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Uncertainty

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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 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.

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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 predicable 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."[1] 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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As long as the earth endures

Looking for providence in the ecological crisis

Anthony G. Siegrist

By most accounts, the term *eco-anxiety* entered the public conversation in 2017 by way of a report from the American Psychological Association. That report described eco-anxiety as "a chronic fear of environmental doom."[1] In this essay I want to offer some reflections on what Christian teaching might have to say about such a fear. In the ecological crisis, many Christians experience a theological collision between a belief in God's ongoing provision for the earth, with us earthlings in the mix, and the catastrophic repercussions of a way of life wildly out of alignment with the biophysical limitations of that same earth. The significance of this collision comes from the fact that a fear of serious environmental disruption—whether or not it rises to the level of doom—is in line with the unfolding facts.

Many Christians experience a theological collision between a belief in God's ongoing provision for the earth and the catastrophic repercussions of a way of life wildly out of alignment.

The theological conversation surrounding the ecological crisis is wide-ranging. For instance, many pastoral voices have encouraged us to recognize God as "Creator" in our prayers as a way of connecting faith and worship with environmental realities. Christian ethicists have asked us to evaluate our carbon footprint in light of God's love for creation. Theologian Sallie McFague encourages Christians to see consumerism as an affront to a biblical portrait of God, especially the kenotic descriptions of God like the one in Philippians 2. God's self-emptying love, she argues, should lead us to practice the radical love of self-restraint.[2] Christian teachers have found

1 Susan Clayton, et al., "Mental Health and our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance," American Psychological Association, March 2017, online: https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/03/mental-health-climate.pdf.

2 Sally McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).

that there is much to draw on and much to critique in both the Bible and tradition.

Given the breadth of the conversation and the propellent anxiety, it is curious that more is not said about God's providence. To affirm or to teach God's providence is to believe that to some degree God both anticipates the future and provides for creation. A common biblical starting point is Genesis 8:22, where God responds to Noah's post-flood sacrifice with these memorable lines (NRSVUE):

> *As long as the earth endures,*
> *seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,*
> *summer and winter, day and night*
> *shall not cease.*

To what degree this and other passages imply that God anticipates the future and rules over its specifics is a matter of long-standing debate. For the purposes of this essay, I would like to set aside views of providence that assume God is all-determining. I set these views aside not so much because they are un-Anabaptist but because such a perspective defies both Scripture and our experience of the world. We Anabaptists have generally said little about God's providence. As strong believers in human freedom, we are more apt to speak about the moral implications of the kingdom of God than to muse about whether God's rule includes control of the earth's atmospheric albedo. However, I can't help but wonder if there is something helpful that might be said here, something that speaks to our anxious age. I will explain by way of a story.

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Two moving trips

In the early summer of 2022, my family and I moved from one edge of Ontario to another. I think the British call this process "moving house." This is an apt turn of phrase, since even though the house itself does not actually move, the trials endured by the self-mover suggest that it must: stubbed toes, sore muscles, conflicting schedules, mounds of stuff that magically grow. During the bleakest moments of our family's move, I was reminded that we had done essentially the same soul-crushing thing before.

Our earlier move took place in 2007. We had less stuff and less people. The difference that stood out most prominently in my mind, however, was auditory. As we rolled along the trans-Canada highway in 2007, the sounds of insects smacking against the truck were impossible to ignore. The pings and pops were the sounds of death: animal lives extinguished by the rush of steal, exoskeletons crushed, multi-faceted eyes smooshed. I noticed far fewer pings and pops during our drive in the summer of 2022. Less life residue was smeared across the windshield.

On a year-over-year basis ecological changes are often hard to notice. Our sense of normal changes gradually. Over the longer term the difference is clearer.

Two moving trips carried out in different places, at different times of the year, with different equipment cannot prove that anything has changed in the intervening years. Perhaps my more recent trip benefited from some great advance in rental truck design. Maybe the older, more tired me simply drove slower. Maybe those factors explain the difference, but I doubt it.

A 2019 review study published in the journal *Biological Conservation* found that 40 percent of insect species are threatened with extinction. The authors, Francisco Sánchez-Bayoa and Kris Wyckhuys, reviewed seventy-three historical studies. The data set revealed both the scale of the problem and some of the key drivers of these population declines: habitat loss, pollution (e.g., pesticides), pathogens, introduced species, and climate change.[3] All these dynamics may be at play in the parts of Canada our move traversed.

On a year-over-year basis ecological changes are often hard to notice. Our sense of normal changes gradually. Over the longer term the difference is clearer. It is important to acknowledge that, though we lament these losses, we also contribute to them. For instance, recall the international attention garnered by the expansion of Mennonite-run farms on the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico. This land conversion has been linked to the collapse of bee populations long cultivated by Maya beekeepers.[4] I

3 Francisco Sánchez-Bayo and Kris A. G. Wyckhuys, "Worldwide Decline of the Entomofauna: A Review of Its Drivers," *Biological Conservation*, 232 (2019): 8–27.

4 Nina Strochlic, "An Unlikely Feud between Beekeepers and Mennonites Simmers in Mexico," *National Geographic*, April 12, 2019, online: https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/unlikely-feud-beekeepers-mennonites-simmers-mexico.

expect that most of us can identify our contribution to ecological changes even closer to home.

Cyclical and non-cyclic change

The difference in insects killed during my two house moves is a sign of something bigger. Changes can be fun, but when they relate to the ecosystems on which we depend, they rightly cause anxiety—maybe even a sense of doom.

Change is not all of one type. Think of the way a human life might unfold: we leave our parents' home, equip ourselves to make our way in the world, establish a household, acquire the necessities to care for our young, rear them, send them off, and then rid ourselves of excess stuff. Not every life follows this arc, but many do.

Changes can be fun, but when they relate to the ecosystems on which we depend, they rightly cause anxiety—maybe even a sense of doom.

In the Dominion Arboretum in Ottawa, Ontario, there is a great, old Bebb's oak. The tree has a girth of nearly six meters. A few years ago, strong summer winds broke off several of the oak's largest branches. People worried. Experts were called. Using tomography and good tree sense, it was determined that, despite its bedraggled appearance, the tree was healthy and sound. It was simply "shedding" limbs that were no longer beneficial. One expert summed the situation up this way: "In Great Britain . . . they say a tree will grow for 300 years, rest for 300 years and it will expire gracefully."[5] What looked like life-threatening damage was really a sign that the tree was transiting to a new stage of life.

Changes of the variety that follow life's natural arc can be difficult, but they are not catastrophic. As annoyed as we might be with declining parental support or with the appearance of grey hair, we sense that these changes fit a pattern. Ancient exegetes made more of this than do our contemporaries. Some early theologians saw a neat seven stage arc of a human life depicted in the Bible and linked it to the days of creation.

Today social commentators and theologians try a similar trick to tamp down our anxiety about various worrying trends. They look for known patterns. They might say things like, *Every five-hundred years the church goes*

5 Joanne Laucius, "Iconic oak damaged in storm has decades of life left, says expert," *Ottawa Citizen*, October 3, 2017.

through a major reawakening. Or, *Every two generations there is a major social disruption*. Or, *The worth of your investments is declining because of a normal correction in equities valuation*. Identifying change as part of an expected pattern is comforting. It reassures us of our mastery and pushes uncertainty back to the edge of the firelight—even if it does nothing to change the facts. Moving house is harder at some points in life than others. Insect populations sometimes emerge at times and in places that put them at risk. These are cyclical changes.

Yet these normal cycles are not the only kind of change. There is another. The cold, analytical term is *non-cyclic change*. More colloquially we know this as the kind of change that makes us wonder, *What the hell is going on?* This is the change that occurs when familiar cycles and structures melt away.

Climate scientists can tell us with reasonable certainty the level of warming a given quantity of greenhouse gas pollution will create. The basics of this relationship have been known for more than a century. Measured observations, from places like the Mauna Loa Observatory, go back decades; measurements from ice cores extend our knowledge much, much further into the past. Decades ago, Rachel Carson famously told us of the potentially devastating impacts of heavy pesticide use. And long before that we knew that destroying the habitat of a species could decimate the population. Yet, for all this longstanding knowledge, the current ecological crisis spurs our anxiety like little else.

Our trouble is that the biophysical disruptions caused by the industrialized economy are breaking the known cycles and patterns. This is new.

Our trouble, symbolized by the fewer insect lives claimed by my moving truck in 2022, is that the biophysical disruptions caused by the industrialized economy are breaking the known cycles and patterns. This is new. We wonder—and worry—about the hellish forces being let loose upon the earth. In our imagination these changes do not evoke life's neat and vaguely biblical arc. They evoke the threatening riders of the apocalypse. It's with the drum of these hooves in our ears that we now think about God's providence. Like the original audience of the opening chapters of Genesis, we long for God to bring order, for God's Spirit to brood over the unpredictable churning of the climate with motherly attention.

God's providence

Whither God's providence? David Fergusson, who has written quite a bit about Christian views of providence, describes this segment of Christian teaching as "the sequel to creation."[6] The 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* illustrates this well. Article 5, "Creation and Divine Providence," opens this way: "We believe that God has created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, and that God preserves and renews what has been made." The final section of the Confession, Article 24, "The Reign of God," restates the sequence: "We believe that God, who created the universe, continues to rule over it in wisdom, patience, and justice."[7]

To query providence is to look for how it is that, even when 40 percent of insect species are endangered, God is working to preserve beloved creation along with the garden caretakers.

There is the niggling worry that looking to Christian teaching on providence, even in the context of creation, will lead to impotence and passivity. Pursuing the question of God's providence, this wise and patient rule, should do otherwise. We pursue this question best by using it like one might use a medical imaging technique. Our hope is not for a locked-in vision of the future but for an outline of how God might be present within a complex and troubling reality. To query providence is to look for how it is that, even when 40 percent of insect species are endangered, God is working to preserve beloved creation along with the garden caretakers who are both its blessing and curse.

One place we find God's providential care at work is in the persistence of nature's cycles. Though stressed, these patterns remain. There are seasons. There are migratory patterns. There is the host of biogeochemical cycles—water, nitrogen, and carbon, to name a few. We sometimes identify this aspect of God's ongoing provision as *creatio continua.* In the face of our worries about environmental doom, we would do well to see these cyclical changes as an expression of God's patient and wise rule. God's

6 David Fergusson, *The Providence of God: A Polyphonic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1.

7 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1995); online: www.mennoniteusa.org/who-are-mennonites/what-we-believe/confession-of-faith/.

providence is not anticipated as an emergency backup. It is found in the system itself, the arc of life.

We must be careful here, for there are those who would reduce the ecological crises from a catastrophic outworking of over-consumption to a natural cycle itself. This is a sham comfort, like the false proclamations of peace in Ezekiel's day. We would be wise to take note of the prophetic response (Ezekiel 13:10–12, NRSVUE):

> *Because they have misled my people, saying, "Peace," when there is no peace; and because, when the people build a flimsy wall, these prophets smear whitewash on it. Say to those who smear whitewash on it that it shall fall. There will be a deluge of rain, great hailstones will fall, and a stormy wind will break out. When the wall falls, will it not be said to you, "Where is the whitewash you smeared on it?"*

The explanations of those who deny climate change fail to match reality. They are like whitewash on a flimsy wall. The ecological crisis is not a cycle. It is an outworking of sin across systems and entire populations. Providence provides judgment, not easy comfort.

The fact that the earth's biogeochemical cycles will not allow negligent consumerism and greed to continue indefinitely is a form of divine provision. That fire and wind erase all doubt that the economies of the Global North are misguided is a call to repentance. To be clear, many who suffer the near-term consequence of climate change are not the ones responsible, just as the many plant and animal species erased from the earth are not the cause of their own demise. God's providence exhibited in the earth's circuit-breaker systems requires scientifically informed prophetic voices. This is the pattern of the Hebrew Scriptures, where God's providence requires the ministry of prophets.

God's providence is in the earth's systems, yes, but it is not only there. For some reason—a tangle of philosophy and historical accident, no doubt—we tend to think of providence as something carried out by God the Father (to use the classical formulation). We imagine a disinterested king moving pieces around a game board. We imagine a being at infinite arm's length from the suffering of creatures. There are lines in Scripture that suggest this, but the full arc of the story promises more.

Divine solidarity with creation

We are wrong to think that our uncertainty and anxiousness are unprecedented. Plagues, social disruption, and natural disasters are not new. We are not the first ones to experience a theological collision between belief and reality. At the core of the Christian response to such catastrophes has always been the preeminent act of God's providence. John's Gospel tells us that "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (1:14). There is no greater act of divine care for and solidarity with suffering creation than this.

The Incarnation, divine solidarity even unto death, points us toward Pentecost. In John 14 Jesus promised his students that they would not be left "orphaned." The Holy Spirit, the "Advocate," would be sent among them. The old King James Version uses the term "Comforter." We experience God's provision for creation through the presence of the Spirit. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson helpfully widens the scope of our thinking when she writes, "The stunning world opened up to our wonder by evolutionary biology and ravaged by our consumerist practices calls for attending to the presence of the Giver of life not at a distance, presiding from beyond the apex of a pyramid of greater and lesser beings, but within and around the merging, struggling, living, dying, and evolving circle of life."[8] Johnson goes on to riff on Augustine: "Like a saturated sponge creation is dripping with divine presence. . . . The life of the Spirit pervades the world."[9] This is important because, without an ability to see God's provision within an eco-state marked by death and uncertainty, we are apt to turn away from the severity of the crisis. To be present with those who suffer, to know and to see, to not turn away—this is God's way of ruling amid creaturely freedom. This is the ministry of the Holy Spirit at a time when a great deal of death is smeared across the windshield of our extractive economy.

