

**FEAR AND FAITH
IN HAMID'S *RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST***

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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Fear or faith? Which one will it be? Are we fearful people, essentially, or are we faithful people? When we face the storms of life, do we do so from a basic equilibrium or are we fundamentally destabilized? Do we rise to these occasions with courage, or is our first instinct to cry out in fear? When Jesus and his disciples are out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee and a great windstorm batters them, as described in this morning's gospel lesson from Mark,ⁱ the disciples are very much afraid for their lives, as their boat begins swamping. Yet, Jesus, calm enough to have been sleeping on a cushion in the stern, speaks to the storm with confidence after his disciples wake him up: "Peace! Be still!" And what happens? "Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm." Next, Jesus turns to his disciples and asks, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

In the Psalm from today's lectionary,ⁱⁱ God is described as "a stronghold in times of trouble." And even so, the Psalmist sounds fearful as he asks God to "Rise up, O Lord! Do not let mortals prevail" -- in particular those who afflict people like him -- one who suffers at the hands of those who hate him. The Psalmist also notes that the needy often seem forgotten and the poor often seem hopeless. So, he calls out, "Be gracious to me, O Lord...so that I may recount all your praises...and rejoice in your deliverance." As one of the biblical commentaries I use explains, "It seems that not all is settled,"ⁱⁱⁱ for the Psalmist, even when he assumes that God is in charge. Fear or faith. Which one will it be?

This juxtaposition is examined in depth, with increasing dramatic tension, in a 2007 novel called *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid, a graduate of Princeton and Harvard Law School.^{iv} From ages three to nine, Hamid actually was right here on the Stanford campus when his father was enrolled in a Ph.D. program.^v The main character of his novel is also a Pakistani graduate of Princeton, and like the author, one who did investment banking work in New York City before returning to Pakistan. The novel takes place over the course of just one afternoon and evening, with the protagonist, a young man in his twenties^{vi} named Changez, sitting in an open-air restaurant in Lahore, Pakistan, with an older American man he's just met. Everything is narrated through Changez's voice, including what the American is saying, with commentary from Changez on how the American is responding: For example, "How much sugar would you like [in your tea]? None? Very unusual, but I will not insist."^{vii} We learn from the very start that the American seems fearful. He sits with his back to the wall,^{viii} doesn't remove his suit jacket on hot day (apparently concealing a weapon),^{ix} appears worried about the burly waiter,^x and thinks his tea might be poisoned.^{xi}

Changez tells the American all about his years at Princeton, about his investment banking firm, Underwood Sampson & Company, and about his American girlfriend, Erica. Meanwhile, the American engages in a variety of not-altogether-appropriate behaviors like reaching under his jacket when the waiter approaches,^{xii} warily gazing at a bearded man nearby,^{xiii} and writing text messages on his cellphone.^{xiv} By the last chapter of the book we've learned that Changez, as a university lecturer, has been organizing anti-American demonstrations in Lahore, protesting its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, that he's spoken out against America on an international television news show that went viral, and that he's been briefly jailed. Changez explains his concerns that he's being observed and followed these days, and that the American government might have sent agents to intimidate him, or worse. So now, not only do we have two potential enemies having

tea and dinner together, but it's not clear who may be the hunted and who the hunter – in the worst case who the assassin and who the soon-to-be-assassinated.

I won't spoil the end of the story for those of you who haven't yet read the book, but let's consider what this novel reveals about fear and faith. First, what do these two characters have faith in? For one thing, they both seem to believe in their countries – Pakistan and America. They seem to be loyal, patriotic citizens. Secondly, they seem to believe in the use of force, when necessary. The American may be carrying a concealed gun, and although Changez professes to be a believer in non-violence, abhorring the spilling of blood, he understands that force might be required in self-defense,^{xv} and he does seem aligned with the burly waiter in the restaurant. Thirdly, Changez believes in love, and he remains true to the memory of his disappeared American girlfriend to the end.^{xvi} Finally, Changez seems to have faith in his own talent, cleverness, adaptability and survivability.

