

Speaking to the fear

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I was in Houston recently, speaking with a colleague, and he said, “Do people around you seem kind of irrational about this election? I mean, I know people who act like the world is going to end if Obama is reelected for a second term.”

I laughed as I recognized the irrationality, except it came from the other direction. “Actually, where I was from, people felt like the world would end if Romney got elected.”

We tried to sort out why this was the case.

Could it be the 24-hour news cycle? They need to hype up the frenzy whenever they can in order to keep their ratings up. I imagine a slow news day can feel like an eternity when you have to fill up that much space with talking. But if you throw some incendiary rants in there, then you’ve got some action.

Could it be the Internet? Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and other aspects of social media make us bold in our proclamations. Many say that the Internet heightens incivility. It certainly gives rancor a space to fester. Could that be the reason we think the world

will end if our choice of president is not elected?

Could it be the motivation of fear? For the last dozen years, our elections have been about personal safety. The terrorist attacks of 9-11 were often evoked and the safety warning system would move from orange to red each time an Election season arrived. When we moved to the polls, we were reminded which party would keep us safer.

Now we are focusing on the economy. The jobs numbers have become an indication of what will ruin us. We have to decide which party will save us.

Whatever the cause might be, the fear is palpable. The Obama supporters feel that a Romney presidency will completely erode our safety net, so that only the rich will survive. Women feel like any gains that they have eked out in society for the last few decades will be taken away completely.

The Romney supporters think that we need to get someone in there who knows about business, or else our economy will collapse. They worry about the looming deficit and an over-sized government, so they want Romney to make tough decisions.

And what is our voice in the midst of it? As people of God, what is a faithful response? Can we speak peace in the midst of fear?

Personally, I don't think that the economy is going to magically get better. I'm no economist, but it seems that our growth in the industrial age depended on oil production. As India and China become more industrialized countries, our petroleum resources will keep getting more depleted.

The tech industry boomed and fueled our economy for a while, but it also made the world flat, so that many of those new jobs were outsourced to other countries and people who are moving into the job markets now are competing with wages in India.

So where does that leave us? How do we speak with relevance in the midst of this? We have so many things that our culture needs right now. We have a sense that our dignity does not depend on our job, but in the fact that God created us in God's image. We have a beautiful duty to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, which (if we can live up to this difficult command) would completely transform that safety net. We have the teachings to live simply and work with our hands. That means that

if someone is not employed, but they are able to provide food for their family by ripping up their lawn and planting a garden, that is a life of value and worth.

We might have bought into the American dream that everything gets better, from generation to generation, and wealth never stops growing. And now we don't know what to do because we know that we're not going to be as well off as our parents.

But this dream was never the good news of our faith. Can we begin to imagine a different narrative in the mist of the anxiety? Can we begin to communicate it?