We experience God's provision for creation through the presence of the Spirit.

This affirmation of the presence of God's Spirit as an enactment of providence brings us to a surprising place. It brings us, in a sense, back to the answer we most want to hear: that the doom we fear may not come

8 Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 133.

9 Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 137.

to pass. Throughout the Scriptures God's Spirit is an agent of surprise, bringing life out of death, bringing new ways of being out of the decrepit. With so many species facing extinction, the fact that this Spirit is the one who raised Jesus from the dead is no small thing, but think also of the surprise of Pentecost, the inclusion of the gentiles, the marvelous sign acts that marked the emergence of the early church. The demise of the Hine's emerald dragonfly is not locked in.

The doom we fear may not come to pass. Throughout the Scriptures God's Spirit is an agent of surprise, bringing life out of death, bringing new ways of being out of the decrepit.

The uncertainty, the non-cyclic nature, of the ecological crisis has two sides. There is the fearsome side, the threat of "environmental doom," but there is another. Thomas Homer-Dixon puts it this way: "The uncertainty in the zone between the impossible and the inevitable creates a mental space; our imagination can then populate that space with desirable possibilities, some of which we can make objects of our hope."[10] The terrifying ecological changes we observe are not the opening salvo of an entirely predictable slide. It is more complicated. Because the earth, coupled with our social systems, constitutes a highly complex system, the future is genuinely uncertain. This uncertainty includes room for repentance and space for hope. Though God may not magically save us from the repercussions of our profligate way of life, the future may yet surprise us. Life from death, seed time and harvest—as long as the earth endures. God's providence may yet bring about repentance.

About the author

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10 Homer-Dixon, *Commanding Hope: The Power We Have to Renew a World in Peril* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2020), 98.

Hope for this in-between time

Interweaving complaint and praise in the Psalms

Andrea D. Saner

> *"But I trusted in your steadfast love;*
> *my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.*
> *I will sing to the Lord,*
> *because he has dealt bountifully with me." (Ps. 13:5–6)*[1]

So surprisingly concludes a psalm that begins with "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me for ever?" (v. 1). This change in mood has been deemed *Gewissheit der Erhörung*, "certainty of a hearing,"[2] suggesting that lament psalms move from complaint to resolution. Canonical readings of the psalter have also emphasized its movement toward orientation and praise in light of the doxologies at the end of Book 5 (Ps. 146–150). Yet readers of the Psalms recognize the vast amount of complaint within it, which raises the question of whether there are also movements *away* from resolution in the psalter—expressing "uncertainty of a hearing"[3]—and whether attempts to subordinate complaint to praise within the Book of Psalms transgresses its basic character. In this essay, I observe the interweaving of complaint and praise in Psalms 89, 27, and 42–43 and argue that this correlates to the character of the Christian life *in via*, on the way. I then turn to Augustine's expositions on the psalms to describe how the Bishop of Hippo invites

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1 Unless otherwise noted, all biblical references are the NRSV translation and use the chapter and verse numbers of the NRSV.

2 See Joachim Begrich, "Das priesterlichs Heilsorakel," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 52 (1934): 81–92.

3 Frederico G. Villanueva, *The 'Uncertainty of a Hearing': A Study of the Sudden Change of Mood in the Psalms of Lament*, Vetus Testamentum, Supplements (Boston: Brill, 2008).

readers to groan with the psalms as pilgrims. Since Augustine wrote and presented orally these expositions for a varied public across three decades of ecclesial turbulence (392–422 CE),[4] they could speak well to the complex communities of our own time.

From praise to lament

Psalm 89

"A prayer for help in reverse,"[5] Psalm 89 is a communal lament with a clear movement from acclamation of God for his past acts of faithfulness, to complaint.[6] In verses 1–37, the psalmist offers praise to God, expounding God's mighty deeds in creation, by which God is known as king of the universe (vv. 5–18), and in covenant with Israel, especially through David, his servant (vv. 19–37). Verse 38 supplies the reversal: the Davidic dynasty was to be as sure as the sun and moon (vv. 36–37), "but now you have spurned and rejected him; you are full of wrath against your anointed." Through verse 45, the psalmist describes the disarray and humiliation into which the Davidic line has fallen, before breaking out into full-blown complaint in verse 46: "How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself for ever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?" In verse 49, the psalmist reflects back on the earlier portion of the psalm, reminding the LORD of promises to David, with a question that could be viewed as the crux of the psalm: "LORD, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?"[7] The psalmist then asks God to recall the taunts and insults the people have endured (vv. 50–51). The final verse appears to have been appended as a conclusion to Book 4: "Blessed be the LORD for ever. Amen and Amen" (v. 52).

Mays argues that it is imperative to see the ways in which God's reign is described and God's faithfulness acclaimed in the sections prior to the

4 Michael C. McCarthy, SJ, "An Ecclesiology of Groaning: Augustine, the Psalms, and the Making of the Church," *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 26.

5 Beth Tanner, "Psalm 89," in Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 674.

6 Psalm 89 has played important roles in canonical approaches to the book of Psalms since Gerald Henry Wilson argued that Books 1–3 narrate the story of the Davidic kingship from its inception (Psalm 2) to its failure (Psalm 89), to which Book 4 responds. See Gerald Henry Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBLDS 76 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 207–15; on recent canonical approaches to the Psalms, see Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, ed., *The Shape and Shaping of the Book of Psalms: The Current State of Scholarship* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).

7 James L. Mays, *Psalms*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 283.

complaint. The text of verses 1–4 repeat and emphasize the word "forever"; in verses 5–8, God is located among the council of divine beings to highlight God's incomparability, even more great and awesome than the holy ones. Verses 9–14 announce God's victory over the sea and its monster, Rahab, at creation, justifying God's place as the highest in the divine council. The God on whose might and victory the very existence of the world depends is clearly not subject to the ebbs and flows of historical moments. Set in this context, God's choice and covenant with David are an extension of God's cosmic reign and faithfulness to the world, but the rejection of David's line does not threaten the latter. Discontinuity between God's transcendent might and promise to David, on the one hand, and the rejection of the Davidic line, on the other, give rise to the question, "How long?" (v. 46).[8] The promise and the current reality are held in relationship to God's transcendent power, love, and mercy, the memory of which gives rise to both acts of praise and complaint.

The promise and the current reality are held in relationship to God's transcendent power, love, and mercy, the memory of which gives rise to both acts of praise and complaint.

Psalm 27

Psalm 27 can be divided into four parts.[9] In the first (vv. 1–3), the psalmist voices trust in God through reflection on what would happen if and when the psalmist comes under attack by his enemies, and through the rhetorical questions, "Whom shall I fear?" and "Whom shall I dread?"[10] These questions suggest God's incomparability in power and faithfulness on account of which no one is to be feared. Recognition of the incomparability of God sparks longing for God's presence. Verses 4–6 continue to voice trust in God but within the context of worship in the sanctuary. In verse 4, the psalmist describes their request to God to dwell in the

8 Mays, *Psalms*, 284–85.

9 Previous generations of scholarship divided Psalm 27 into two songs, with the vow in v. 6 concluding the first. See Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. Herbert Hartwell, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 245; Herman Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 121; and C. A. Briggs and E. G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1906), 236.

10 Translation by Rolf A. Jacobson, "Psalm 27," in deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 266.

"house of the LORD" throughout their life, and in verse 6, she promises sacrifices and praise offered to God "in his tent." Verses 7–12 constitute a new section, which is more distinct from verses 4–6 than the latter is from verses 1–3. Verse 7 begins with a petition, "Hear, O LORD, my voice when I call, be gracious to me and answer me!" This and related petitions (vv. 9, 11–12) include a complaint expressing the situation of the psalmist: "False witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence" (v. 12). The psalm concludes with a statement of trust—"I will see the LORD's goodness in the land of the living" (v. 13)—and a communal exhortation to strength and confidence (v. 14).[11]

Verbal correspondences link the four sections of the psalm and invite reflection on the relationship between the petitions and the statements of trust.[12] "My adversaries" referenced in v. 2, who are not to be feared, are identified in v. 12: those who speak falsely against the psalmist in court (cf. Exod. 20:16). Such speech was not only unjust but also deathly in ancient Israel (cf. 1 Kings 21), yet the psalmist declares, "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living" (v. 13). "The goodness of the LORD" connects to the singular petition in verse 4 "to behold the beauty of the LORD," suggesting that the hope and exhortation voiced at the conclusion of the psalm springs from the presence of the Lord and the psalmist's pursuit of this presence. "Seeking" connects the petition to be in the presence of God in the temple in verse 4 to the pursuit of God's "face" in verse 8. References to "hiding" connect the petition "Do not hide your face from me" (v. 9) with the psalmist's trust that God will hide *him* in God's "shelter" and "tent" (v. 5).[13] The acclamation of God as the psalmist's salvation (v. 1) grounds the petition not to be cast away in verse 9, as if to say, "You are my salvation; show yourself to be my salvation." In these ways, the movements of prayer in Psalm 27 do not seem to move in a linear direction, but rather,

The acclamation of God as the psalmist's salvation (v. 1) grounds the petition not to be cast away in verse 9, as if to say, "You are my salvation; show yourself to be my salvation."

11 Jacobson, "Psalm 27," 271.

12 Villanueva, *Uncertainty*, 116–17.

13 Cf. Jacobson, "Psalm 27," 271.

the psalmists' pursuit of the presence of God in the center of the psalm (vv. 4–10) gives rise to both petitions and trust.

Psalms 42–43

As in Psalm 27, in Psalms 42–43, it is pursuit of the presence of God—longing for the presence of God—that evokes the psalmists' statements of confidence and petition. These two psalms are closely connected though the refrain that appears in verses 42:5–6a, 42:11, and 43:5, which differentiate three sections, each of which combine complaint and trust.

The first section (42:1–6a) introduces the metaphor of the thirsty deer as the psalmist describes longing for God while being taunted by those around them, with the question, "Where is your God?" Beginning at verse 4, the psalmist nostalgically remembers leading processions to the temple, with joyful song and thanksgiving, and the state of his soul on those occasions is the antithesis of its current state: sunk down and turbulent. Still, this description comes in the form of a question, directed to the soul, as if his disposition is unwarranted.

After the first refrain, the psalmist reflects on his downcast soul, and because of this, he writes, "Therefore I remember you." The stanza concludes with the declaration that by day, the Lord commands steadfast love over the psalmist, who, by night, offers the Lord's song as a prayer "to the God of my life" (v. 8). The first complaint to God is offered in verse 9, with the questions, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?" Verse 10 echoes verse 3 with its reference to the taunters asking a different question, "Where is your God?"

The psalmist is not only asking for his life to be preserved; he is asking to be preserved in truth, justice, and communion with God. Life and deliverance are associated with God's presence in the temple.

The third section (43:1–5) begins with petitions for vindication, defense, and deliverance from faithless, deceitful, and unjust people before voicing questions that echo 42:9, "Why have you cast me off? Why must I walk about mournfully?" This leads to a more positive petition: that God would send God's light and truth to lead the psalmist into God's presence ("to your holy hill and to your dwelling," v. 3) where the psalmist will offer praise at the altar (v. 4). The psalmist is not only asking for his life to be preserved; he is asking to be preserved in truth, justice, and

communion with God. Life and deliverance are associated with God's presence in the temple, the altar where thanksgiving sacrifices could be offered, and where God's praise is sung.

Augustine's "Expositions on the Psalms"

From the above discussion, it should be clear that at least Psalms 89, 27 and 42–43 exhibit movement from complaint to praise as well as from praise to complaint, at times interweaving statements of trust with petitions. Memory of the transcendent power and love of God and pursuit of the presence of God spark both praise and complaint in these psalms. Augustine of Hippo's sermons on the Psalms develop these motifs within the context of Christian life.

Experience of a partial vision of God draws attention to the weaknesses the sufferer endures in the present, and it cultivates desire for wholeness and rest in God.

Longing for and pursuit of the presence of God are central elements of Augustine's exhortations on the Psalms, as he invites his hearers to groan with the psalms and, in so doing, to order their groaning toward the end of the pilgrim's journey. "The dominant 'voice'" in Augustine's expositions on the psalms is that of groaning.[14] This groaning follows from spiritual movements akin to praise, as the psalmist and reader or hearer see God partially, but not fully, in this life. Experience of a partial vision of God draws attention to the weaknesses the sufferer endures in the present, and it cultivates desire for wholeness and rest in God. "The psalms help to make the sufferer a pilgrim," an exile longing for their home with God.[15]

For example, in Psalm 42, Augustine writes of the metaphors of thirst and water: "I am thirsty on my pilgrimage, parched in my running, but I will be totally satisfied when I arrive."[16] The consumed tears of the pilgrim do not satisfy but rather intensify longing for water. Augustine describes

14 Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, "Groaning with the Psalms: The Cultivation of World-Weariness in Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos*," *Studia Patristica* 98 (2017): 81–90. Cf. McCarthy, "Ecclesiology of Groaning," 23–48.