Neither of them, however, seems to have faith in their own religions –Islam for Changez^{xvii} and presumably Christianity for the American – or in the God that lies behind those traditions. Religion in fact is barely mentioned in the book. It becomes clear that the fundamentalism which the whiskey-drinking^{xviii} Changez had been involved with was that of Wall Street finance. He describes his investment banking firm as continually “focusing on the fundamentals,”^{xix} which “was Underwood Samson’s guiding principle... It mandated a single-minded attention to financial detail.”^{xx} He called his firm’s creed particularly “reassuring because it was quantifiable – and hence *knowable* – in a period of great uncertainty” early in the twenty-first century.^{xxi} It could be, instead, that the American is actually the reluctant fundamentalist of the book’s title – one who unequivocally believes in his nation and its right to assassinate its enemies, even civilians on city streets in a foreign country like Pakistan.

As for fear, the American seems to be overwhelmed for most of the novel: glancing about nervously all the time,^{xxii} leaping up when the electricity briefly fails and the lights go out, startled by a backfiring motorbike as if it were a pistol shot.^{xxiii} Changez, by contrast, seems to face the fact that his life's at risk much more calmly. Since he's been organizing anti-American protests in Lahore he has felt "rather like a Kurtz waiting for his Marlowe" in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and he has "been plagued by paranoia." However, he has a steadiness about him, saying: "I must meet my fate when it confronts me, and in the meantime I must conduct myself without panic."^{xxiv} He's also unerringly polite to the one who might be out to kill him. This is in fact a habit of character, for his American girlfriend remarked to him early on when they were Princeton students: "I don't think...I've ever met someone our age as polite as you... Respectful polite. You give people their space. I really like that. It's unusual."^{xxv}

So being polite, conducting oneself without panic, and bravely facing one's fate are partial antidotes to fear. Along with that are Changez's abilities to keep talking his way out of danger and to keep his eye on the ball with careful observation of his adversary. Beyond that, though, Changez seems able to escape attachment to his own ego and view his life as part of a larger story of his nation's struggle for dignity and respect. Earlier, he found solace in the certainty of quantification in his investment banking work. And his love for his girlfriend also sustained him for much of the book.

However, in the final analysis, both Changez and the American are missing the most important kind of faith – faith in God, Allah, or the Dharma, or the Tao, or the Life Force, or however one describes the Ultimate or the Ground of our Being. Both of them are worshipping idols – objects or concepts of worth that are not ultimate and that will fail to be complete in the end: etiquette, financial success, romantic love, and nationalism. The first words of the Muslim profession of faith, to be said multiple times every day, are that "There is no God except

God.”^{xxvi} Politeness is not God. Money is not God. One’s loved ones are not God. One’s nation is not God. To be attached to any of them with finality is not only to violate the first words of the Muslim Creed but also the First Commandment of the Jewish and Christian religions: “I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath... You shall not bow down to them or worship them.”^{xxvii}

How are we to know God and avoid false gods or idols? How are we to have true faith – the kind that vanquishes all fear? For Christians, it’s by opening ourselves to Jesus as our Lord and Savior. By Lord I mean the one in whose footsteps we try to follow, the great exemplar, the teacher, the guide, the one who showed us in his own life how best to love God with all of our hearts, minds and souls and to love our neighbor as ourselves.^{xxviii} By Savior I mean the one who shows us the way to ultimate meaning and purpose for our lives, helping us avoid the idols that will fail us. Jesus’s way is able to still the windstorms of our hearts and minds and souls. Jesus’s way will allow us to know love that is truly unconditional and ultimately transformational. Be still my soul, and know that God is on our side.^{xxix}

BENEDICTION

Hold onto what is good, even if it is a handful of earth.

Hold onto what you believe, even if it is a tree which stands by itself.

Hold onto what you must do, even if it is a long way from here.

Hold onto my hand [O God] even when I have gone away from you. Amen.

Nancy Wood

NOTES

- ⁱ Mark 4:35-41.
- ⁱⁱ Psalm 9:9-20.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), Vol. IV, p. 718.
- ^{iv} Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2007); see biographical information on book jacket.
- ^v "Mohsin Hamid: A Muslim novelist's eye on U.S. and Europe," *International Herald Tribune* 12 October 2007
- ^{vi} Hamid, *Fundamentalist*, p. 22.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 5, 139.
- ^x *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 181.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 120.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 53-54, 100, 161.
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.
- ^{xx} *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- ^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- ^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, p. 183.
- ^{xxv} *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- ^{xxvi} Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 244.
- ^{xxvii} Exodus 20:2-5.
- ^{xxviii} Matthew 22:37-39; Mark 12:30-31; Luke 10:27.
- ^{xxix} Katharina von Schlegel, "Be Still, My Soul" (1752).