

### THE GREATEST FREEDOM OF ALL

It's a bit gloomy this morning, but what a lovely holiday weekend we've had! Officially, there are ten federal holidays. Ten American holidays. And arguably the most American of them is the Fourth of July. It's the day we celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the founding of our nation, and the many freedoms we enjoy as citizens.

There is probably no artist more closely associated with the day, indeed with Americana in general, than Norman Rockwell. From 1916-1963 his wonderfully warm and human paintings graced the covers of the *Saturday Evening Post*. 321 of them in all. Each one portrayed a slice of American life that seemed to connect with the very core of our own self-understanding.

Rockwell was especially known for his domestic scenes, brimming with home and family. He once said, "If a painting isn't going well I put a puppy in it." ([www.normanrockwell.com](http://www.normanrockwell.com))

But Rockwell also took on very serious subjects and none more memorably than in his famous series called *Four Freedoms*. The four paintings those covers were based on were exhibited all across the nation during World War II, raising over \$139 million for the war effort.

Rockwell's inspiration for the paintings was a speech Franklin Roosevelt delivered to Congress on January 6, 1941, just months before the United States entered the war. "In the future . . ." Roosevelt said, "we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms. The . . . freedom of speech and expression . . . the freedom of every person to worship God in his own way . . . The . . . freedom from want . . . [and the] . . . freedom from fear . . ." (*Congressional Record*, 1941, Volume 87, Part I)

While an argument can be made for the supreme importance of any one of these four freedoms, I would suggest that the last of the four is truly the greatest freedom of all: the freedom from fear. For when we are freed of fear, we are able to do that which is necessary to ensure the other freedoms; we are able to do that which is necessary to live full and productive lives.

Roosevelt was no stranger to fear. Who knows what he must have dealt with as he faced the challenges of his deteriorating legs as he struggled with the effects of polio. And on a more global scale, he had been elected to office nine years earlier, in 1932, when the Great Depression was at its lowest ebb. Stocks were worth just 20% of their pre-Depression value. --and some 25-30% of all workers were unemployed. (All statistics from "About the Great

Depression,” [www.english.uiuc.edu](http://www.english.uiuc.edu)) It was an extraordinarily bleak economic picture, and folks were afraid, very afraid. But Roosevelt was determined to boost the morale of America, and offer a ray of hope. And so, in his first inaugural address, he outlined some of his plans for addressing the problem. He also offered up his most quoted bit of wisdom: “Let me assert,” he said, “my bold belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself . . . .” It sounds good, but on closer examination we might ask why? Why is fear so dangerous? Isn’t it a harmless emotion? Not at all—for as Roosevelt went on to say, it “paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” (*First Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1933)

You see, fear gets in the way of our being able to take action. Fear finds us crouching in corners, unable to move, unable to breathe, unable to live. And in the end, if we allow it to happen, our fears come to define who we are.

Unfortunately, fear did not disappear at the end of the Great Depression—not even at the end of World War II. Subsequently fear has often dictated how we live as individuals and as a nation. Look what’s happened post-9/11! Reflecting on the aftermath of those attacks, Harvard professor and preacher Peter Gomes writes: “The greatest tragedy may be that we have since been programmed to live by our fears and not by our hopes.” (*The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, 104)

Over the months ahead it will, more than likely, just get worse. As Election Day draws near, as we prepare to exercise our freedom to choose our own leaders, we will hear fear-mongering on both sides of the aisle. For these are difficult times. The war in Iraq drags on. Osama bin Laden is still at large. Global warming seems inevitable. The Dow Jones experienced the worst June since 1930. Unemployment is on the rise. Oil prices are up, the dollar is down and home values have yet to stabilize. Consumer confidence is at the lowest point it’s been since 1992. As economist Ken Goldstein recently noted: “We’re now nine months into a slowdown, and the fear is that it could go on for another nine months.” (*USA Today*, 6-25-08, B-1)

Fear is everywhere! It’s in the air itself! So what are we to do? How are we to respond to so much bad news?

Simply put—by remembering the GOOD news, the good news that is found throughout the scriptures. For upon careful examination we will discover the authors of the sacred text invite us over and over again to recall one fundamental truth, a truth embodied in the Psalm we heard read earlier this morning. And that truth? God rules the universe—ultimately, God is in charge.

That doesn’t mean God controls each and every detail of life. That doesn’t mean there won’t be troubles. Mountains may indeed shake, as they did in China. Waters may roar, as they did

in Iowa. Nations may be in an uproar, as they are in Zimbabwe and Afghanistan. “But” says the Psalmist, “the Lord of hosts is with us.” (46:7a) We need not be afraid.

One scholar writes: “Psalm 46 calls people to decision . . . . It invites its hearers to enter the reign of God, to live in dependence on God, to find ultimate security in God rather than in self or in any human systems or possessions.” (Clinton McCann, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, IV:867)

You see, when we recognize that in the end it is all in God’s hands, when we trust that in God we are ultimately and eternally safe, then we can let go of our fears. And once having done that, we will discover a new clarity of vision, which will allow us to see more clearly, to think more clearly, to live more clearly. When we let go of our fears we will be able to use our God given gifts to begin to address the problems that confront us.

You and I are privileged to be citizens of what may be the greatest nation on earth. We are blessed with freedoms others only dream of. But our true security doesn’t grow out of being Americans, as wonderful as that is. Our true security doesn’t come with military might or material wealth. Our true security, that which can transcend all fears, comes from being citizens of what Jesus called the kingdom of God. And as long as we remember that, we can live lives free, not of problems, but free of fear, free of anxiety, free of the things that rob us of sleep. For that is the sure mark of fear and anxiety isn’t it--the tossing and turning, the fretting over the day ahead.

Perhaps that’s why Norman Rockwell’s portrayal of the fourth freedom—the freedom from fear—so captured the imaginations of those wartime Americans. Perhaps you remember it. It showed a young child, nestled in bed, as Dad looked on, and Mom pulled up his covers.

That, my friends, is the freedom God offers each one of us. A freedom from fear so potent you can sleep at night. So powerful you can find rest when you need it. So real you will be able to wake up each day refreshed and renewed, able to face your problems with a new sense of clarity. Fear not, says the Holy One, for behold I am with you. Be still and know that I am God.

Sleep well, my child, sleep well. A life free of fear is already yours—all you need do is claim it!

For Roosevelt was right, all we have to fear is fear itself.

Amen

John H. Danner