15 Stewart-Kroeker, "Groaning with the Psalms," 86.

16 *Enarrat. Ps.* 41.5. Maria Boulding, OSB, trans., *Expositions of the Psalms 33–50*, vol. II/16 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, OSA (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000).

several stages of contemplation: from the beauty of creation, in which something of the artist can be seen, but not fully; to interior sight, which can consider justice and beauty abstractly, but the mind is weak, remembering and forgetting, fickle in its desires. Ultimately, God is "above" the soul (cf. Ps. 42:5 [Gr. 41:4], "I poured out my soul above myself"), unreachable by the mind.[17] As the psalmist turns his attention to the presence of God (cf. Ps. 43:3–4), so Augustine reflects on God's presence among the faithful, who are God's tent on earth. The pilgrim is drawn from God's tent to God's "house"—the highest heaven and the deer's ultimate goal—by the sounds of celebration and praise. Describing the movement from praise to lament for the people of God, Augustine writes, "As we have found there a cause for joy, so here there is no shortage of things to groan about."[18] The psalmists' soul disquiets him even though he hears the sound of delightful music drawing him homeward in love—thus the question, "Why do you disquiet me?" "Hope in God," he commands, meaning, "Dwell in hope for this in-between time."[19]

Describing the movement from praise to lament for the people of God, Augustine writes, "As we have found there a cause for joy, so here there is no shortage of things to groan about."

Conclusion

The movement of lament psalms is not only from complaint to "certainty of a hearing" but also from praise to acknowledgement of the weaknesses of our mortal lives and within the pilgrim church on earth. I have suggested that the concept of pilgrimage may be a helpful way to orient our lives in uncertain times and that this concept follows from a close reading of Psalms 27 and 42–43, in which memory of and longing for worship in the temple engender both lament and trust in God, who will ultimately lead the psalmist into life, praise, and communion with God. The contemplation of our end in God *should* spur both complaint *and* trust within us, and the community of the faithful remains a reliable locus of the presence

17 *Enarrat. Ps.* 41.7–8; Gerald P. Boersma, "Augustine's Deer Visits the Ophthalmologist: Exercising the Eyes of Faith in *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 41," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 10, no. 2 (2016): 217.

18 *Enarrat. Ps.* 41.10. Boulding, trans.

19 *Enarrat. Ps.* 41.10. Boulding, trans.

of God on earth, even as it remains the community of the weak and broken on their way home.

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Living apocalyptically in uncertain times

Dan Epp-Tiessen

The Bible's apocalyptic texts emerged out of contexts of great crisis and hardship, and so they offer us valuable resources for living with uncertainty. I will explore some of these resources by focussing first on Revelation's Christmas story and its aftermath. Then I will step back to reflect on some larger apocalyptic perspectives.

Revelation's Christmas story (12:1–17)

Symbolic language makes Revelation's Christmas story challenging to interpret, which probably explains the church's unfortunate neglect of a profound story that should be included among our repertoire of Advent readings. Unlike the nativity stories in Matthew and Luke that seek to provide at least a somewhat realistic account, Revelation's version is entirely figurative because it seeks to portray the consequences of Jesus's birth, not the circumstances.

In apocalyptic literature the ability of cosmic evil to influence human actors is a major cause of the suffering and chaos afflicting the world.

The story begins with a great heavenly sign, a pregnant woman in labor, wearing a crown of twelve stars (12:1–2). Twelve is the biblical number for God's complete people, indicating that the woman represents God's people. Another heavenly sign appears, a ferocious dragon with seven heads and ten horns (12:3). The dragon represents Satan (12:9), his multiple heads and horns symbolizing his power, ferocity, and deviance from normal creatureliness.

The dragon's tail sends a third of the stars crashing to earth, demonstrating the threat he poses to God's creation. He also threatens God's saving purposes as he attempts to devour the woman's child immediately after birth (12:4). Readers should hear echoes of Matthew's Christmas story in which the brutal Herod attempts to kill infant Jesus, murdering Bethlehem's baby boys in the process. Revelation implies that the power of Satan manifests itself through the brutal deeds of tyrants like Herod. In

apocalyptic literature the ability of cosmic evil to influence human actors is a major cause of the suffering and chaos afflicting the world.

Revelation's woman gives birth to a son destined to rule the nations (12:5), indicating that he is Jesus. The child is immediately whisked out of danger and taken to the throne of God. God's throne is a foundational source of hope in apocalyptic literature, as illustrated, for example, by the book of Daniel. In a dream Daniel sees a succession of vicious beasts representing a series of oppressive earthly empires, the last being particularly brutal (7:1–8). The scene shifts to the heavenly realm where God sits on the throne in majestic splendor (7:9–18). In God's throne room Daniel sees all the beasts destroyed and hears that God's eternal kingdom or reign will be established on earth and given to the faithful (7:11–18). The apocalyptic visions in Daniel probably emerged during the harsh repression of the Jewish people by Antiochus Epiphanes (167–164 BCE). Most commentators view the last particularly vicious beast as an allusion to Antiochus and his brutality. Daniel's vision acknowledges the suffering of the faithful but then reminds them that God still sits on the throne. God seated on the throne is a central apocalyptic symbol asserting that God always remains sovereign Lord, even when destructive cosmic and human powers afflict God's creation. Apocalyptic literature claims that the God seated on the throne will not forever watch evil prevail on earth but will intervene to deliver the faithful and establish God's healing reign.

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In Revelation's Christmas story, the birth of Jesus initiates a chain of events beginning with the archangel Michael leading God's angels in battle against the dragon and his angelic forces (12:7). The dragon, now identified as Satan, is defeated and cast out of heaven along with his angels (12:8–9). The birth of Jesus sets in motion the final defeat of Satan and his forces. Heaven and its residents are called to rejoice (12:12a) because:

> *Now have come the salvation and the power*
> *and the kingdom of our God*
> *and the authority of his Messiah. (12:10a)*[1]

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

While the kingdom of God is now fully present in the heavenly realm, on earth it is a different story (which is why in Matthew 6:10 the Lord's Prayer teaches us to pray that God's kingdom may come to earth as it is already present in heaven):

> *But woe to the earth and the sea,*
> *for the devil has come down to you*
> *with great wrath,*
> *because he knows that his time is short! (Rev 12:12bc)*

Because of Jesus's birth, Satan's days are numbered, and so he is determined to wreak as much harm on the earth as possible. Small wonder that there is so much turmoil on the earth.

The dragon immediately pursues the woman who birthed Jesus, but she is delivered, the earth itself protecting her (12:13–16). The enraged dragon proceeds "to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus" (12:17bc). This statement identifies the woman as the church and believers as her children, warning them to expect opposition and persecution because the dragon wages war against them. However, the dragon will never be able to destroy the woman/church because God protects her (12:14–16).

In the next vision a terrifying beast arises from the sea (13:1–2). The dragon gives his power, throne, and authority to this beast, creating an entity we might call the dragon-beast system. Similar to how the beasts in Daniel symbolize oppressive empires, the dragon-beast represents the Roman Empire. Revelation signals this by describing how the dragon-beast exercises authority over the peoples of the world (13:7–8), controls world commerce (13:16–17), dominates kings (17:18; 18:3, 9), operates a massive mercantile system (18:3, 11–19), and sits on seven hills (17:9), as the city of Rome did. Revelation calls the dragon-beast "Babylon" (14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21). Given that ancient Babylon was the evil empire that had destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BCE and that Rome had done the same in 70 CE, Revelation's early readers would have understood that Babylon meant Rome.

Following the consolidation of the dragon-beast system, God unleashes a series of massive calamities to destroy it (15:1–17:18). This leads to heavenly celebration over God's destruction of Babylon the great (18:1–19:8). Then Jesus returns to earth as a rider on the white horse, followed by the armies of heaven. As king of kings and lord of lords, he defeats the dragon-beast and all its supporting kings and armies (19:11–21). This

paves the way for God's renewal of heaven and earth and the arrival of the New Jerusalem, the perfect city of God (21:1–22:5).

Unmasking reality

Apocalyptic literature is challenging to interpret because we moderns are not familiar with its symbol system or style of communication. Yet, the Greek verb *apocalupto* means to reveal, uncover, or disclose. As Barbara R. Rossing observes, "Apocalypses pull back a curtain so people can see the world more deeply—both the beauty of creation and also the pathologies of empire, experienced as plagues against creation. Apocalypses show us the throne of God, the Alpha and Omega. Then they take us back to our lives with our vision transformed, . . . to live according to an alternative community vision."[2]

Rome claimed to be a divinely sanctioned empire, providing its citizens with peace, security, prosperity, and civilization. Revelation draws back the curtain to reveal that the empire embodies the dragon's power and authority. Its satanic character is evident in its extractive economy, slave trade, persecution of Christians, idolatry, brutal militarism, conquests, and repression of subject peoples. Revelation pulls back the curtain to reveal that tyrants like Herod act satanically when they commit atrocities.

Apocalyptic symbols can help us unmask the pretentious evil powers of empire in our time, challenging us to discern how they are instantiations of the dragon-beast.

Apocalyptic symbols can help us unmask the pretentious evil powers of empire in our time, challenging us to discern how they are instantiations of the dragon-beast. As I write these words, a dragon-beast is committing atrocities and devastating Ukraine. Not so long ago a dragon-beast based closer to home rained destruction on Iraq and Afghanistan through massive bombing campaigns. The dragon-beast of fossil fuel extraction seeks to dominate our planet, regardless of harm to ecosystems and climate.

By portraying the dragon-beast, or Satan, as the driving force behind oppressive empire, Revelation reminds us of the deep power of evil and the cause of much uncertainty in our world. As Ephesians reminds us, we

2 Barbara R. Rossing, "The World Is about to Turn: Preaching Apocalyptic Texts for a Planet in Peril," in *Eco-Reformation: Grace and Hope for a Planet in Peril*, ed. Lisa E. Dahill and James B. Martin-Schramm (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 141.

struggle not "against enemies of blood and flesh" but against "the cosmic powers of this present darkness" (6:12). We should never be naively duped into believing that evil and oppression can easily be overcome by a few social programs or educational campaigns, as valuable as these might be. By exposing the depth and power of evil, apocalyptic literature provides a realistic image of what we are up against and what faithful resistance might cost us.

The throne of God and the promise of victory

When apocalyptic literature pulls back the curtain, it does more than expose the world's evil. It also highlights two closely related fundamental sources of hope: despite the world's turmoil God still sits on the throne, and this sovereign God will intervene to right the wrongs of history. When Daniel's world is gripped by horrific evil, the curtain is pulled back to reveal that God is seated on the throne and will establish God's kingdom on earth (Dan 7:1–18). Revelation mentions the throne of God thirty-nine times. In the book's pivotal vision, John is invited into God's magnificent throne room where God is adored and worshiped (4:1–11). John also sees the Lamb who is worthy to break the seals of the scroll (5:1–14). As the scroll is unrolled, a series of divine interventions transform the kingdom of the world into the kingdom of God and God's Messiah (11:15), leading to deliverance of the faithful and destruction of persons currently destroying the earth (11:18). Revelation's final vision portrays God's renewal of the cosmos and the perfect New Jerusalem descending from heaven to earth (21:1–22:5). God and the Lamb sit enthroned in the New Jerusalem, and from their thrones flows a river that nourishes the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations (22:1–2).

Apocalyptic literature pulls back the curtain to assure the faithful that no matter how chaotic, oppressive, and painful their current circumstances are, they can be confident that God still sits on the throne.

Apocalyptic literature pulls back the curtain to assure the faithful that no matter how chaotic, oppressive, and painful their current circumstances are, they can be confident that God still sits on the throne. God's sovereignty constitutes a promise that the suffering of the present is temporary, that ultimately God's healing purposes for the world will prevail, and then human faithfulness will be rewarded.

The call to faithful resistance

Apocalyptic literature seeks to nurture a spirituality and community of resistance.[3] There are few times when such resistance is more crucial than when evil is rampant and the pressures to accommodate are enormous. Revelation addresses seven churches, symbolizing the entire church, admonishing each to steadfast endurance and faithfulness (2:1–3:22). As heavenly voices celebrate the fall of oppressive Babylon and the dragon-beast, one particular voice cries out:

> *Come out of her, my people,*
> *so that you do not take part in her sins. (18:4b)*

Whereas financial advantages impel most persons to accept the mark of the beast (13:16–17), only the name of God and the Lamb are inscribed on the foreheads of 144,000 faithful persons, symbolizing their counter identity and illustrating that it is possible to resist and "come out of her" (14:1–5).

When Revelation's Christmas story celebrates God's salvation resulting from the defeat of the dragon, it makes a remarkable claim about Christian martyrs:

> *But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb*
> *and by the word of their testimony,*
> *for they did not cling to life even in the face of death. (12:11)*

Whereas Jesus Christ is God's primary means to defeat the dragon, human faithfulness also contributes. Christ-followers conquer the dragon in two ways.[4] One is through "the blood of the Lamb," which must mean something like faithful commitment to the crucified Christ. Christ-followers also conquer through faithful witness that may lead to martyrdom. The power and character of the dragon become instantiated in the Roman Empire. God utilizes faithful human resistance to the brutality of empire in the process of conquering the dragon-beast.

