

# Editorial

Karl Koop

We seem to have entered a period of uncertainty. All of us experience personal uncertainties, of course, but in recent years global events—events such as climate change, food insecurity, economic woes, the pandemic, rising international tensions, intensification of political and social fragmentation inside national borders, and so on—have made us collectively uncertain. We would like to experience a return to normalcy, but we

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might also be in permacrisis, a prolonged period of instability and insecurity. But then, instability and insecurity have always been a part of human experience. Perhaps only we, the privileged, have escaped widespread calamity until now.

It would be our good fortune if we could find solace in the church, but here too we are likely to encounter uncertainty. Congregants have re-evaluated their

routines and may have opted out of attending church altogether. In not insignificant numbers, pastors have joined the “Great Resignation,” that movement in the work force that the news has been recently discussing, where people quietly retire or look elsewhere for fulfillment and balance.

Many of us are not particularly skillful at managing uncertainty. Perhaps we can blame our genetic makeup or point to our Western heritage as the source of our predicament. Industrialization and technology have programmed us to expect predictability. We have put our trust in reason or sense perception and then have anticipated predictable outcomes. As Christians, we have trusted these underpinnings too, even as we have sought security in specifically religious foundations such as biblicism, tradition, doctrinal statements, or spiritual experience. This has sometimes made us overconfident in what we believe.

Sarah Coakley, a British theologian, suggests that we need to address our persistent temptation to be in control of our beliefs, to idolatrously turn God into an object of our knowledge. She believes that we must turn to contemplation and prayer, an approach that “inculcates mental pat-

terns of ‘un-mastery.’” Coakley suggests that we embrace “the apophatic dimensions of classic Christian thought.”<sup>1</sup> That is, we need to be open to mystery and accept the humble state of unknowing. Of course, Coakley dares to make affirmations about God. But she concludes that our understanding of God remains imperfect and partial, ever and always hidden from our finite minds.

Apophatic theology has a durable history in Christian theology that surfaced among early spiritual writers such as Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Pseudo-Dionysius. In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas frequently reminded his readers about the hiddenness of God and the limits of human reason, while the English mystics, such as the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Julian of Norwich, frequently emphasized divine mystery. The German mystics, such as Meister Eckhart, appropriated the term *gelassenheit*, which informed sixteenth-century Anabaptist spirituality. *Gelassenheit* implied having an attitude of self-surrender and self-abandonment, a yielding to God’s will, which in its passive form could lead to contemplation and in its active form could translate into following Christ in yielded obedience.

Whether we gravitate toward the fecund terminology of *apophaticism* or *gelassenheit*, we are in both cases moving away from self-centred conceptions of certainty and control and moving toward notions of trust and mystery. I see this repositioning reflected in several of the writings in this issue of *Vision*.

The issue begins with Anthony Siegrist sharing his thoughts about the environmental crisis and the providence of God—language that Anabaptists do not often use—suggesting that “uncertainty includes room for repentance and space for hope.” Next, Andrea Saner observes how the interweaving of complaint and praise in the Psalms correlates with “the Christian life *in via*, on the way.” She notes that the longing for worship may engender both lament and trust, which can ultimately lead to “life, praise, and communion with God.” Dan Epp-Tiessen’s reading of the Bible’s apocalyptic texts highlights themes such as God’s sovereignty and the conviction that God’s new age will surely arrive “to transform the world, including our lives.”

But how can we trust God to transform? Two preachers address the reality of doubt by looking at biblical stories connected to the Easter season.

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1 Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 42, 43.

In his examination of the empty tomb in Luke's gospel, along with the traumatic experiences of Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, David Cramer places hope in "the power of God's love that rose Jesus from the dead." In her sermon on "Doubting Thomas," Kathy McCamis absolves the disciple's reputation, insisting that the Christian life is not about having all the answers or being free of all doubt. Rather, it is about including doubt, like Thomas, who embodied "bold honesty, faithful loyalty, and courageous discipleship."

Authors in this volume also share about the exemplary lives that they see in daily encounters. Jessica Reesor Rempel sees courage and resilience among young adults who long for ritual and tradition. When facing unavoidable change, Moses Falco finds strength in the elderly. Lorraine Reimer shares about her traumatic struggles with cancer and finding God's loving hand guiding her life, along with the church and its leadership. Darrel Toews relates his experiences with the rare diagnosis of Oculopharyngeal Muscular Dystrophy, his subsequent loss of voice strength, and the "unlooked for early departure from a lifelong pastoral ministry vocation." For Darrel, uncertainty is a certainty that finds comfort in mystery.

The final essays of this volume suggest various Christian practices that can accompany us on our indeterminate journeys. Drawing on her experience in spiritual direction, Laura Funk looks to several signposts that can point the way. Amelia Pahl suggests that contemplation (or contemplative prayer) "is itself the necessary, fertile ground for meaningful and life-giving action in the face of uncertainty." Paul Doerksen examines the Christian practice of patience, grounded in the Triune God. His concluding remarks highlight the importance of acknowledging the "uncontrollability of the world in which we find ourselves, which is nonetheless God's world."

All these contributions have the potential to inspire. They can leave us with questions, and perhaps doubt, but possibly also courage to reposition our lives. I trust you will find the following pages moving and encouraging.

### **About the author**

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