

Be not afraid

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Syrian refugees stand on the platform of a Hungarian railway station in 2015. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Mstyslav Chernov](#).

In the weeks before Christmas, the prospect of Syrian refugees entering the United States unleashed an epidemic of fear and fearmongering, at least among many politicians. Alarmed that one of the suspects in the November terrorist attacks in Paris may have entered Europe using refugee status, two presidential candidates said they would block all Syrian Muslims from entering the country and admit only Christians. Candidate Ben Carson compared the threat of Syrian refugees to that of rabid dogs. More than half the nation's governors said Syrian refugees are not welcome in their states.

Faced with one of the greatest refugee crises in modern history, in which some 11 million Syrians have been displaced, 4 million have fled their country, and 700,000—mostly women and children—have risked their lives to reach Europe, some Americans shrink from even the modest humanitarian response outlined by President Obama of resettling 10,000 Syrian refugees in the next year.

Fear is an understandable reaction to danger, but it's an unreliable guide to policy and, often, to our own well-being. As cooler heads have noted, the refugee application process already includes background checks, in-depth interviews, and vetting by the National Counterterrorism Center, the FBI's Terrorist Screening Center, and the departments of state, defense, and homeland security. Refugees from Syria are already given additional scrutiny. The investigation takes from 18 to 24 months.

It's unlikely that people seeking to commit terrorist acts in the United States would choose to enter the country via this detailed and lengthy process—especially when the Islamic State already has sympathizers in the West who possess Western passports.

“Fear not” is the angel Gabriel's message to Mary in announcing the birth of Jesus. “Be not afraid” is Jesus' frequent message to his disciples. These words contain a frank recognition that fear is part of life. When danger looms, we fear for the safety of our loved ones and for ourselves.

In those scripture passages, Mary and others find their fears relieved not only by hearing divine words of assurance but by working at the tasks set before them. They trust that God is with them, whatever dangers are involved.

Welcoming refugees and strangers in need is a God-given task. It is not without risks, but the doing of it can help us overcome our lingering fears or at least put those fears in perspective as it reveals that refugees are not strangers but are much like us—seeking freedom from terrorism, safety for their families, and a chance to live in peace.