Revelation acknowledges how challenging and costly such resistance can be, given how powerful the forces of evil are. It seeks to nurture faithful resistance by repeatedly reminding Christ-followers of the rewards awaiting them in the new age (1:3; 2:7, 10–11, 17, 26–28; 3:5, 12, 21;

3 Rossing, "The World Is about to Turn," 144, 149, 152.

4 Rossing, "The World Is about to Turn," 148.

5:10; 7:9–17; 11:17–18; 14:1–5, 13; 15:2–4; 19:9; 20:4–6; 21:3–7, 27; 22:1–5, 12–17). Such promises of rewards in the next life can nurture an unhealthy other-worldliness, as they do in some forms of Christian piety. However, they can also empower this-worldly discipleship by reminding us that God will ultimately reward faithfulness and the sacrifices it may demand.

Living apocalyptically

Jewish apocalyptic imagination embraced a two-age scenario. Because the present age was in the grip of evil forces, it would take God's dramatic intervention to defeat these powers and establish the new age of God's reign on earth. Early Christians adopted and adapted this apocalyptic two-age scenario. They believed that Jesus was God's Messiah who inaugurated the new age and kingdom or reign of God. However, it was obvious that Jesus's ministry did not represent God's cataclysmic intervention that defeated all evil and established God's full rule over the world. Therefore, much of the New Testament maintains a lively hope that Jesus will return to complete the task of establishing God's healing reign within all of creation. Many early Christians lived with an "already not yet" mentality. Jesus had partially inaugurated the apocalyptic new age, gifting his followers with a foretaste of its blessings. However, the complete establishment of this new age and the fullness of its salvation awaited his return.

In the old age or reality outside of Christ, the powers of sin, illness, death, and Satan still hold sway. But because Jesus has inaugurated the saving reign of God on earth, Christ-followers already experience partially the blessings of the new age. Someday Jesus will return to complete his ministry of defeating all anti-godly powers. Then the reality of the new age will entirely transform the old.

Christ-followers live in the overlap between the two ages, which explains much about our lives. Christ delivers us from the painful and sinful realities of the old age, but because the reign of God is only partially here, we still live with one foot firmly planted in the old age, partially subject to its limitations. Hence, we still sin, suffer, and die. But we also live in the new age in Christ and receive its gifts of grace, healing, and fruits of the Spirit. Christian discipleship involves leaning ever more into this new age and letting its realities, rather than the realities of the old age, shape our character, identity, and lifestyle. God calls the church to be the foretaste and showcase of the new age in Christ so that the world can see the new age at work in the life of the church and individual Christians.

Conclusion

As we live in uncertain times, apocalyptic texts provide us with imagery for naming and confronting some of the evil powers at work in our world. By reminding us of the depth and power of these forces, apocalyptic passages keep us realistic. At the same time, these texts provide us with deep sources of hope. No amount of uncertainty and evil can ever displace God from the throne of the cosmos. In Christ we catch the vision of God's new age, and we are blessed with a foretaste of its benefits. With the help of God and the faith community we can resist the destructive powers of the old age and live as new age people amid the wreckage of the old, secure in the promise that someday God's new age will fully arrive to transform the world, including our lives.

About the author

Dan Epp-Tiessen is retiring from twenty-five years of teaching Bible at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He increasingly appreciates apocalyptic texts.

Puzzled and terrified

An Easter homily on Luke 24:1–12

David C. Cramer

> *"They stood there puzzled" (v. 4).*[1]
>
> *"The women were terrified" (v. 5).*
>
> *"The story sounded like nonsense to the men, so they didn't believe it" (v. 11).*
>
> *"He went home again, wondering what had happened" (v. 12).*

Puzzled. Terrified. Nonsense. Didn't believe it. Wondering.

These are not words we normally associate with Easter. And yet, here they are in Luke's Gospel narrative of that first Easter morning. Why would Luke include these details?

At the outset of his Gospel, Luke explains the purpose of his writing.

> *Many people have set out to write accounts about the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used the eyewitness reports circulating among us from the early disciples. Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write an accurate account for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught. (1:1–4)*

If Luke's purpose is to help Theophilus and subsequent readers to "be certain of the truth of everything [they] were taught," is not that purpose undermined by including these details of puzzlement, terror, unbelief, and seeming nonsense?

For many of us, even the idea of trying to be *certain* of the truth of everything we have been taught is troubling. The certainty we once had, or at least thought we had, has come crashing down as we have come to question some of the beliefs we were taught. Maybe it is particular beliefs

1 This homily was originally preached at Keller Park (Mennonite) Church, South Bend, Indiana, on April 17, 2022. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the New Living Translation (NLT).

about Scripture or creation or the end times or sexuality or atonement theory. Whatever it might be, after changes in our thinking about things we once held certain, it can start to feel like everything is up for grabs.

Or perhaps we have come to realize that some of the people who taught us the faith were less than trustworthy. People we looked up to as pillars of the faith ended up exploiting their power or abusing their spiritual authority, leaving us to question whether anything they taught us could be trusted. And so, again, we now lack that certainty we once felt about those teachings we received from them.

The popular word right now for this crumbling of certitude is *deconstruction*. But perhaps for some of us a better way to describe it would be simply attempting to recover from religious trauma.

The popular word right now for this crumbling of certitude is *deconstruction*. But perhaps for some of us a better way to describe it would be simply attempting to recover from religious trauma. It is not so much that we have set out intentionally to find the seams in our belief systems and to pull at them until we have deconstructed everything. Rather, it is that our belief system has been rocked again and again by circumstances beyond our control.

For anyone feeling this way about faith, the good news from this story is that you are in good company. That is precisely how Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James felt that first Easter morning.

Less than forty-eight hours prior, they had looked on as the man they thought was their messiah was brutally executed by the state authorities, with the full approval of their religious authorities. All the male disciples had abandoned them and fled for their lives, leaving these women to accompany Jesus as he underwent the extreme bodily trauma that ultimately took his life as they looked on, helpless to stop it.

By accompanying Jesus in his trauma, these women experience intense trauma to their own psyches. (There's no such thing as *secondary* trauma; trauma is trauma.) So now, just days after this intense traumatic experience, as they go to lay spices and perfumes on Jesus's body, they have another startling experience. Jesus's body is gone, and two men in dazzling robes appear to them at the tomb.

It is no wonder that the women are puzzled and terrified. This is a perfectly natural and understandable response to what they are experiencing. Similarly, we should not be surprised that the male disciples initially

fail to understand or believe what the women are telling them. Sadly, this, too, is an all-too-common reaction to trauma survivors when they report what they have experienced.

Luke's inclusion of these details does not undermine the veracity of their account. If anything, it makes it more believable. And, ultimately, on Easter morning, that is all we are asked to do: to believe the testimony of trauma survivors about the things they have heard and seen and experienced.

We are not asked to submit ourselves to the teachings of religious authorities, despite our questions and doubts.

We are not asked to adopt a specific theological system or philosophical worldview.

We are not asked to adhere to an elaborate theory of the atonement.

We are simply asked to believe the testimony of trauma survivors.

But the good news of Easter goes even further than this. Ultimately, the truth of their testimony is not dependent on whether we believe it. One of the troubling aspects of the teaching I inherited is the notion that the victory Jesus accomplished over Sin and Death was somehow up to me and my beliefs to access. If I did not say the right prayer or did not have the right belief system or did not have the appropriate level of certainty about that belief, Jesus's work would be null and void. Even though I was taught that I was saved by the work of Jesus, it still felt like there was a lot of pressure on me to get it right.

The good news of Easter is that Jesus's victory over Sin and Death does not depend on how we feel about it on any given day. Jesus's victory is total, complete, and once-and-for-all.

But the good news of Easter is that Jesus's victory over Sin and Death does not depend on how we feel about it on any given day. Jesus's victory is total, complete, and once-and-for-all. Indeed, it is because of Jesus's victory over Sin and Death that Paul can write that he is "*convinced* that nothing can ever separate us from God's love." He elaborates:

> *Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation*

> *will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38–39)*

It is the power of God's love that rose Jesus from the dead that first Easter morning. And it is that same power of God's love that assures us on Easter morning—and every morning—that we have nothing to fear. Sin and Death are defeated, and Jesus has claimed the victory.

He is risen.

He is risen, indeed.

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The incredulity of Thomas

An Easter sermon on John 20:19–31

Kathy McCamis

Doubting Thomas

Most of us associate Thomas with the unfortunate label *Doubting Thomas*.[1] Poor Thomas has been saddled with that nickname for centuries, thanks in large part to the story in John 20:19–31, in which he tells his fellow disciples that he will not believe their stories of having seen the Lord unless he sees the scars for himself.

Most of us associate Thomas with the unfortunate label *Doubting Thomas*. Poor Thomas has been saddled with that nickname for centuries, thanks in large part to the story in John 20:19–31.

Frankly, I'm not sure that was an unreasonable request, and I think it is time that we free Thomas from this label once and for all. A sixteenth-century English manuscript includes an image entitled "The incredulity of Thomas."[2] The *Cambridge English Dictionary* describes incredulity as "the feeling of . . . not being able to believe something."[3] If that is the case, who among us cannot relate to experiencing some incredulity at the idea of resurrection—real, live, in the flesh, man-who-was-crucified-is-back-and-they-claim-they-saw-him resurrection?

I find myself somewhat surreptitiously siding with Thomas on this one. I do not believe easily, however much I might wish I did. I am cautious. I want to weigh the evidence for myself, rather than simply taking

1 This sermon was first preached at Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba, on the second Sunday of Easter, April 24, 2022.

2 The image referenced here can be viewed at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doubting_Thomas#/media/File:The_incredulity_of_Thomas,_who_places_his_finger_in_the_wound_(f._142v)_Cropped.jpg.

3 *Cambridge English Dictionary*, s.v., "incredulity"; online: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/incredulity.

someone else's word for it. I came to my Christian faith after carefully examining the evidence before me, after needing to find for myself a reason to commit my life to wholehearted faith.

And we come to these stories of resurrection having experienced plenty of challenges that give us abundant reason to question this theology of life beyond death. COVID-19 has meant that in recent years we have been unable to gather as a community on Easter morning because of a pandemic that has brought so much suffering with it.

We might be forgiven if we want to ask—with Thomas—for a little proof that God is yet with us in the midst of our fears and uncertainties.

Beyond that, we are continuously aware of the horrors of the war in Ukraine and of wars that rage no less awfully in other places in the world at the periphery of our awareness and of our longing for peace. We have experienced grief at the unexpected loss of people dear to us. We have borne witness to the painful legacy of Indian Residential Schools in Canada. We see the impacts of human activity on our planet and feel helpless to turn things around.

We might be forgiven if we want to ask—with Thomas—for a little proof that God is yet with us in the midst of our fears and uncertainties. And yet, none of us probably wants to be known as the Doubting Thomas of our own community.

That alone seems to be a good reason to relieve Thomas of his terrible nickname, once and for all! Because it is time to relieve ourselves of this unnecessary burden: believing that doubts and questions are the unwanted enemies of the life of faith and that there is no place for them in the lives of "good Christians."

To that, I say, *Baloney!*

Faithful Thomas

Anne Lamott writes, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns."[4] Which, if you think about it, is pretty much exactly what Thomas did.

4 Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 2005), 256–57.

And when Jesus came and met Thomas where he was at and offered him the same encounter that the other disciples had already experienced, the result was Thomas's words, "My Lord and my God!" The power of this confession of faith is easily missed in our contemporary Christian context, two millennia later, when our theology has developed to the point where both Lord and God are regular parts of our worship lexicon. But with these words, Thomas takes the most common titles used of God, *Yahweh* and *Elohim*, and applies them to Jesus.[5] Doubting Thomas? I hardly think so. It is Thomas to whom is credited the highest affirmation in the entire Gospel of John. It is Thomas who gets it, Thomas who provides the example of trust and faith. Thomas.

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So let us free Thomas, and in doing so, free ourselves too.

Thomas is an interesting character, known to us in Scripture primarily through John's Gospel, although he is named as one of the Twelve in the Synoptic Gospels as well. We first encounter Thomas in John 11:16. Mary and Martha have sent word to Jesus to let him know that his friend Lazarus is gravely ill. After staying where he is for two days upon receiving this news, Jesus proposes going to Judea. His disciples, however, are concerned: "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and you are going there again?" (John 11:8)[6]

After some characteristically Johannine musings in which Jesus succeeds in confusing everyone with him about whether Lazarus is truly dead or is merely sleeping, it is Thomas who speaks for the group when it becomes clear that Jesus cannot be deterred from going to be with Lazarus and the sisters, despite the dangers that presents: "Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him'" (11:16). Brave and loyal, a leader among the disciples—that is how we first meet Thomas.

Thomas next appears in John 14. Here Jesus says, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told

5 Willard M. Swartley, *John*, Believer's Church Bible Commentary (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2013), 464.

6 Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

you that I go to prepare a place for you?" Again, it is Thomas who is brave enough to speak aloud the thoughts that surely the others are having as well: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (14:5). Thomas is honest and willing to be a little vulnerable about his lack of understanding. Yet he demonstrates that he intends to follow and wants to know the way. Faithful to Jesus—that is Thomas.

And Jesus responds to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. . . . If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on, you do know him and have seen him" (14:6–7). I wonder if those words come back to Thomas, as he stands face to face with the risen Christ—if they lie behind his astounding statement of faith in John 20.

