sub-Saharan Africa a human rights nightmare. Recently, he spoke of a Sudanese pastor who had been killed by ISIS forces in Somalia. There were concerns that Christians in South Sudan would respond in kind towards Muslims in South Sudan, but John and the leaders in Project RECONCILE are working with the people to prevent such an "eye for an eye" response and instead to see this as an opportunity to make reconciliation a reality.

He's not building walls; he's building relationships, and by building relationships, he's building community, and by building community, he is building God's new world.

I am thankful that the Peacemaking Program of the Presbyterian Church USA brought John into our lives. I am thankful that the financial support we provide him is strengthening and supporting his ministry. I am thankful that Pennside Presbyterian Church is not hiding behind our walls; we are in the midst of it all; we are signs of God's zombie apocalypse.

John is a witness to us of what living through the birth pangs in the hope of God's new beginning is all about.

It isn't easy. It doesn't offer all the answers. It doesn't reduce complex situations to simple sound bites. It doesn't build walls; it builds relationships.

Do not be afraid. Come what may, and what may will come, do not be afraid. Be infectious! Spread the good news that God is at work in this world. Cast the vision that bad times do not signal the end of us; they are our opportunity to move into God's new world. Don't build walls; build relationships, and be ready for God's zombie apocalypse. Amen.