

# In the midst of the storm

Esther Epp-Tiessen

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.  
—Isaiah 43:1b–2a*

## A terrifying moment

We were out on the open water of the Bohol Sea. My husband, Dan, and I had been vacationing on a small island off the coast of Mindanao in the Philippines. During our three-day stay, a typhoon east of us made our vacation wet and windy. But as we set out to return home on day four, we thought the storm had passed and all would be well. No sooner were we out of harbour than we realized how wrong we were.

The small ferry boat was old and dilapidated. Even in the calmer water of the harbour, it listed badly. As we left the leeward side of the island, the remnants of the typhoon attacked with unrelenting fury. Massive four-metre waves tossed the boat about and threatened to capsize it. I sat on the wooden bench, clutching it as hard as I possibly could. Some ancient life jackets hung from a shelf at the front of the boat, but I was too terrified to stand up and get some. I imagined myself disappearing and drowning in the churning, heaving sea. I lamented that I would not be able to say farewell to Dan, who was sitting several rows behind me. I watched as my Filipino companions pulled out their rosaries and whispered their prayers.

Obviously, the ferry boat did not capsize, and we did not drown.<sup>1</sup> But the experience was the most terrifying in my life, and it imprinted itself in my body and on my psyche. When I think of fear, I often go back to that journey in the midst of the storm. I believe that this is why the first verses


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<sup>1</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the question of whether God protected us and enabled our boat to reach safety. It has always been hard for me to answer that. A month prior to this experience, another typhoon capsized a much larger ferry with hundreds of passengers. Most of those passengers, including several church worker friends, drowned. I have no doubt that they prayed for God's protection.

of Isaiah 43 and the story of Jesus calming the storm in Mark 4 eventually became so important to me.

### **Fear in the Philippines**

Dan and I were part-way through four years of service with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Mindanao, Philippines. These were amazingly transformative years, but they were also years when I experienced



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fear in its many forms. Some of those experiences, like the episode on the boat, were times when we were clearly in physical danger. For example, we frequently rode buses through the mountains, and oftentimes the buses lacked adequate brakes. It was not uncommon to see the carcasses of vehicles that had careened over roadside cliffs. Many people died because there weren't the resources to keep buses in good repair.

At other times, my fears were simply rooted in the anxiety of being in a context where everything was so different and unfamiliar. I worried about making

mistakes and being culturally insensitive, about being inadequate for the job, and about not being able to fill the huge shoes left by our MCC predecessors. As a young and inexperienced twenty-something, I was afraid of being a failure. My fear and anxiety diminished as I got to know my neighbours, learned the language and the culture, and entered into the lives of the people around me.

As time went on, I feared for friends and partners. A civil war was underway, with the military forces of dictator Ferdinand Marcos determined to crush the New People's Army (NPA), a people's armed struggle for justice and equality. Many of our Filipino friends were sympathetic to—if not directly involved in—the liberation struggle. Those who openly voiced resistance to or worked for the end of the Marcos regime, even through nonviolent means, were at great risk of arrest, torture, imprisonment, and even “salvaging” (the common term for the summary execution of opponents of the regime).

Several times we accompanied others searching for loved ones who had been disappeared, or we visited those who had been imprisoned.

Several times we saw bodies that had been brutally killed. Several times we visited communities that had been the sites of “encounters” between military forces and rebels. The blood, the bullet-ridden buildings, and the absolute silence—because all the people had either evacuated in fear or been forcibly displaced—were deeply unsettling.

But there was another kind of fear at work in the Philippines, not one that we felt personally but one that we witnessed. That was the manipulation of fear for political ends, or “the politics of fear.” Like many oppressive regimes around the world, President Marcos retained his power and his brutal hold on the country not only through military might but also through portraying himself as the one to ensure stability and security against existential threats. He proclaimed to be securing the nation from evil terrorists (equated with Muslims) and godless communists (associated with the NPA and its supporters). The strategy had considerable success. Whenever we travelled away from Mindanao—home to most of the Philippines’ Muslims as well as NPA supporters—we encountered disbelief that we could possibly live and work in such a seemingly dangerous place.