We do not know why Thomas is not with the disciples on that first day of the week, when Jesus appears to them in the locked room and shows them his hands and his side. But when they tell him about these unlikeliest of events—truly the definition of *unprecedented* (a word many of us have come to rue these last couple of years)—Thomas is skeptical, as we might well have been also.

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For many of us, these resurrection stories have been part of our lives from our earliest days and are now so familiar that they lose some of their shock value. So let me remind us all: Jesus was well and truly dead. Crucified. One does not bounce back from crucifixion. When a Roman soldier pierces one's side, and blood and water come pouring out, that is the end. Pronounced dead. Wrapped in linens and laid to rest in a tomb. Gone.

And if there are only two things certain in this life, according to Benjamin Franklin, this certainly was one of them: death! So, when one's friends appear to have had a mass hallucination involving the dead friend reappearing, it is only natural that one is not sure quite what to think or feel—whether one needs to seek grief counseling for those friends or ask what they had been eating and drinking at the time.

To his credit, Thomas does not immediately call them crazy or explain to them that this is truly impossible. He simply says that he will need to see for himself in order to believe. A week later, that is exactly what happens. The events closely parallel the initial experience of the disciples.

Locked room, sudden appearance of Jesus, same greeting of "Peace be with you!" (I can imagine that when Jesus is suddenly standing in a room with you, peace might well be the first thing needed!) And, just as he had with the other disciples, Jesus shows Thomas his hands and his side, even offering to let Thomas touch the wounds.

"Do not doubt but believe," Jesus says (20:27). (Do you think that Jesus wishes he had chosen his words differently now that this is all his friend Thomas is remembered for by so many people?)

The word "believe" comes from the Greek *pisteuo*, meaning both to believe something is true and also to trust or to rely on. Belief here is not a one-time, absolute assent but a relational virtue that can be nurtured and grown.[7] Thomas's declaration, "My Lord and my God!" puts the exclamation mark on his example of belief, of trust in Jesus.

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"These things," we are told, "are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). Life. The same word, *zoe,* brings us full circle back to the beginning of John's Gospel, to the reminder we hear at Christmas every year: "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it" (1:4–5). And we, like Thomas, are invited to place our trust in the risen Christ, in whom is life that brings light to all people.

That is essentially it for Thomas's story in the New Testament, but traditional accounts have it that Thomas went on to preach the gospel as far afield as southern India, where to this day he is thought of as the patron saint of India among Christian adherents there.

Beloved Thomas

One scholar, James Charlesworth, has written a book making a case for the argument that Thomas and the mysterious "Beloved Disciple" in

7 René Such Schreiner, "Commentary on John 20:19–31," *Working Preacher*, online: https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-john-2019-31-18.

John's Gospel are one and the same.[8] It is an intriguing theory, even if it is not a view widely accepted by biblical scholars. But it made me stop and wonder: How much of our reading of the story of Doubting Thomas reflects our own feelings of shame? How much might we be imposing on Thomas and on this text the impacts of a church that has too often insisted on the merits of blind faith, of right belief not as trust to nurture and to grow but as once-and-for-all assent to right doctrine?

In a recent issue of *Anabaptist World*, I read the story of a provincial church conference asking its pastors and church leaders to recommit to the denomination's Confession of Faith. This seems to be a response to an increasing number of congregations and church members wanting to engage in study and discernment around the welcome and inclusion of LGBTQ people in their churches. Stories like this—stories in which people's genuine questions and desire for conversation are met instead with requests for "theological compliance"—are far too common.[9]

I wonder how much it is stories like this that have contributed to Thomas getting such a bad rap—how much they have contributed to a culture in which we too often fear giving voice to our questions or exploring our reasons for having faith (or not). When our questions are met with insistence that we repent and renew our commitment to right belief, maybe it is no wonder that Thomas is viewed in such a negative light by so many in the church.

I wonder what might happen if we dared to flip the narrative, to listen to the voice of Jesus who never once condemns Thomas nor scolds him for his desire to see for himself but instead commends his faith.

I wonder what might happen if we dared to flip the narrative, to listen to the voice of Jesus who never once condemns Thomas nor scolds him for his desire to see for himself but instead commends his faith for all of us to emulate. Such a reading, just maybe, might invite us instead to dare to shed the negative labels we have received, from ourselves or others, and instead to hear ourselves named as no less than Beloved Disciples.

8 See James H. Charlesworth, *The Beloved Disciple: Whose Witness Validates the Gospel of John?* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995).

9 John Longhurst, "British Columbia MB pastors question request to reaffirm Confession of Faith," *Anabaptist World*, December 24, 2021, 22.

Walking in the resurrection is not about perfect certainty, about having all the right answers and being free of all doubt. It is about a journey in which we learn to put our trust in Jesus, in whom truly is life, the light of all people.

You are nothing less than God's beloved children, one and all. So let the story of Thomas invite you to follow his example of bold honesty, faithful loyalty, and courageous discipleship, this week and always. Amen.

About the author

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Young adults, uncertainty, and a future with hope

Jessica Reesor Rempel

It is the last week of term here at Conrad Grebel University College. One by one students finish their exams, hand in their assignments, and move out. "Where will you be living in the fall?" I ask an upper year student, moving boxes in hand, as I hold open the door. His face crumples into anxiety. "I really don't know," he replies with a sigh, setting down the heavy box. "I'm signed up to study in Europe for the term but—you know," he trails off. I do know. With the war in Ukraine destabilizing the region and wave after wave of COVID-19 upending travel plans, no one can be certain about something like a study term abroad scheduled to begin in four months' time. Given the level of constant change these days, it might as well be scheduled to begin in four years' time. This conversation stays with me long after the student loads his boxes into his parents' minivan and drives away.

Uncertainty for young adults

When I was a young adult, I was able to depend on things. I was able to look forward to things with some degree of certainty. I picture myself as a Grebel student fifteen years ago planning my own year abroad. Back then my mind was absorbed in packing lists and language learning with never a thought that it all might be for nothing. I knew (intellectually anyway) that sometimes unexpected things happen in life and force plans to change, but my lived experience told me that most plans could be counted on to come to fruition. I understood the world to be an orderly and predictable place with stable patterns and rhythms year to year. Here at the outset, I must acknowledge that my many layers of privilege deeply influenced the stability I experienced as a young adult. I am a Canadian citizen. I am a settler. I am white. I am educated. I am cis-gendered and heterosexual. I am neurotypical. My young

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adult contemporaries with marginalized identities may not have experienced the world to be the stable and predictable place it seemed to me.

Many of the young adults I encounter in my ministry work at Grebel and at the young adult ministry organization Pastors in Exile (PiE), however, regardless of their levels of privilege, experience the world today as a place of instability and uncertainty. The young adults I know have stood helplessly by while one plan after another is canceled, as conflict feels heightened internationally and close to home, all the while watching global average temperatures steadily climb. Around lunch tables and over cups of coffee, what I hear expressed to me by young adults is grief for the life they thought they would lead, worry for what the future might hold, and a deep longing for hope in these troubling times.

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Uncertainty and exile

Back in 2014, when my friend Chris Brnjas and I were starting PiE, we took inspiration from the prophet Jeremiah. In the book of Jeremiah, vast numbers of Hebrew people find themselves taken captive and exiled to Babylon. Understandably, the exiles are eager to return home to Jerusalem and resume the familiar patterns of their lives. Some so-called prophets tell the people what they want to hear. Hananiah, for example, has this message for the exiles:

> *Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. (Jer. 28:2–3).*[1]

The prophet Jeremiah, however, has very different words for the exiles in the letter he writes them:

> *Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build*

1 All biblical references are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

> *houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to your dreams that you dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.*
>
> *For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope (Jer. 29:4–11).*

The difference between two years and seventy years is the better part of a lifetime. When Chris and I looked around at our young adult peers, when we heard their stories of deep faith and deep disconnection, we longed to be pastors to and with the young adults in our community—both those who found a home in traditional churches and those who had left church behind. We wondered what it would look like to invest in the faith journeys of young adults wherever they found themselves, rather than spending all of our energies focused on returning young adults to church pews. Inspired by the prophet Jeremiah, we sought to do the ministry equivalent of planting fruit trees in a new land.

When we started PiE in 2014, with financial and prayer support from Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC), our dual aims were to support young adults in Waterloo Region—primarily those who had grown up in a Mennonite congregation—to explore their Christian faith identities as they made the transition into adulthood and to support local churches as they strived to be welcoming places for young adults. In 2014, we were not alone in thinking about exile as being connected to the post-Christendom Anabaptist-Mennonite experience. In the discernment documents for the 2014 MCEC annual gathering, Sandy Shantz, then moderator for MCEC, wrote: "We, both as an area church and a national church, are trying to find our way in territory unknown to us since the first centuries AD. Our church is growing and diversifying. There are new issues and

new ways of being church in post Christendom society. We are exiles who are part of the national identity, leadership, and culture."[2]

At that point, almost a decade ago, as I led Bible studies and retreats for young adults and workshops for churches, my perception was that while the church was in a post-Christendom period of instability, the world beyond the church was relatively stable. While that perception was shaped by the many layers of privilege I carry, the world has changed since that time. Privilege still distributes challenge unevenly, but no amount of privilege can take away the uncertainty and instability of being alive on this planet right now. The young adults I encounter through my ministry roles feel this uncertainty acutely. More than ever, they identify with the Hebrew people exiled in Babylon. To some it really does feel like they have been carried far away from the life they expected to lead.

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And while the pandemic is certainly one cause of upset and grief among today's young adults, it is certainly not the only one. I bear witness to worried conversations around the lunch table about the carbon impact of the burgers we are eating and whether the planet will be livable for future generations. I listen to nervous peace and conflict studies students who wonder whether Russia's attack on Ukraine will lead to nuclear war. I hold space for tearful couples who are deeply conflicted about whether to bring children into a hurting world. Now in my mid-thirties, I no longer consider myself a young adult, but I do share their fears. Who among us who is paying attention doesn't worry about these things?

A future with hope

As in challenging times throughout history, the church has a unique role to play today. When Jeremiah writes his letter to the exiles in Babylon, he describes what it will take to thrive in that place, not just for a year or two but for a lifetime: "Build houses and live in them; plant fruit trees and eat what they produce" (Jer. 29: 5). What will it look like for our

2 Sandy Shantz, "2014 Discernment Documents: On Holy Ground," Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, March 2014, https://mcec.ca/sites/default/files/2014_discernment_docs.pdf.

churches to show up with and for young adults in this ongoing period of uncertainty? I think it will look like those of us in older generations embracing some of the uncertainty and instability young adults experience while also showing up in the lives of young adults with a calm, non-anxious presence. At a congregational level, this means engaging the work of advocacy for peace and justice while also maintaining worship practices that ground us all in the constant, steady, hopeful love of God. Very practically this means continuing to invite young adults to preach, teach, and take on leadership roles in our churches, even if their work or study plans might change their church involvements with inconveniently short notice. While church involvement might be sporadic for many young adults, I have heard many stories of how their home congregations are a place of rooting and grounding for these same individuals. In uncertain times it becomes even more important to have places where we connect as an intergenerational community and engage with the rituals and traditions of Christianity.

Furthermore, while it might seem a little scandalous for some of us more progressive Mennonites who are typically suspicious of many kinds of evangelism, I think now more than ever we have something good to share with our neighbors. In times of crisis and uncertainty, humans crave ritual and places to feel connection and support. I make no promises that they will say yes, but this might be the moment to invite your young adult friend from work to your church potluck or the prayer service before the climate strike. I sense a new openness to faith and spirituality among young adults in these uncertain times. When calendars get upended and the future is full of uncertainties, we need something to cling onto that cannot be taken away. We need something to keep us deeply rooted. In the depths of the pandemic, when indoor gatherings were off limits, PiE gathered a group of twenty young adults for a "Night Church" gathering in a city park. Wrapped in blankets to protect from the cool fall air, participants sat cross legged on the concrete of a courtyard, spaced six feet apart. The darkness was lit only by the light of the candles that each person had brought with them. We read the sacred words of the Last Supper. We took communion with

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small loaves of homemade bread and grape juice boxes placed on the concrete next to each person. We listened to the aching melody of a cello for as long as the player's fingers could keep from stiffening in the cold. In that hour we felt connected to Jesus and his beloved friends, gathered in the upper room for a ritual meal while, beyond those walls, the future seemed anything but certain. Challenging and uncertain times take religious practices from being what we *ought* to do to what we *long* to do.

For churches that can stay rooted in tradition while being willing to adapt to these changing times and stay nimble as the times change still more, I believe that a "future with hope" will come to pass.

From the young adults I work with, both at Grebel and at PiE, I hear a new longing for ritual, tradition, and connection in this time. While young adulthood can sometimes be a time for questioning the faith we are born into, for some young adults the pandemic led to greater connection with their communities of faith. Around the lunch tables at Grebel, I hear stories of young adults continuing to connect through Zoom to the congregations they left back home. What started as a lifeline in the pandemic has opened new possibilities for connection from a distance. Every congregation has the potential to be a Spirit-inspired oasis of ritual, calm, and connection. For churches that can stay rooted in tradition while being willing to adapt to these changing times and stay nimble as the times change still more, I believe that a "future with hope" (Jer. 29:11) will come to pass.

