


Fear Not

John P. Braun

Our culture of fear

We live in a culture of fear. It is being fostered by political leaders and accepted by society. It is used to motivate people to get on the bandwagon of particular political causes. Even this fear itself is seen as a fearful thing. We just can't seem to get away from fear.

We experience life in our own cultures and countries, but in many ways we get our cues from powerful empires, and their concerns spill over into smaller and more insignificant countries. The desire to build a border wall between the United States and Mexico, for example, is emblematic of the fear that exists in society. We are told that there are certain people



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of whom we should be afraid. They are poised to take away our jobs and to do us harm, it is said. In order to get the point across and to make sure that the fear takes hold in us, perceived threats are made to sound ever more grave and severe. What if people come and do murderous things among us? What if mobs come to live in our communities and threaten our values and our culture? What if strange people come to take away our jobs? And so on.

Fear infects us now in so many ways. The world seems like a dangerous place. People who are different from us, people who have a different skin colour, people who have a different economic status, or people of a different religion or culture have become so threatening in our minds that we are overcome with fright. This kind of fear affects us not only on a personal or community level but also on the level of national and international politics. There is a culture growing all over the Western world that fosters fear of the other. Our empathy for other peoples is shrinking as is our capacity to welcome the stranger.


Political fears on a national scale also infect us as individuals. We live in a time when many people are afraid and anxious for themselves. We are fearful about jobs, about relationships, about the future of a limited circle of loved ones around us. We are under siege by fear.

Scripture confronts our fears

It is in the context of our present fear that the words of Scripture come to us in our generation: *Do not be afraid*. These words appear hundreds of times throughout Scripture: *Do not fear. Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy for all people*.

These words came long ago to Abram and Sarai when they were in uncertain circumstances and their future was unclear. They had come through the time of a family quarrel with their nephew Lot and also conflict with local kings. The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great” (Gen. 15:1).

This is not to say that Abram was unafraid but rather that his fear is precisely why these words of assurance were needed. It is also not to say that Abram himself was perfect. He experienced conflict in his own family



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and in his own relationships when Sarai and her slave Hagar were both his spousal partners, as was the custom for some ancient people. Conflict arose among these three, and the result was that Hagar and her little son Ishmael were sent away into the wilderness, which spelled sure death for Hagar and her son. Hagar was Egyptian, not Aramean like Abram and Sarai. She also was a slave and not a free woman. She was that other person, the person to be hated and feared, and yet she was the vulnerable one. And so she was rightfully very fearful. Even now we forget her story because we think mostly of Abram and Sarai, but Hagar’s story

reflects God’s concern for the other. The voice of God’s messenger angel says to Hagar, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God hears the voice of the boy where he is” (Gen. 21:17).

One cannot help but think of the refugee children fleeing countries where their lives are threatened—only to be taken from their parents at the US-Mexico border. There are many children like Ishmael and many parents like Hagar who are afraid today. And yet powerful leaders in the US administration are fostering fear among privileged American citizens about the threat of asylum seekers crossing their border. We should follow the cue from the angel who goes to the refugee and conveys a message that assuages their fear, but instead we are often afraid ourselves of losing our positions of privilege.

Justifiable and unjustifiable fears

I suppose we can't help having fear at times in our lives. I remember when my spouse and I were travelling from the old city of Jerusalem to Bethlehem on my last study leave. We were in our first days in that region and were still uneasy. Before we left Canada, many people would ask us whether we felt safe going to a place of conflict. And when hearing those

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concerns over and over again, it's natural to develop fears. On one of our first bus rides from Jerusalem toward Bethlehem, the bus was stopped and soldiers boarded the bus, but before they boarded they asked everyone standing in the aisle to get off the bus. My spouse and I were separated because she was sitting in a seat. Almost immediately I felt fear. And then young soldiers boarded the bus. They looked uncomfortable and

frightened themselves. And then the young Palestinian who was taken off the bus looked despondent and hopeless and fearful. Everyone was fearful of the other. There are many powerless people in the world who have a right to be afraid. And here I was, a rich Canadian, fearful too but with much less justification. Could the words of Scripture be for me as well? *Do not be afraid.*

Those of us who have had a lot of control in our lives, a lot of power, fear the loss of it. How much more must the poor and the powerless be shaken to the core by their fears of how they will be treated by those in charge?

