

Editorial

Justin A. Neufeld

So many things make us afraid.

We are distressed by events in our churches, our communities, and our nations. We are grieved by the neglect of kindness, by swelling self-righteousness, by loyalty to untruth and pitilessness. We are brought low as we discover that persons, communities, and nations can be runaway trains protecting their interests at the expense of the interests of others.

We are frightened by sickness and pain. We see the bodies and minds of our beloveds begin to totter. We see our own bodies and minds turn against us, making us strangers to ourselves. And we observe souls trembling and withering under these physical and mental changes.

We watch friends and children disappear into addiction, into depression, into anxiety, into despair. We ourselves may settle into the basement of loneliness and self-disregard. The world outside our doors may become too much, pressing in the walls of life, even as we also pull them inwards to fashion a windowless room.


We are surrounded by enemies. Our names and the names of our beloveds have been slandered and mocked. We have been derided and cast out from circles of belonging and warmth. We have been forced into physical and spiritual poverty by the cruelty of others. Our lives are in the hands of those who hate us, men and women aroused by our abuse.

At the door also are our dark thoughts, our uncontrolled lusts, our hatreds and resentments, our vanity and insecurity. With these dark thoughts have come dark deeds, for we have given these thoughts food and lodging. In our hearts' unlit rooms lurks an insatiable me-firstness keeping company with the despoiler, the adulterer, the murderer, the betrayer.

We are rattled and humiliated by challenges to our faith. The confounding variety of human belief and worship, the unthinkable size of the universe and Earth's peripheral place in it, the incomprehensibly long and prolific evolutionary story in which humans occupy an extremely tiny subplot, and the capacity of scientific explanations to render religious explanations foolish—it all leaves us reeling.

We are haunted by the incompleteness of life. Life's gifts are so good yet so fragile and fleeting. And not only do these gifts come and go, but

we also fail to embrace their beauty because we are overcome with concern that they might begin to crumble before their time. Then we realize just how much our anxiety prevented our knowing and loving them, how it



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stole from each of us, and this realization only compounds our anguish over them and ourselves.

We are overwhelmed by our destitution. For so long we thought we were being good and doing well; then circumstances changed painfully to reveal that, in truth, hidden judgmentalism, unacknowledged selfishness, and disavowed resentment separated us from the good we want—now desperately—for ourselves and others. “My iniquity is too great to bear!” we cry out.

We are silenced by silence. There is loss and pain and loneliness that calls out for cosmic redress, yet no one—no one!—seems to pay them any attention.

But after all, we ask, who can? What compensation can time or eternity offer to those who have been injured so grievously?

Yet in the Bible we read:

Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go. (Josh. 1:9)

When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul. (Ps. 94:19)

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? (Ps. 27:1)

As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him. (Ps. 103:13)

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. (Prov. 9:10)

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matt. 11:29)

I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world. (John 14:33 NLT)

Concerning this final verse from the Gospel of John, Jean Vanier writes:

*This is the final message of Jesus for each one of us,
in all our loneliness,
when we feel rejected and abandoned:
“Trust, for I have conquered the world.”
Yes, trust, for Jesus is leading each one of us to greater truth
through the Paraclete.
He is leading the whole Church
through time
to a deeper understanding of his message.
He is leading each one of us into the new
through much pain and many deaths.¹*

When I invited authors to contribute to this issue, I included the above list of fears along with this passage from Vanier and asked them to examine whether and how the Bible’s exhortations to “fear not” finds support in their experience and study. We all know persons whose fear has turned to grief and whose hopes have gone unfulfilled. Nevertheless, I asked contributors to consider whether, amid these losses, Christianity holds out the possibility of becoming part of a “we” that is never put to shame.


Admittedly, the form and substance of the invitation was driven by my own concerns and preoccupations, and it informed both the voices I sought and the personal approach I suggested. The month of April brings me into the twelfth month of living with the deepest fears I’ve yet met in life, fears into which I entered just after I received this assignment. More months are in store, certainly. My fears are not the deepest fears possible, and I realize there are many more occasions for fear and many different

¹ Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2004), 289.

kinds of fear than my own. But my fears have been breathtaking, and undoubtedly this influenced the approach I invited from authors. I was looking for help. Can there be consolation amid disconsolation?

Not all the causes of fear are personal or existential. But there is no fear without persons, without expectancy for the future and dread of what it may bring. So while this issue could have addressed systemic causes of fear, I am glad that its authors did not choose systems over persons. The issue of fear remains inescapably personal, and there is no systemic solution to the problem of fear, no taming of heart and circumstance by policy or structure or ethics or medicine alone—or in combination. This too is fearful.

We fear because we relate expectantly to the possibility of evil, loss, and rejection in the future, both for ourselves and for our beloveds. We hope because we relate expectantly to the possibility of goodness, victory, and welcome in the future, both for ourselves and for our beloveds. But



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are we poised equidistant between these alternatives, with equal chance of either outcome? Maybe it is not that evenly distributed, sadly. Maybe hope belongs primarily to youth and privilege and diminishes with age and poverty. This too is fearful. It's also entirely sensible.

But if this is true, what foolishness that Jesus tells us that his yoke is easy and his burden light, that we should take heart through our trials and sorrows because he has overcome the world. And what foolishness that saint Paul tells us that love hopes all things and is never put to shame. What fools—if they are spokespersons for the world.

But they never said they were. They said they were spokespersons for the kingdom of heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal. To defeat fear at all times we need to have occasion to hope at all times, and this occasion cannot come through the world alone; it can only come through God, who did not leave the world alone but set up his tent in its midst in the flesh of Jesus Christ.

“Jesus is *risen*. Jesus is *Lord*.” So take heart. No infirmity of flesh or mind or spirit, no sin or evil—your own or another’s—can extinguish the

possibility of good for you or others. So fear not, and receive the gift of hope—in all things, always—given in love for you. Or as one of our authors puts it: “May the peace of Christ continue to bind up our fears and threaten us with resurrection so that future generations will be left a legacy of hope.”²

It has been good for me to invite and receive the contributions for this issue. I am thankful to each of the authors for what they have written. I have been blessed by them, and I hope they are a blessing to you and that God speaks to your heart through them.

*Do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand. (Isa. 41:10)*

About the editor

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2 See S. Lesley Sacouman’s essay in this issue, “A child will lead you.”