Conclusion

It is the May long weekend, and I am far from home when a storm hits suddenly and with intensity. As I wait out the storm in my car, I call my neighbor, who performs a daring rescue operation, bringing my fragile tomato seedlings into the safety of the shed. As I drive home, the streets are littered with fallen branches and downed power lines. Left outdoors in the elements, my precious seedlings would have been blown about and battered in their little plastic pots. I cannot help but think on this stormy day about the climate crisis, about resilience. Those dainty seedlings are deeply planted in the garden now, their roots stretching down a foot or two into the rich soil, their stems strong and flexible from a summer spent acclimatizing to rain and wind. I think about my hope for the young

adults I work with and for all of us seeking to be God's church in these uncertain times: not that we might avoid facing storms but that we might have deep roots and thick stems with enough give to sway in the wind.

About the author

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Through the certainty of uncertainty

A biblical reflection on living through change

Moses Falco

> *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (Genesis 1:1–2, NIV)*

With these words, the book of Genesis begins to tell the story of the creator of the universe. It starts off with beauty and goodness, is quickly tainted by brokenness and separation, but then faithfully follows the arc of redemption until the last page of Revelation. Scripture spans the spectrum from beginning to end, and somewhere in the midst of this grand story, we find ourselves.

The story of my church community

For me and my particular church community, we find ourselves as twenty-first–century Anabaptist Christians living in the urban context of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Our story began in the 1940s as Mennonites moved into the city from rural communities for alternative service during World War II. Some decided to stay in Winnipeg after the war and settled in the south end of the city. At first, they organized themselves in home groups and later held services, Sunday School, and Daily Vacation Bible School (DVBS) camps in a local community center. By 1958, Sterling Avenue Mennonite Church was incorporated with eighteen members and fourteen associate members. Sixty-four years, three buildings, a name change, and many members later, Sterling continues to worship and serve in the community of St. Vital.

This is not an overly remarkable story by any means. It has been repeated in many parts of Canada and pales in comparison to some of the stories of church growth around the world. Yet this is our story of how God has worked in our collective church life. We do well do pay attention

to it because it is through our particular stories that we are able to witness to the redemptive power of God in our world.

I have heard many parts of our story over my twelve years at Sterling as I have sat around coffee and dinner tables. I have heard about the joys and excitement of starting a new church, God's leading in selling and buying a new building, and the decisions to accept shifting views (like welcoming women into leadership and ministry). I have also heard about the challenges of almost closing because of declining membership, the deaths of pillar members, and the disappointment of church votes not going the way most people hoped or expected.

Living through change

What stands out to me about the story of Sterling is just how much change our church has endured. I have often sought the wisdom of those members who have been present since the beginning (of which less than a handful remain) and have asked for their input on issues we are currently dealing with. What amazes me is just how unfazed they seem to be. The uncertainty that I carry with me does not seem to trouble them in the slightest. At first I thought the reason for this was their unwavering faith, but I quickly realized that age does not eliminate doubt. Instead, their experiences have taught them that change is a constant.

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The oldest member of our church is ninety-seven. Just in the time since Sterling formed, he has lived in his own house, supported living, and now a personal care home. Each space tells the story of his physical changes, some that were welcomed but many that were not. With age came the change of identity from single to married, to father, to grandfather, and eventually to widower. Over the years, his newspapers and TV have broadcasted endless wars, financial crises, nuclear attacks, famines, natural disasters, regime changes, civil unrest, and even a pandemic. He got to witness the invention of microwave ovens, mobile phones, credit cards, computers, satellites, and the internet. He even had the opportunity to communicate by mail, telegram, phone, fax, text, e-mail, and social media (although I know he never chose the latter).

This man and so many others in his generation have never given me the false hope that things in this life or at church will stay the same. The

only assurance they have given me in regards to change is the certainty of uncertainty. However, they do not hold on to uncertainty for uncertainty's sake. The realization that change is unavoidable and that nothing in life is guaranteed has forced them to hold on to something else. It is here that I find tremendous wisdom as a pastor helping to lead a congregation through the changes we face today.

Returning to the beginning

In order to glimpse this wisdom, we need to return to the beginning, when the author of Genesis tells us that God decided to create. The backdrop we are given is that of an empty Earth, formless and dark. Before God speaks the world into being, God's spirit "was hovering over the waters." The Hebrew word for *hovering* is also rendered in some translations as *moving*. It appears in two other Old Testament passages, most notably in Moses's song recorded in Deuteronomy 32:11 where it is used to describe an eagle *hovering* over its young. Before everything was about to change, the Spirit of God was on the move, hovering as if to incubate the earth. This verb is full of anticipation for what God is about to do. There is an energy that is fluttering with excitement.

As we continue reading, we see how God creates, simply by speaking things into being. Order, goodness, and peace permeate God's perfect creation. Unfortunately, it does not last, and almost as soon as it begins, harmony is lost as relationships with God, others, self, and creation are broken.

God may have rested on the seventh day of creation, but this did not mark the end of God's presence or work in the world. Even while Adam and Eve were being sent out of the garden, God cared for them by exchanging their leafy garments for more durable ones. Mixed into the curses that sin brought was the anticipation of hope and redemption. From this point on, Scripture tells the story of a God who continually partners with humanity in order to bring about reconciliation and new life to God's world. Regardless of how many times we turn away from God to follow our own way, God's faithfulness keeps inviting us back.

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God on the move

Scripture leaves no doubt that God has always been on the move, not only through the people of Israel, but often also through those whom the Israelites least expected. God's love for creation was the force that kept God engaged, eventually fulfilling the long-awaited hope through the incarnation of Jesus. Jesus continued the trajectory of actively seeking out humanity in order that we might be reconciled to God and live as citizens in God's kingdom.

In Luke 15, we find a trilogy of parables told by Jesus that analogize God's ongoing movement in the world. Perhaps the most well known is the last, in which a son takes his inheritance from his father even while his father is still alive. After leaving and wasting all his wealth, the son hits rock bottom and decides to return home, thinking that perhaps his father would take him back as a servant. To his surprise, the father had been waiting with eager longing and anticipation for his son, so much so that when the son comes home, his father hosts an elaborate party to celebrate. The father exclaims to his household, "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:24a).

Like the father, God never compels anyone forcefully. At the same time, like the shepherd and woman, God does not stand idly by while God's beloved creation stumbles around in darkness.

This parable is a reminder to us of God's mercy, compassion, and love. After we have wandered on our own, God's response to us when we turn back is always unconditional forgiveness. However, God is not only described as a father who waits patiently for his child to return. The first parable in Luke 15 compares God to a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep behind in order to find the one that got lost. The second parable compares God to a woman who lights a lamp and turns over her house in order to find her precious lost coin.

Like the father, God never compels anyone forcefully. At the same time, like the shepherd and woman, God does not stand idly by while God's beloved creation stumbles around in darkness. As Jesus told Zacchaeus in Luke 19:10, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." This salvation will be fully actualized at the end of the age as is revealed to us in Revelation. The promise we hold on to is that Jesus will return to undo the curse of sin, bring justice to the earth, and defeat evil once and for all. As John takes us through his vision, we see his distress when, in

Revelation 5, there is no one to open the seals of the scroll (a symbol for the initiation of the things to come). John quickly learns that the only one who can bring the last days into motion is Jesus. An angel says to John, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals" (Rev. 5:5b).

As was the case at the beginning of creation, has been the case throughout all of history, and will be the case when Jesus returns, God was, is, and will always be actively on the move. Although I have believed this in theory for many years, it becomes all the more real to me as I see the unwavering trust in God through the seniors of our church. Since the changes and uncertainties we face today are nothing new to those who have lived longer than us, we can trust alongside them that God is moving now as well. The founding members of our church have taught me that we are not alone in figuring out the steps ahead. Through Christ, the church is invited to partner with God to bring about healing and hope. The Holy Spirit is the force working in, through, and sometimes despite us, enabling us to join in God's action. Our call is to listen and respond to how God is moving in the changing contexts of our world.

As was the case at the beginning of creation, has been the case throughout all of history, and will be the case when Jesus returns, God was, is, and will always be actively on the move.

Humility in uncertain times

There is one characteristic that is vital in responding to God's movement in the world, which I again see exemplified in the seniors I encounter—namely, humility. This wisdom is gleaned from Scripture, especially from people like Job. Job's life was the epitome of change, having lost almost everything except for his own breath. Instead of comforting him, his friends confront him and challenge his understanding of God. There must have been something Job did to bring this suffering on himself. Job pushes back, however, and lays blame on God. He maintains his integrity, even after his wife tells him to "curse God and die" (Job 2:9b). As the characters in this story argue back and forth, they share something in common. Each of them seem to have figured out how God operates; each of them claim to be able to understand and predict God's movement.

Readers of Job likely sympathize with what he is going through, and if there is one who is right about God, it must be Job. The last few chapters, however, turn everything on its head. God confronts Job, calling him to humility. God basically puts Job on trial and begins the questioning in Job 38:2–7:

> *"Who is this that obscures my plans*
> *with words without knowledge?*
> *Brace yourself like a man;*
> *I will question you,*
> *and you shall answer me.*
> *"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?*
> *Tell me, if you understand.*
> *Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!*
> *Who stretched a measuring line across it?*
> *On what were its footings set,*
> *or who laid its cornerstone—*
> *while the morning stars sang together*
> *and all the angels shouted for joy?"*

This type of questioning continues, and by the end, the wisdom of Job is clear: we are not God. God has been revealed to the world, but we should never claim to fully know the mind of God. Although we can be certain that God is at work, we should never assume that we know exactly how God is moving. The simple reminder in Job that we are creatures and not creator shatters any confidence that we can put God into a box. Especially in times of uncertainty and change, we need to remain humble that God may yet surprise us.

Adjusting to change

There are several internal and external changes that we are experiencing as a church. For one, the COVID-19 pandemic has eliminated any sense of "normal" so much so that "pivoting" has become our regular practice. Even as many of us return to in-person worship and activities, we are trying to figure out how our churches have changed and what that means for who we are now. We feel those uncertainties at Sterling like anywhere else. Although we are excited to be back in person, some people are not here. Some have passed away, some have left, and for some, their comfort level keeps them online. At the same time, we are getting to know new people, some who joined us and some who were born during the lockdowns. We

do not quite know who we are at this point, and we also know that our identity will likely continue to change as we fumble to hold on to some kind of stability and rhythm.

As we try to adjust to a changing world around us, we are also facing internal uncertainties as we wrestle with questions of welcome and inclusion. The last few years have seen changes in our thinking and theologies, which for many feel inconsistent with what we have declared in the past. As we discern the way forward, we face the uncertainties of a church divided and the possible changes that come with that. As we observe churches around us who are asking similar questions, we see how some have become more polarized, while others are now more united. The way forward for us feels like taking a step through a fog, not exactly knowing if our foot will hit solid ground.

Conclusion

Through the certainty of uncertainties, I lean heavily on the wisdom I see lived out in our founding members and other seniors in our church. These changes do not scare them because they have consistently seen God at work in their lifetime. They have a keen awareness of God's hovering spirit over us even now, moving in, among, and through us. The excitement of what God can do gives them hope for where we are going. Paired with their strong faith that God is moving in the world is the humility that we do not fully understand this movement. They never claim to know all the answers but rather are open to being surprised by God. They put their trust in a God "who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Eph. 3:20a).

This is the kind of faith that I desperately want to have and live out in my life. This is the kind of hope that I long for our church to grasp. However, I know that those who have lived longer than me have only gotten there precisely because they have lived longer than me. To learn this wisdom, we need to continue walking through the fog, accepting the changes that come, and looking toward a God who seeks to make everything new. It is in the uncertainties, in the emptiness and darkness, that God hovers, moves, and creates.

About the author

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A season of uncertainty

Lorraine Reimer

I *knew* that I was facing breast cancer as soon as the radiologist requested that I stay for not only a second mammogram but also an immediate biopsy. I had walked into the hospital that morning confident that I had nothing to worry about. After all, no one else in my family had ever had cancer. I walked out of the hospital, a few hours later, numb with almost certain knowledge of a diagnosis that came shortly thereafter. I felt betrayed by my own body.

Surgery quickly followed within six weeks. Despite the small size of my tumor, the resulting pathology report necessitated that my future treatment plans would need to include both chemotherapy and radiation due to the aggressive nature of my cancer. I was in for the battle of my life, yet I felt unexpectedly at peace. All would be well, no matter what. After I received my diagnosis, God's Word became more precious to me than ever before; I clung to God's promises of presence and peace. The psalmist's words leapt off the page during my morning devotions in the days after my doctor's awful confirmation: "The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts; so I am helped" (Ps. 28:7).[1] They became my comfort and my guiding light.

Sicker than I had ever imagined being, I felt uncertain that I could go on, especially when my doctor sadly informed me that what was happening would most likely worsen before treatments stopped.

That comfort and guidance became sorely tested in the weeks after I began chemotherapy. A host of side effects, both common and uncommon, rained down on my body, bringing me to the brink of refusing any more treatment. Sicker than I had ever imagined being, I felt uncertain that I could go on, especially when my doctor sadly informed me that what was happening would most likely worsen before treatments stopped. He left the decision in my hands, and I was to inform him in a few days of my choice of whether to continue. *How* could I continue?