We live in this privileged, rich country, and yet we still have many fears. We have fears about the education and opportunity on behalf of

our children. Will they make it in this world with the privilege we desire for them? Such fears in turn cause fears among those in the world who are much more justified in their fears. We fear those who want what we have. We believe the false prophets who encourage us to be fearful. We are afraid of those who are in a much weaker position than we are. We too must listen to the voice of Scripture that says, *Do not be afraid.*

Overcoming fear through trust in God

In the season of Advent and Christmas we remember the story of Joseph discovering that Mary was pregnant before the two of them were married. He wants to quietly break the engagement to avoid humiliation for both of them. But then an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and says, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:20–21). The assuaging of Joseph’s fears makes him a husband to Mary and a father to Jesus.

As Jesus grew and became a man, he taught about anxiety and fear:

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today. (Matt. 6:25–34)

And yet Jesus himself knew about fear and shared in human fears in instructive ways. Just before his arrest and trial and execution, he says to his disciples, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake” (Mark 14:34). And then he goes and throws himself on the ground and prays fervently that this tragic hour might pass from him. As the book of Hebrew tells us, in Jesus “we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15).

Jesus knew fear. And yet he is the one who speaks to us, *Do not be afraid*. Despite our relative wealth and privilege, we are in the same boat as the disciples. When the disciples are on the storm-tossed sea, they are afraid for their lives as Jesus sleeps. They awaken him in the stern

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of the boat and ask him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” Jesus stills the storm by saying, “Peace! Be still!” Then he asks the disciples, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (Mark 4:38–40).

Trusting Jesus is the antidote to our deepest fears. In the final words of the short ending of the Gospel of Mark, the women who find the empty tomb of Jesus see a young man sitting inside the tomb. He tells them to go and tell the other disciples that Jesus is risen. And

yet the final words tell us of their struggle with their fears: “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8).

If this fear had been the final word, we would never have heard the strong and hopeful news of the resurrection. The women must have overcome their fear, because we know the story now, and their initial witness is part of the gospel.

Like these women, so too our fears sometimes paralyze us. Sometimes it is only at the last minute that our fears are dispelled. The good news of the gospel is that trusting God, trusting Jesus, helps us to overcome our fears. We trust Jesus because in him the very worst that could happen (crucifixion) was overcome by the best thing that could happen (resurrection). Jesus is in the boat with us when the storms are at their worst—even when we think that God does not care. We do not have all the answers, but

what we need most is trust to overcome our fears: trust that God has the future in hand and hope that the future is one of resurrection.

Witnessing to peace in the midst of fear

Once our fears are calmed, we can be a witness to a peace that can help calm the fears of others too—some of whom may be in more precarious positions than we are. Out of our trust in God comes love for God and others. As the letter of 1 John testifies, “God is love . . . There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:8, 18). Part of trusting Jesus is to receive and share his love.

As I write this, I am thinking of the parents and children who have been separated from each other this past year because of the fears of rich Americans. If we could be more trustful and more loving by drawing near to God, perhaps we could use that capacity to minimize our own fears. Then our fears would no longer need to victimize others, who only want a chance to be free of fear as well.

We live in a culture of fear, and we need salvation from it. So hear the voice of Jesus say, *Do not be afraid*. Trust the love of Jesus to cast out your fears. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even our fears. Now go out, practice trust in God and the love of Christ to conquer your fears, and follow Jesus into a hopeful future. *Do not be afraid!*

About the author

John P. Braun is pastor of Charleswood Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where he has served since 1994 and is retiring in the fall of 2019. John holds a BA (1977) from University of Waterloo, Ontario, and an MDiv (1982) from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. He has also studied at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon and has spent sabbatical/study leaves at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, and Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem/Bethlehem. He has served recently on the ministerial leadership committee of Mennonite Church Manitoba and earlier on the Manitoba Conference executive committee. He enjoys woodcarving, gardening, and reciting Scripture as a way of practising the oral tradition of the Gospels.