

Editorial

Andrew Dyck

The writer of 1 John begins with this introduction.

*What was there from the beginning—which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have observed, and felt with our hands—is our subject: the word of life. The life was revealed. We have seen it; we are bearing witness and proclaiming to you the eternal life which existed with the Father and has been revealed to us. What we have seen and heard we are declaring to you as well, so that you also may share our fellowship: a fellowship which we have with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this in order that our joy may be complete!*¹

The first disciples heard, gazed at, and touched Jesus from Nazareth. Through these physical human encounters, the disciples discovered that in Jesus God was displaying a life (*zoe* in Greek) that transcended biological existence (*bios*). This eternal life had existed as Creator and Word ever since “the beginning” (cf. Genesis 1:1, John 1:1). By knowing the man Jesus and being known by him, first century women and men discovered that they were entering into fellowship (i.e., communion) with the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The life they experienced thereby was so joy-filled that they felt compelled to talk and write about it to everyone they could, so that others too would enter the fellowship of God’s joy.

Today, people continue to encounter God through the human means of physical senses, felt thoughts and intuitions, and interpersonal relationships. To put things more concretely, these means range from studying Scripture to hearing prophetic words, from praying to living with mentally disabled adults, from experiencing the silence of God to accompanying refugees, from hearing an inner voice to watching butterflies, from surviving trauma to receiving spiritual direction, from tasting bread and wine to meeting strangers. It seems that every kind of human experience can become an occasion for encountering God.

1 1 John 1:1–4 as translated in Stephen S. Smalley, *Word Bible Commentary: 1, 2, 3 John* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 3.

Yet encounters with God are not always obvious or understandable. A neighbor once asked me whether he had encountered God. This man was in a volatile relationship with his girlfriend, who was the mother of their



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young daughter and who had a drug addiction. On a Friday morning while I was at home taking a Sabbath from my pastoral work, he came to me with this story: “I was sitting in the living room, looking out across the lawn and into the trees in the back gully. Suddenly I saw a huge bright light just outside the window. The light made me feel wonderful and peaceful. Was that God?”

I certainly wanted that man to know God and to know the peace that God gives through Jesus Christ. But I found it difficult to discern whether this man had had a heavenly vision. Furthermore, this man lacked a vocabulary for talking

much about his remarkable experience. Discerning God in our many human experiences requires spiritual sensitivity and wisdom—not least because, as in Ephesians 6:12, we also have the capacity to encounter spiritual forces that are evil (literally “spirituals of evil”). Looking back on that conversation, I wish I had been better equipped to discern the presence, work, and communication of the Holy Spirit.

However, although many people have experiences that they consider to be encounters with God, they often do not talk about these experiences. Perhaps they are afraid their stories will not be taken seriously. Perhaps they lack a vocabulary for narrating their most profound experiences. Perhaps our churches do not invite people’s encounter-stories within the routines of worship services, fellowship groups, and adult Christian education. Perhaps we who claim to know Jesus Christ find ourselves pressed into an entirely immanent frame of reference, in which it seems beyond credulity to believe that God communicates with us—if we can believe in God at all.

This issue of *Vision* provides an opportunity to hear people’s stories of encountering God. As well, this issue invites gracious and honest reflections on such encounters—reflections that draw on Scripture, theology, psychology, cross-cultural perspectives, missiology, and more. As

guest editor, I trust that this issue's focus on encountering God will help readers in at least three ways. First, I hope these articles and stories will provide readers with courage and vocabulary for sharing their own stories of encountering God. Second, I pray that this issue will prepare people to discern the wide-ranging activity, presence, and communication of the

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Holy Spirit. Third, I believe that these articles can increase our capacity for inviting others into life-giving fellowship with Jesus and his people. If these goals are achieved—even in part—our joy will increase.

This issue begins with three articles that provide a framework for understanding encounters with God. Marlene Kropf, drawing on years of being attentive to the spiritual life of Mennonites, identifies a problem many have with encountering God—namely, being uncertain of what language to use for coming to God or uncertain whether we and God can connect at all. Marlene addresses this problem through a focus on inter-

cessory prayer. Bible scholars Dan Nighswander and Pierre Gilbert offer grounds for recognizing the Holy Spirit. Dan draws on 1 Corinthians 12 to understand how God is revealed. Pierre addresses a topic that may feel foreign to some Western readers—namely, what differentiates encounters with spirits who are evil from encounters with the Spirit who is holy.

The next three articles provide approaches for pursuing encounters with God. Theologian Paul Doerksen draws on his experience with L'Arche communities to describe a posture of openness to encountering God. Alicia Buhler, herself a spiritual director, highlights spiritual direction as a practice of discernment. Psychologist Heather Campbell Enns writes about encountering God through images.

Although many people have experiences of God, many others find such experiences to be non-existent or at least problematic. Janet Peters, who gives leadership to Mennonite camps, writes about times when God seems absent. Grace Kang, a theology student, writes about the difficulties and opportunities that mental illness presents for encountering God.

In preparing this issue, I considered it essential to include stories of people who have encountered God in diverse ways. The next set of articles provides additional personal stories. As a pastor, Talashia Keim Yoder writes about the perspectives of children, while Marnie Klassen writes from the perspective of a young adult. Arisnel Mesidor (an immigration consultant), Brian Dyck (from Mennonite Central Committee), and Doug Schulz (a pastor) tell of meeting God through their experiences with refugees and newcomers to Canada. Four other pastors—Kathy McCamis, Karen Schellenberg, Jim Loepp Thiessen, and Vincent Solomon—tell of the ways God has called them into ministry or invited them into deeper ministry.

This issue of *Vision* ends with two writers who model winsome, joy-infused speech about God. Pastor J Janzen tells stories of the ways that one congregation is kindly evangelistic by inviting people to recognize and respond to their encounters with God. In a series of concluding missives, spiritual director Kevin Clark uses his poetic perspective to inspire us to recognize God in all things.

About the author

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