1 Unless otherwise specified, all biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

A sabbath of uncertainty

Just as I faced deep uncertainty about my ability to endure more treatments and the horrific side effects, my home congregation now is facing a season of profound uncertainty—a season that comes on the heels of the pandemic's monumental shifts. Our long-term pastor's COVID-shaped burnout led him to request a five-month sabbatical. During his absence, an interim pastor has accepted our congregation's call to serve in a part-time capacity, traveling each week from his home several hours away. So much uncertainty is contained in those last two sentences; there is much we are not sure of.

Just as I faced deep uncertainty about my ability to endure more treatments and the horrific side effects, my home congregation now is facing a season of profound uncertainty.

These next few months will invite all those affected on a journey toward our congregation's and our pastors' unknown future—a future on which God's handprint already is stamped. Several questions have arisen in my own mind as I have pondered this time of sojourn for our church. *How will the members, both individually and collectively, move forward, in faith, despite shifting pastoral realities and the ongoing recovery from the pandemic disruptions? What results will our pastor's sabbatical time yield for him and his family? How will our interim pastor fulfill his shepherding role over the next five months?* As one who holds a position of leadership in the church, I feel it is important to understand what the complex uncertainties are for our congregation as well as for our long-term and interim pastors.

For now we see in the mirror dimly

As the world moves forward past the initial crisis of the pandemic toward the possibility of a COVID endemic, the members of my home congregation search for ways to recover and heal from the incredible strains, anxieties, and disconnections wrought over the pandemic years. Each has struggled in their own way, and our pastor has been no less affected. Indeed, perhaps he has been even more so affected, given his God-given desire to shepherd his congregation through a time in history when distancing and masking were required for the safety and well being of all, yet these requirements have generated much controversy over the government's health mandates. Along with many others, our church family is living

with the consequences of those burdens, especially now as we have gifted our pastor with his requested sabbatical time. During his absence, my question is how the members of our church will strive to be a community of faith, caring for each other and living out the words of the prophet Micah, "to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God." Will our church family honor our commitment to learn and grow in our service to God during this sabbath interval—a tenacious promise spoken during our pastor's time of blessing and sending? Will the congregation, accompanied by our chosen interim pastor, trust God to lead and direct our collective path? These are some of the uncertainties that confront our gathered community.

Before our pastor left, he shared his reasoning for his sabbatical request as well as some of the questions that crowded his own mind. The weariness and losses of pandemic ministry, as well as the stresses and strains of solo pastoral work, had affected his ability to process, in real time, the collective trauma that has accumulated and had shaken his confidence in his ability to shepherd a congregation as a lead pastor. He needed time—time to let God speak and time to listen for God's voice. Yet, I wonder whether, at the end of this time of sabbath, he will be gifted with the clarity, wisdom, spiritual growth, and vision for his ministry that he longs for.

I wonder whether my own experience with the uncertainties of spiritual wilderness may help to illuminate a pathway, for my home congregation, toward trusting in the Lord's providence.

As our interim pastor prepares to answer God's call to ministry with our congregation, he has shared the questions and uncertainties that are percolating in his mind as well.[2] Under normal circumstances, an interim pastor's role is defined by the interval between a former pastor and a new pastor—a time of processing a farewell and a time of preparing to welcome a new person in that role of pastor. However, in this circumstance, there is no sense of transition since the pastor plans to return post-sabbatical. Given these realities, it is uncertain what shape the interim pastoral role will take and how he might embody that role so that our congregation may be assisted to grow

2 I have received permission from both the long-term pastor and the interim pastor to share their thoughts and experiences.

in faithfulness to God. Given the brief timeframe of the sabbatical, it is uncertain how our congregation will receive our interim pastor's pastoral care and in what ways will he best enter the life of our congregation. Knowing the uncertainties being contemplated, there is the further uncertainty of whether our interim pastor's quest for God's guidance in his new role will be provided in a way that he feels able to move forward with his ministry to our church while, at the same time, maintaining a healthy relationship with his family, despite the physical separation during a portion of each week.

After considering these questions for a while, I wonder whether my own experience with the uncertainties of spiritual wilderness may help to illuminate a pathway, for my home congregation, toward trusting in the Lord's providence while, at the same time, helping to remind myself of the Lord's faithfulness over the years.

I will make a way in the wilderness

Over the course of my weekend of agonized decision-making, God answered my pleas for wisdom and guidance in three completely diverse ways. On Friday, a small envelope arrived in my mailbox, containing a short missive from an acquaintance in our community who had successfully fought breast cancer several years earlier. Her unexpected words of encouragement spoke directly to my heart: "We do whatever we must do to fight this disease. When the going gets tough, the tough get going!" This woman had no idea what I was facing at that moment, yet God used her to speak words that I desperately needed to hear.

My second answer came in the form of a dream in which God reminded me of a conversation among me, my husband, and our two boys. After sharing my distressing news with our young adult sons, I reassured them that, with my family's prayer support, I would do everything in my power to fight this horrid disease so I could be present for their futures—their graduations, careers, weddings, and children. I awoke in the night, clearly recalling my dream and the words of promise that I had spoken. How could I renege on my promise?

My third answer came over a period of several days. As part-time managers of a life-lease building, my husband and I oversaw the hosting of a family who were in town to attend the funeral of their son and brother. The deceased man and I had much in common. We were of similar age; we had the same number and ages of children; and both of us had been diagnosed with cancer. The main difference that I was aware of was

that he had chosen not to take any further treatment beyond his surgery. Within two years, he had died from a recurrence of cancer, and his family was deeply grieved. I had a choice to make.

Despite my uncertainty in my own ability to endure the suffering involved, I chose to trust in God's leading, cling to the psalmist's words that I had chosen as my guiding light, and move forward with my treatments, come what may. And come it did! The chemotherapy side effects did worsen, yet I was given the strength to endure, and my doctors were given the wisdom to prescribe medications that alleviated the worst of my symptoms. Praise the Lord!

Despite my uncertainty in my own ability to endure the suffering involved, I chose to trust in God's leading and cling to the psalmist's words that I had chosen as my guiding light.

However, weeks later, as I neared the conclusion of my radiation treatments, odd feelings of sadness, anxiety, and confusion began to cloud my mind. My doctors' enthusiasm over my successful completion of the treatments fell on hollow ground. Why did I not feel like celebrating? Weeks went by with worsening symptoms, the heaviness weighing me down. A dear friend suspected depression and encouraged me to seek medical help.

Diagnosed with anxiety and depression, I faced yet another uphill battle: finding the right medication that would address my symptoms. Weeks stretched into months with little resolution, as I remained paralyzed by the intense sadness and anxiety, unable even to formulate a prayer or focus on Scripture. During that time, I was inspired by my faith community to draw on Christ's strength and to trust in the promise of the Holy Spirit's prayerful intercession on my behalf. Faithful accompaniment was demonstrated by individuals who were moved to speak or write words of encouragement, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Worshiping and praying together as the body of Christ reminded me of the power of God and the lengths to which God's Son endured suffering for my sake. Often, I simply wept as my church family sang songs testifying to God's love and grace. The realities of my life never were denied or ignored; rather, they were accepted as trials that testified to the love of God. That demonstrated love carried me through that time of deep uncertainty.

Finally, with the help of an experienced psychiatrist and the prayers of many, a combination of medications was found that slowly but sure-

ly brought healing and restoration of my mental health. Hearing God's voice through God's Word and God's people, I was thankful for my community of hope and the God who authored that community. Through the healing I received, a way was made in the wilderness I was in, and I could, as the apostle Peter instructed a group of first century Christians to do, "proclaim the excellence of him who called [me] out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). That excellence is what my home congregation may now draw on to endure and to grow despite the uncertainties of our pastor's sabbatical.

Come to him

In 1 Peter 2, the apostle exhorts a community of early Christian believers to take strength from their identity as God's holy nation, at a time of great uncertainty in their life of faith. During the final years of Emperor Nero's reign, Christian believers in Asia Minor faced persecution best described as an environment of antagonism and discrimination. Peter encourages believers to continue to grow in their spiritual maturity and to manifest behaviour worthy of the God they serve, despite their uncertain circumstances.

> *Come to him. . . . Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. . . . You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:4–5, 9)*

The nature and character of God are excellence, perfection, and glory. Knowing the love expressed through God's nature and character creates the ground from which grows the trust needed for living out our faith—for practice and proclamation. Believers know this excellence because of God's Word and the gift of God's Son, the living Word. Trusting God's excellence and providence both in our own individual faith journeys and in our collective journey as a church will enable the members of my home congregation to endure the uncertainties we face and to grow despite those uncertainties.

Ten years have passed since my last cancer treatments ended and my depression lifted, yet the passage of time has not dulled my sense of wonder each time I remember the ways in which God chose to answer my prayers for healing and restoration. I am thankful that my cancer remains

in remission, and the medication continues to successfully treat my depression. My prayer is that, at the conclusion of this time of sabbatical, we church members may be able to reflect on God's loving hand guiding and directing our church and its pastors, both present and returning, and witness to the excellence of our Almighty God.

About the author

Lorraine Reimer recently enrolled in the Master of Arts in Theological Studies at Canadian Mennonite University after retiring from a career in education. She combines her online studies with her life as a wife, mother, grandmother, and daughter of a parent with Alzheimer's disease. Lorraine lives in Boissevain, Manitoba, where she attends and coordinates worship at Whitewater Mennonite Church.

Certain uncertainties

Darrel Toews

Personal uncertainties

Nineteen ninety-eight, and a diagnosis of Oculopharyngeal Muscular Dystrophy (OPMD) is confirmed.

Taken in stride, the limitations thereof could be sublimated, hidden, safely ensconced behind a niggling consciousness, delayed in their most certain appearance. After all, while in its infantile stage, OPMD operates out of sight, and mostly out of mind. Even so, circa 2010, a shot across the bow revealed a certain unwelcome pest: when a delectable delicacy would not, could not, be swallowed—there it was, a clear sign that the pharyngeal muscles were atrophying.

Given the patterns evident in my larger maternal familial system, inscribed genetic messaging begins to assert its energy upon subjects when one is nearing the age of sixty, or arriving toward that mark. Bingo!

While developmental signs of muscle dystrophy could be considered on the certainty side of the proverbial scale, an unexpected and surprising loss of voice strength during 2021 precipitated an unlooked for early departure from a lifelong pastoral ministry vocation.[1] What? What? What?

It turned out that the undercurrents of shifting biological tectonic plates suddenly produced a tilting personal landscape. Ergo, the day of retirement arose rather quickly. Consulting with trusted leaders and friends, I concluded that the possibilities of continued pastoral ministry would invite a necessary shift in professional identity.

Occasionally I've harbored the passing thought that an Aaron speaking for Moses could be an alternative (Exodus 4:10–17), but how well did Aaron truly know the mind and unique phraseology of Moses? More profoundly, perchance the Lord of song played a palpable trick, for the disappointing pathos of aphonia has rendered hopes of continued melody making an impossible dream.

1 Ordained in 1982, the author served as pastor among the congregations of Gospel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg (1983–87), Tavistock Mennonite Church in Ontario (1989–2003), Breslau Mennonite Church in Ontario (2003–2014), and Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg (2014–2021).

Learning to balance certain uncertainties, I offer this sample into my personal OPMD journey while simultaneously holding an acute acknowledgement of veritable multitudes suffering much, much worse troubles and trials, tragic traumas touching the depths of human frailties, stretching the soul, sometimes eliciting wretched sensibilities of abandonment, separation, and heartbreaking loss.

Global uncertainties

Widening the lens, or thinking more broadly, could it not be the case that certain degrees of uncertainty have always acted as part and parcel upon the hoped for stasis in life? Might not those elements disturbing our equilibrium, unlooked for developments challenging the ordinary, act precisely to advance the very purpose(s), meaning(s), and potential directions of the human enterprise?

Launched on Christmas Day 2021, the multi-national astoundingly complex James Webb space telescope is one hundred times more powerful than its predecessor, the 1990 vintage Hubble. With everything unfolding as per meticulous planning, Webb is offering a deep gaze into the very first galaxies forming in the early universe(s) circa 13.8 billion years ago.

Earth itself is besotted with change. Tectonic plates shift; earthquakes, tsunamis, storms, and floods redefine the landscape.

Viewed from space, Earth appears as the now familiar dot of blue in the sky, one little 4.5 billion year old speck floating within the gravitational grasp of one small star within the vast swirling Milky Way galaxy. The rotating circling Earth operates with certain precision, providing the regularly expected rhythm of day and night within an annual circuit around the sun. Currently home to eight billion human inhabitants—and billions upon billions of other sentient life forms—the watery Earth provides a very certain habitation.

On the other hand, Earth itself is besotted with change. Tectonic plates shift; earthquakes, tsunamis, storms, and floods redefine the landscape. When the Laurentian ice age dominating most of the North American landscape during the Pleistocene Epoch (ending circa twelve thousand years ago) receded north, it left behind thousands of lakes, rivers, and fertile soils, reliable geographical phenomena usually forfeiting scents of uncertainty.

And yet, the uncertainty of "natural" storms battering supposedly solid ground arise not infrequently to upset life itself. Many readers may recall the 1980 volcanic eruption of Mount St. Helens (part of the Pacific ring of fire) devastating its surroundings and killing fifty-seven people. The ashen skies spread all the way from Washington to the prairies.

