

Fear not: A new kingdom is here

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 15, 2008](#) issue

What an anomaly: while many Americans were gearing up for Christmas and singing the angels' song of peace on earth, good will to all, the nation was considering the government practice of torture—or more precisely, how and why videotapes of the government's harsh interrogation practices had been destroyed.

Military experts have serious doubts about the effectiveness of torture as a means of extracting information. Under torture people will say whatever they think their tormentors want them to say. So why are we doing what seems so utterly contrary to the highest values of our nation?

About a year ago Peter Steinke wrote in these pages about the “fear factor.” We know about the “fight or flight” syndrome that causes eyes to widen, pupils to dilate and breathing to quicken. Steinke said there is a point at which “fear overwhelms us and actually diminishes our alertness. . . . The fearful person is barely able to focus on anything else. Tunnel vision occurs and fear takes over.”

Sometimes I think that is what has happened to us as a nation. I do not mean to minimize the dangers around us. We live in a world in which some people mean to do us harm. But it seems that our fear has caused us to lay aside our principles and our reputation among the nations.

In *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, Peter Gomes introduces a chapter on “the gospel of fear” with a line from Robert Frost: “There’s nothing I’m afraid of like scared people.” And Thomas Friedman in a *New York Times* column last September said, “9/11 has made us stupid. I honor and weep for all those murdered that day. But our reaction to 9/11, mine included, has knocked America off balance and it’s time to get things right again. . . . In the wake of 9/11 we need new precautions. But we also need our old habits and sense of openness.” The U.S. is doing things to prisoners, Senator John McCain said recently, that the U.S. called war crimes when they were done by the Japanese in World War II.

A passage from Isaiah 35 was read in many churches on the Third Sunday of Advent, and the words should hearten us in this new year: “Strengthen the weak hands, / And make firm the feeble knees. / Say to those of a fearful heart, / ‘Be strong, do not fear! / Here is your God.’”

We have just celebrated the birth of a child who brings a new kingdom. Kindness, forgiveness, love and peace are the dynamics of God’s reign. And there is nothing to fear. In that child’s birth, ultimate issues have been resolved. The coming of Christ into human history, to live our life, to die our death, to defeat the power of death in his resurrection, means that the final battle has been won. It’s time to stop living out of our fear—and to call the nation to do the same.