

Fear factor

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The hidden message in many politicians' campaign speeches and ads is this: "Be afraid. Be very afraid."

The Republicans want us to fear that we don't have an adequate defense budget, that the country is going bankrupt, that the government is going to take guns away from law-abiding citizens. The Democrats want us to fear that the Republicans will gut Social Security and Medicare if they win the White House and gain enough seats in Congress, that given the chance they'll stack the Supreme Court even more in favor of conservatives.

President Nixon said it best: "People react to fear, not love—they don't teach that in Sunday School, but it's true." Nixon, ever the anti-Communist, was himself adept at fear-mongering.

Fear is a natural and necessary response to perceived threats in our environment, both real and imagined. Fear of pain keeps children from putting their hands on a hot stove; fear of danger keeps them from running into a busy street.

There are some things that we should fear: the spread of AIDS, the effects of global warming, unchecked state power. The problem is living in a *state* of fear. The state of being in fear is debilitating to the human spirit. It can paralyze us from taking positive, constructive actions against legitimate threats and dangers; it can lead us to take actions that only make matters worse.

Be afraid. That's the politicians' mantra. But there's another mantra, a recurring biblical theme: be not afraid. Be not afraid, for God is with us.

That's a mantra we Americans need to keep hearing throughout this election season.