### **What I’ve learned about fear**

Many years have passed since our life-changing sojourn in the Philippines. In recent years, I have reflected more deeply on those formative experiences as well as my additional decades of work with MCC.<sup>2</sup> Here’s what I have learned about fear.


First, through my years with MCC, I have become sensitized to my privilege and how that privilege prevents me from experiencing the fear that many people live with constantly. My white skin, my education, my relative wealth, my heterosexual marriage—and the good fortune to live in Canada—ensure that fear and insecurity and trauma are not my daily fare. When I contemplate the lives of other members of my human family, my own fears pale in comparison. Privilege protects me from things that cause others indescribable fear and suffering. It also leads to comfort and complacency and keeps me from taking risks to diminish fear for others. A question that haunts me is how people of privilege resist the intoxication of comfort and complacency.

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2 In the course of writing this essay, I consulted several current and former MCC workers for wisdom arising out of their experiences of fear. I am grateful to the following for helping me flesh out my own learnings: Anna Johnson, Anna Vogt, Diana Epp-Fransen, Lois Coleman Neufeld, Mike Smith, and Valerie Smith.

Second, I have learned that context shapes one's understanding and experience of fear. I was never afraid of sexual assault in the rural Philippines, but I do carry those fears with me here in my own city of Winnipeg. A friend who served with MCC in Bosnia concurs. In Bosnia, she learned to fear the presence of landmines left from the war, but she never feared walking alone as a woman at night. It seems that, depending on the context, certain societies come to accept certain causes of fear as "normal." Canadian society—along with many other societies—has a high tolerance for violence against women, especially Indigenous women, but a very low tolerance for boats that are not sea-worthy or buses that are not in good repair. How do we learn to look at ourselves and our own society's blind spots?

Third, I have learned that much fear is about the unknown. I mentioned the impressions that northerner Filipinos had about the southern part of their country: they knew of it primarily as the home of violent



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terrorists and insurgents. And yet, most people living in the south went about their daily activities normally. When my MCC friends in Bosnia travelled to Northern Ireland to attend a peace-building conference, their Bosnian neighbours expressed concern that they would travel to such a dangerous place; yet their new friends in Northern Ireland expressed equal concern that they should be living and working in dangerous Bosnia. Another friend, serving with MCC in Palestine, shared that Palestinians sometimes wondered how she could live in the dangerous United

States! How do we build relationships and understanding so as to counter the stereotypes and distortions that can arise from fear of the unknown?<sup>3</sup>

Fourth, I have learned that the manipulation of fear can contribute to "othering." With sufficient media and political propaganda, people's fears of the unknown can be channelled in ways so as to marginalize,

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3 I believe that one of the most profound ways that MCC helps to build peace and understanding in the world is through the relationship building that happens as MCC workers and people in diverse global contexts become friends. The ripple effect of this bridge building has been largely undocumented.

exclude, and dehumanize whole groups of people. Elites prey on people's insecurities to create more fear and to legitimize political actions that will solidify their power and control over others. President Marcos used it in the Philippines in the 1980s; Donald Trump and others like him use it today. The "othering" that we witness in our world today—of Muslims, Mexicans, migrants and refugees, LGBTQ persons, and more—is a profound threat to global peace. How do we resist this manipulation and fear?

Fifth, I have learned that the Spirit of God enables people to act courageously despite their fear. For me, this is symbolized best in the story of my Filipina friend Jeannette (Jet). Jet was a human rights worker with the Catholic Church. She helped to document human rights violations, to visit political prisoners, and to search for the missing and disappeared. Given the context of the Philippines, hers was a very dangerous job. One time when she did not show up at a conference at the expected time, many of us began to imagine the worst. Jet eventually arrived well after midnight, and we welcomed her with celebration. But we also noticed the blood on her shoes. She explained that she had spent the day travelling from morgue to morgue with a family searching for their missing son. They had eventually found the young man's murdered body, lying on the floor of the last morgue, his blood running out onto the cold concrete. In moving closer to help identify the body, Jet had stepped into the blood.

Later on, I expressed my incredulity to her, marvelling that she could continue doing the work that also threatened her own safety and security. I remember her simple response: "How can I *not* do this work? How can I as a Christian *not* support the poor and the oppressed and work for justice and peace? How can I *not* resist the forces of oppression and injustice?"

