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A Trump supporter in Kenosha, Wisconsin, exchanges words with protesters Sept. 1, during President Donald Trump's visit there. (CNS/Reuters/Kamil Krzaczynski)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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Kenosha is where I stop for cheaper gas, on the way from Chicago to visit relatives in Wisconsin. It is the home of Apple Holler orchard, the Mars Cheese Castle, and, since 2017, the massive Amazon fulfillment and distribution centers — totaling 1.6 million square feet — that flank the I-94 freeway.

Now Kenosha is known to nearly everyone around the country, as the place where 29-year-old Jacob Blake, a Black man, was shot in the back seven times at close range by a white police officer, severing Blake's spinal cord and leaving him paralyzed.

This small city on the southwestern shore of Lake Michigan is now also known as the place where, after protests after the Blake shooting turned violent, a teen vigilante who drove up from a neighboring state armed with a semi-automatic rifle shot and killed two protesters.

These horrific incidents in late August prompted visits to the battleground state of Wisconsin by both President Donald Trump and his opponent, former Vice President Joe Biden, in early September.

Biden visited Blake's family, reiterated his commitment to racial justice, and called for healing and unity. He spoke at a Lutheran church and held a listening session with activists, elected officials, clergy members, businesspeople and a few law enforcement officers.

Trump brought his "law and order" campaign theme to Kenosha during his visit, focusing on the need to crack down on the unrest and shockingly seeming to defend the vigilante shooter. Trump met with law enforcement officials but not the Blake family.

Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden speaks to residents in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Sept.

Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden speaks to residents in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Sept. 3 during a community meeting at Grace Lutheran Church after a

week of unrest in the aftermath of the shooting of Jacob Blake, a Black man, by a white police officer. (CNS/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

Some worry that the violence that has erupted around some protests plays right into Trump's reelection strategy, which is trying to capitalize on the fears of voters — especially white voters — with threats of looting and destruction, not to mention the boogeyman of "socialism" and scary low-income housing coming to the suburbs.

Even before the shootings in Kenosha, the Trump campaign had been warning since July: "You won't be safe in Joe Biden's America."

But I don’t feel safe in Donald Trump's America.

And it's not the Black Lives Matter protests, nearly all of which are peaceful, that have me worried. My interracial family is more concerned about far-right militias, like the two heavily armed Missouri men recently arrested after the FBI learned they were planning to drive to Kenosha to "pick people off."

A report released in late August by the nonpartisan Brennan Center for Justice that found links between militias and white supremacist groups and police in more than a dozen states — not to mention hundreds of police officers posting racist and bigoted content on social media — is not helping me sleep at night either.

The NAACP, in its statement following the Kenosha shootings, called on Facebook to be "held accountable for its inaction while these violent groups have been allowed to grow and organize" on social media platforms.

Facebook — and the Democrats — are already preparing for what some are calling the "doomsday scenario" of Trump trying to invalidate election results. How do you think those armed militias will respond then? Concerns about civil war, which seemed overblown years or months ago, now seem plausible.

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I'll admit, I have a worrywart personality. And it's human nature to crave safety. There is a reason psychologist Abraham Maslow put "safety and security" right above "food, water, shelter and sleep " on his famous "hierarchy of needs."

But is safety a Christian virtue? Is it what we should be considering, above all other values, when we vote, choose where to live or decide whether or not to speak up about injustice?

Historians know that appeals to "law and order" that excessively prey on people's fears take a page right out of the dictator's handbook. Appeals to fear work. And it's not just the white suburbanites Trump is courting who are fearful.

People of color are afraid of being shot if pulled over by police, or while jogging, or while sleeping in their own homes. Americans — indeed, citizens around the world who depend on us — are afraid our 250-year democratic experiment is coming to end.

Fear can be a powerful motivator, and many times it is justified. I'm pretty sure the physical reaction I get in the pit of my stomach when I'm on high rooftop deck is warning me of the danger that awaits me if I fall over the edge.

But our faith tradition warns against excessive fear as a motivation for our behavior. No phrase is more often repeated in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures than some version of "do not be afraid" — some 365 references, according to one count.

The opposite of fear-mongering can be equally dangerous. Rebecca Bratten Weiss, writing in NCR, warns of an excessive providentialism that believes that everything that happens is willed and caused by God, so there is no need for fear — or for taking sensible, practical measures to protect ourselves and our families.

When politicians, political parties or social media memes try to prey on our fears, we need to prayerfully consider whether those fears are being unnecessarily stoked for another's advantage. Each person, based on his or her circumstances, has to make his or her own decision. But as Catholics and Christians, let's remember to "fear not" a bit more this election season.

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