

Diary of an urban pastor

Carrie Badertscher

June 26

My heart skipped a beat as I answered the phone from my bedside table. After ministering in the city for several years, I had learned that it was seldom a good thing to receive a call after midnight. This time was no different. I recognized the number but not the voice on the other side. It was heavy with breath—short, shallow breaths. Words were hard to make out, and the tone and cadence were shaky and rushed.

“Can you come get the baby? They said they are coming back with a gun! Can you come get the baby?”

As quickly as the call came in, it ended. The silence on the other end meant that I would have no additional information and would have to act on what I did know. I put on my shoes, threw a car seat in the van, and headed out the door. Within minutes I arrived at the house from which the call came. The front door swung open and out came a teenager holding an infant. With hurried steps and fearful eyes that darted from left to right, she ran to the van and placed the baby boy in the car seat, hugged me as if it was the last hug I would receive from her, and then ran back toward the house, yelling at me to drive away.

July 3

I arrived at the hospital room at the same time the doctors were making rounds. I was not prepared to see the number of wires and machines that were hooked up to such a small, newborn baby boy who was barely clinging to life. Earlier that day this baby boy’s parents were told that this day would most likely be his last. They called and asked me to come and provide pastoral support as they said good-bye to their son. Doctors had run out of ideas, machines were not providing enough support, and a decision needed to be made. Palliative care entered into the sacred space and provided answers to the questions that were only being asked silently in the mind. Within minutes of the palliative care team exiting the room, this baby boy’s mama collapsed in my arms, and for several minutes, maybe hours, she cried the deepest, most painful cry I have ever heard. At times in her lament, she would cry out intelligible words of fear for what would

happen next, what her baby would experience if she removed the tubes, and what life would be like without him.

October 5

The knock on the door was loud and persistent. It was too dark to make out who was standing on the porch, but the reality of my children wak-

There stood a junior high girl we had come to know well. Her eyes were red and full of tears. I invited her in, wondering all the while what had caused the fear that was so evident on her face. It was then that I saw them— welts, on her face, on her arms, down her legs.

ing up from the loud knocks propelled me to open the door just as quickly as I could. There stood a junior high girl we had come to know well. Her eyes were red and full of tears. I invited her in, wondering all the while what had caused the fear that was so evident on her face. It was then that I saw them—welts, on her face, on her arms, down her legs. She proceeded to tell me that she had been injured at the hands of her mother and she could not return home. When the police officer and on-call Child Protective Services worker arrived that night, it was as if this young girl left her body. Her eyes appeared blank as she followed each instruction and answered yes or no

to each question. Her body seemed to react involuntarily when she was told that, because there was not enough physical evidence of abuse, she would be returning back home that very night.

May 7

It was as if there were a hundred people screaming in the background when I answered the phone on that Friday afternoon. I couldn't make sense of what was being said or who was saying it. Through the cries of small children, I could faintly make out an address and the request to come. I typed in the address and began navigating to the location, unaware of what or whom I would find. I pulled up to a house that was unfamiliar but saw a car that was owned by a youth I knew well. Inside her car were four small children, barely dressed, with faces stained with tears. The young woman quickly got out of her car and fell into my arms. She had seemingly kept her emotions in check until we embraced, and now she could barely find the strength to stand. With very few words exchanged,

she shared that there was just a drive-by shooting at her home while the kids were playing outside and that her brother had been shot twice and was en route to the hospital. The kids in her car needed a safe place to go, as her house was now a crime scene. I loaded the visibly shaken children into my van, and we headed to my home. Blank stares and silence seemed to permeate the cinderblock walls of my basement. These young children, later joined by their older siblings, spent the weekend away from windows and doors and snuggled in large blankets as they tried to make sense of what their mind, bodies, and hearts had just experienced.

January 12

He walked into the visitation room in a blue jumpsuit, hands firmly connected behind the small of his back. He was ushered in by a man with a gun tucked into a holster on his belt. I felt my face become warm



With tears in his eyes, he shared his own fears about being tried as an adult. At sixteen years old, he could stand before a judge in adult court and face the next forty years to life in a state penitentiary.

and my heart beat a little faster. It had been eighteen months since I had seen this young man, eighteen months since he had been at the wrong place at the wrong time, eighteen months since he had taken the life of another and had gone into hiding. We spent the next ninety minutes chatting about days of the past and laughing about the funny things he did as a child. He talked about his cravings for my homemade Sloppy Joes and repeatedly told me everything would be OK when my eyes would well

up with tears. Then, with tears in his eyes, he shared his own fears about being tried as an adult. At sixteen years old, he could stand before a judge in adult court and face the next forty years to life in a state penitentiary. He was fully aware that if convicted, because he is not yet eighteen years old, he could spend the next two years of life in solitary confinement.

Reflecting on fear

Fear has a sound. It has an appearance. It has a presence.

I have heard it in the voice of a young woman locked in a home against her will but unsure of where she was or how to tell me how to get to her. I have seen it in the face of a young mother who just found out she was pregnant with her fourth child in four years but knew she didn't

have the means to bring another child into the world. I have felt it deep within my own chest as I held my foster child, knowing full well that at any moment she could be taken away. Settings, characters, and stories may

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change, but the deep-seated grip of fear crosses all lines of age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. It is real and overwhelming.

I recently had an individual ask me how I deal with the fear I have felt and seen while living in the city, ministering to neighbors. They wanted to know how I continue to answer the phone and walk through the hard moments. I didn't know how to answer in the moment, but after much processing and prayer, it has become much more clear to me. My answer is that with every fiber of my being, I believe that God is with me, working to redeem even the most fear-filled, broken moments. God's presence

makes me brave. God's presence enables my neighbors to rise in the midst of panic and despair. God's presence makes the giants fall. I have seen it with my own eyes—when God stands off with fear, fear bows. God's presence changes everything.

I wish that I could say that every story came with a happy ending—that God intervened in palpable ways, changing even the circumstances and situation, as with the Israelites and the Red Sea as the Egyptian chariots were in full charge. That has not been my experience. More often than not, for many of my neighbors and friends, the battle rages on. I cannot offer them a life without fear, but I can offer them a God who will enter into times of fear with them. I can offer them a hope that stretches far beyond what they see. I can offer them a peace that confuses fear itself. I can offer myself as a steady companion in their time of fear and grief.

About the author

Carrie Badertscher is community pastor at Keller Park Church and founder of Keller Park Ministries in South Bend, Indiana. She earned a BA in youth ministry and adolescent studies at Bethel College in Mishawaka, Indiana.