Despite the risks and the fear, her faith demanded that she put her own life on the line in service of those who suffered. She acted despite her fear.

### **Courage in community**

Through Jet and others, I also learned that courage is contagious. Jet was part of a Christian community that met regularly to pray, to support one another, and to discern ways of faithfully resisting the dictatorship and bearing witness to God's reign of justice and peace. Jet could act with courage because she was not alone; she was one part of a community resisting together.

In subsequent years I have witnessed this "courage in community" elsewhere. In Gaza, Palestinian mothers, fathers, and young people cou-

rageously protest the crippling Israeli occupation and blockade that has made their life a prison; hundreds were killed in 2018 alone. In Syria, young Christians and Muslims deliver material resources in war zones, determined to help those in desperate need and to demonstrate the possibility of peaceful coexistence. In northwestern Guatemala, Mayan peasants protest a Canadian-owned gold mine that has torn the fabric of their community and devastated the earth and water. In Canada, Indigenous grandmothers defend their land from the dams, pipelines, and extractive industries that destroy their way of life and that of future generations. All of these communities of people are profound examples of those who are empowered to stand up for truth, justice, and righteousness despite their fear because they are not alone. I regularly remember this courageous cloud of witnesses, and I am strengthened.

### **Jesus calms the storm—and our fears**

I mentioned earlier the power of the story of Jesus calming the storm, found in Mark 4. As a young person, I read verses 35–41 as a stand-alone story. A sleeping Jesus and his disciples are out on the sea when a wind-storm arises and threatens to swamp the boat. The disciples are terrified and awaken Jesus, who seems not to care that they are perishing. Jesus rebukes the wind and chides the disciples (“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”), and all is calm. The moment of terror has passed. End of story.

But, no, the story is not over. Jesus and the disciples do not go home. In Mark 5, they continue on to the other side—their intended destination in the first place. The other side is not only a different side of the sea; for the Jewish disciples it is also the place of the feared “other.” It is a place of Gentiles and a place where Roman soldiers (from the occupying military force) are stationed. It is also home to the man Legion, whose name is an unmistakable reference to the Roman military legion. This man is so disturbed, troubled, and demon-filled that everyone is afraid of him. The storm on the sea is a prelude and perhaps even a premonition of the fearful things the disciples will encounter on the other side.

But on the other side, Jesus heals the feared man, removing the demons that make him a terror to others. Jesus sends the man home to his community, where he might once again find belonging. Jesus urges him to tell all that God has done for him. The disciples are witnesses to this miraculous transformation. A terrifying man becomes an ordinary hu-

man, and a place of “otherness” becomes the stage for profound healing and blessing.

We cannot do too much about a stormy sea. But we can help to diminish the fears that we create or harbour about one another. The story

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from Mark teaches us that we do not overcome fear by fleeing or hiding from things that are unknown or from those we consider “other.” We do not overcome fear by surrounding ourselves with walls and weapons and with ideologies and practices of “othering.” We do not overcome fear alone. Indeed, perhaps we do not overcome fear at all. Perhaps the point of the story is simply that fear loses its power as we rely on Jesus’s presence with us, as we turn toward that which is fearful, and as we face it together in community, *en-courage*-ing and strengthening one another. Perhaps we never lose our

fear; rather, we find courage *despite* our fear. And who knows what blessing we may encounter on the other side.

I conclude with confession. I am a coward and believe that I always will be—especially on a stormy sea. I am also painfully aware of the irony of writing about nobly confronting fear while seated in the safety and security of my Winnipeg home. But I also believe that I am called to trust in the promise of Jesus’s presence, to love my neighbour (especially the unknown and frightening one), and to find strength in community. I believe that, somehow, God empowers the fearful—even me.

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*and the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.*

## About the author

Esther Epp-Tiessen served with MCC for over twenty-five years, primarily in the area of peace and justice education and advocacy. She has master’s degrees in Canadian history and theology and has written three books on Canadian Mennonite themes, including *Mennonite Central Committee in Canada: A History* (CMU Press, 2013).