During the last number of years, a certain ambiguous angst hovers around the aroused elements of climate change, social and political unrest, and the global ravages of the COVID-19 pestilence.

When in 1883 Krakatoa erupted (located about midway between the Indonesian islands of Java and Sumatra), it not only destroyed a significant land mass; the blasts triggering subsequent tsunamis and continuing violent tremors killed more than 36,000 people and spread ash and impenetrable darkness, all of which is estimated to have lowered the entire global temperature by about .6 to 2 degrees! Volcanic aerosols blocked sunlight, caused oceans to cool, and developed summer-time frost and lost harvests as far afield as the eastern United States.

During the last number of years, a certain ambiguous angst hovers around the aroused elements of climate change, social and political unrest, and the global ravages of the COVID-19 pestilence. While variants of these elements have generally accompanied the entirety of human existence, and thus could be considered to fall onto the certainty end of the scale, when these movements and illnesses impact personal lives and social enterprises, then the random absurdity thereof ends up producing a kind of existential dread.

Sometimes the outcomes of such encounters feel paralyzing. We may begin the day serenely driving along, when in a moment, an unforeseen accident changes everything. We may begin a day with a parent, spouse, or child and end the day bereft. Or in more banal circumstances, we may recall surds of uncertainty raising their dander at particular nodal points, the very real hesitancy involved in moving to a new school, church, or dance group or entering a different arena of any sort.

Written in 1859 by English novelist Charles Dickens (1812–70), the opening line of *A Tale of Two Cities* suggests that Dickens's sagacity has evidently grown current: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of

belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness."[2]

This literary depiction of the urban zeitgeist serves as a bird's eye view, a contrastive panoply placing life in broader socio-historical settings. Then as now, geography, economics, and varying political movements affect life in all its macro- and microscopic elements. Uncertainty served as a continuous staple within whatever certainties could be established, at least within the space of Dickensian times.

While we humans generally prefer to reduce the unpredictable, might we learn to trust uncertainty?

While we humans generally prefer to reduce the unpredictable, might we learn to trust uncertainty? American biblical scholar Peter Enns offers a stimulating image: "watching certainty slide into uncertainty."[3] It's as if we may learn to expect changeable surprises at almost every turn.

In 1927, almost one hundred years ago, theoretical physicist Werner Karl Heisenberg (1901–76) published a paper on the uncertainty principle. In the fascinating world of quantum mechanics, precisely ascertaining both the position and speed of a particle is deemed an impossible conundrum. A devout Christian in the Lutheran tradition, Heisenberg argued that surely the Lord knows all about subatomic particles in the universe, and that quantum physics offered humanity a path toward a positive, widened worldview.

Growing up on a mixed farm in south central Manitoba, I learned that, while there was no uncertainty to the regular daily requirements of the dairy, when it came to the elements of seeding, spraying, harvesting, and storing the various crops, the lack of secure knowledge in regards to the presence of the sun or the rain or the frost or the insects or the pests or certain birds attacking both plant and beast, the entrepreneurial agricultural class is most assuredly cognizant regarding the natural expectations of uncertainty in the midst of certainty.

Not knowing what even the next moment may provide is simply part and parcel of life. I submit that such tension may even be deliciously desirable. Anticipating new friends is exciting, but then so is the loyal re-

2 Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1959), 1.

3 Peter Enns, *The Sin of Certainty* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 8.

liability of lifelong companionship of dear friends. And truth be told, life without that possibility would be entirely boring, flat, uneventful.

In multiple ways, the present generations in most of the world live with less uncertainties than in earlier historical eras, so casting wistful glances back to so-called predictable social, political, or religious periods reveals a kind of rose-colored amnesia. The fact that the average age of people in the world has continually grown and now reached seventy-three testifies to a large leap in both the longevity and quality of life.

In his most recent tome, well known British-Canadian historian Gwynne Dyer notes that post–World War II, taking the whole world into account, on an annual basis, more people die in traffic accidents than in war.[4]

In general, the peoples of the world recognize the practice of war as a failure in the negotiation of conflict. Certainly new learning structures will be required to resolve the uncertainties of climate change and the natural competition for sustainable resources. Again proving that war is hell, the 2022 escalation of the dastardly Russo-Ukrainian conflict operates as no small reminder of the Holodomor, the terror of a politically induced famine that killed millions during 1932–33 in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Leaders of the world's democracies struggle to work intelligently with the uncertain realities presenting themselves when confronted by unstable egotistical autocrats who flaunt international treaties.

Casting wistful glances back to so-called predictable social, political, or religious periods reveals a kind of rose-colored amnesia.

Walking the path of uncertainty

Shall we lose our way? What if overweening grief, whether personal or social, tosses assumptions into turmoil? What if we lose the will to hang on, or what if disaster imposes its stamp on life? What if the banality of evil triumphs on the larger scale, and we lose our trust in the wider collective and its leadership? What if the simple encouragement to persevere means nothing? What if cynicism becomes de rigeur? How shall we order our lives?

Ordained Presbyterian minister and Yale Divinity professor Thomas H. Troeger (1945–2022) caught certainties amid uncertainty so very

4 Gwynne Dyer, *The Shortest History of War* (Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2022), 1.

well in his poetic renditions. In the song "How Many Times We Start Again" from the *Voices Together* hymnal, he describes the journey of faith as starting again and again, taking us on a path from the familiar to the perilous, even as we trust that it is always in God that "we live and move and dwell."[5]

Let me propose the sedulous path as one way to encounter the ever present certainty of insecurity. Illustrative of dedication and diligence, we may catch the wave of resilience and adaptive sensibilities. When the path ahead is dim and murky, we are exhorted to keep eyes open for insightful surprises! Pursuing deepening experiences of grace and exploring ever changing realities impacting life's experiences may vitalize one's "normal" socio-religious trajectories.

Without negating the realities of darkening clouds, the "cloud of unknowing" may be precisely the path forward.

Observing Webb's spectacular images beamed back to earth, spectral starry scenes engender imaginative flights to early beginnings while simultaneously approximating a wholly uncertain future propelling us beyond the wildest eschatological possibilities operating at the heart of all realities. Uncertainty reigns, and yet poetic visions seek to gain a glimpse of a deeper (or higher), more meaningful ethos.

"Further on up the road where the way is dark and night is cold, one sunny morning we'll rise, I know, and I'll meet you further on up the road." The Bruce Springsteen song "Further On (Up the Road)," sung live in Dublin, Ireland, captures a sense of working through the challenges of life vitalized by the metaphor of a lifelong search for meaning and purpose.[6]

Adopting a major motif in the tension of uncertain certainties, we may see light in the cloudiness and set the mindset toward a joyous life-enhancing gratitude. Without negating the realities of darkening clouds, the "cloud of unknowing" may be precisely the path forward and through whatever darkness presents itself, whatever testing ground, whatever mystery operates at the core.

Imagining life with companionable travelers among a cloud of witnesses, we shall not quail in the face of what sort of people we may be

5 "How Many Times We Start Again," lyrics by Thomas H. Troeger; music by Bradley Kauffman, *Voices Together* (Harrisonburg, VA: Menno Media, 2020), #553.

6 "Further On (Up the Road)," track 5 on Bruce Springsteen with the Sessions Band, *Live in Dublin*, Columbia Records, 2007.

within the context of certain uncertainties. Perhaps the key is learning to trust the mysteries of God's hiddenness.

Tossed into the uncertainty of seeking the actual identity of common humanity, the poetry of German American Pulitzer Prize winner Theodore Roethke (1908–63) comes to mind: "I learn by going where I have to go."[7]

Ergo, nothing is ever finished. We enter a stream at a certain historical point and hope that the river of grace will keep on flowing, continuously blessing our collective splendiferous travels favoring those elements freeing a full humanization within an evolutionary context.

Here's hoping a poetical artistic bio-historical incarnational communal presence will continue to inspire a mutually enriching humanity in our deepest and highest possibilities, thereby revealing God's realm in the world. Emerging as we have within a long evolutionary process, assuming a curious open stance may act as our saving grace.

The reverence bestowed upon and honoring daily life may well open up daily transcendent epiphanies. And irony of ironies, as promised by an old time prophet, peace is freely given (John 14:27), confirming Isaiah's much earlier declaration of trust (Isa. 26:3).

We enter a stream at a certain historical point and hope that the river of grace will keep on flowing, continuously blessing our collective splendiferous travels.

Surely donning a colorful enlightened serviceable spirituality may aid and abet our walk in challenging times, as they have ever been. Surely the certain presence and process of God's unfettered Spirit weaving together a multitude of uncertain communities may offer a kind of humble luminosity to the world. Surely unveiling the possibilities of human equality to and within the entire world offers a chance for the peace branch to blossom. After all, building up our social contracts requires an ongoing constructive project.

These spaces of expansive wisdom provide room for wondrous incursions of mystery. Sedulously seeking ever broadening ruminations, we may handle uncertainties with aplomb; unknown vistas and creative forces inspire our better angels.

7 Theodore Roethke, "The Waking," in *20th Century Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Gary Geddes (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), 178–79.

In the end, I find myself resonating with Ray Dirks, founder, curator, and former director of the Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery, who was recently quoted as saying this: "Where I find comfort is in mystery, not in certainty."[8]

About the author

Darrel Toews is recently retired from his position as lead minister at Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Married to Lucille Harms Toews, Darrel also enjoys sharing the journey with three adult children and as Opa to four young grandsons.

8 Quoted in Brenda Suderman, "Drawing on Relationships," *Winnipeg Free Press*, November 26, 2022, section F1.

From uncertainty to mystery

Signposts in times of change

Laura Funk

We live in a time of rapid change that brings great uncertainty. Rapid technological advances can be exciting, or they can leave people reeling to keep up. Climate change and a growing societal awareness of inequalities also contribute to unease and unrest. Media curates the most extreme events around the world and feeds us this information in a constant stream, contributing to increased anxiety. The church is also facing great change and uncertainty as people have been leaving by the thousands every week and do not appear to be coming back, even before the pandemic exacerbated this trend. Many others have shifted from engaging with a church community weekly or even more, to attending only monthly, or anonymously and remotely accessing services online, or attending just for special occasions. However, when we gather with other people of faith in community and lean into uncertainty rather than away from it, and when we engage in spiritual practices that renew and enliven us, we can experience a mystical transformation through the Holy Spirit that can guide us into the future, whatever it may bring.

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A great rummage sale

The American author Phyllis Tickle compares these vast societal and ecclesial changes to the depth of change that happened during the Reformation. She describes a pattern of the church throwing "a giant rummage sale" every five hundred years or so, looking at our accumulated heritage

and discerning what will be useful to take to the next era and what we can leave behind.[1]

Some people might feel invigorated by this sorting process; an excitement can come with spring cleaning. But a rummage sale can also produce anxiety. People argue about the rubric used for discerning what is kept and what is discarded and who has authority to decide. *That doily was lovingly crocheted by Great Grandma as she came over to this country!* one sibling might shout at another. Such sentiments are not uncommon.

During the Reformation, one guiding question for the church was this: Where does our authority lie? Martin Luther's answer was that authority lies in Scripture alone. He rejected church traditions and the office of the pope as ultimate authorities. His answer has sustained the Protestant Church for over five hundred years. However, our confidence in "Scripture alone" is wavering. The current generation has seen the Bible used to justify sustaining inequalities between people from different backgrounds, skin tones, and sexual orientations. We have come to see that we cannot read it as a "flat" book where every text carries equal weight. This contributes to our sense of uncertainty: Can we trust this book to guide us in our life of faith? Times of change push the church to discern together again what authority we can trust to guide us in faithfully following Jesus.

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In her science fiction novel *A Wind in the Door*, Madeleine L'Engle writes, "It is only when we are fully rooted that we are really able to move."[2] The crisis in the book involves a medical issue with one character's mitochondria, and other characters travel inside his body to convince the tiny structures to "deepen." The older mitochondria tell the ones who resist the deepening, "Now that I am rooted I am no longer limited by motion. Now I may move anywhere in the universe. I sing with the stars. I dance with the galaxies." When we pursue the quest for a way forward, we need to go deeper than fear and anxiety that the rummage sale might produce

1 Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 16. Tickle credits Anglican bishop Mark Dyer for this image.

2 Madeline L'Engle, *A Wind in the Door* (New York: Dell, 1973), 190.

in us. We need to find that which grounds us in a better story. I would like to suggest some road markers, or signposts, that I see pointing the way for us in our own era of uncertainty and change.

Community

The first signpost for our journey through uncertainty is community. The isolation that many of us experienced in the pandemic was a great teacher, a reminder of our deep need for true community. Those who were on the front lines and perhaps the extreme introverts may have been affected in different ways, but for the rest, the plea from those trying to help us manage this crisis was simply to stay home. It sounded simple, but it was certainly not easy. We missed our friends and extended families. We missed our acquaintances and casual connections. We found ways to connect over video calls, but it just wasn't the same. The church has a significant role to play here. We need to be communities of support and accountability—not just as a program for offenders or those who struggle deeply but for everyone.

I had a conversation with someone recently from a large congregation. Another member had recently died, and this member told me that she had sat behind her in the pews for many years. They had exchanged a friendly "Good morning" each Sunday but never more than that. This has to change if we are going to be able to navigate this season of uncertainty with integrity. We need each other in so many ways. Our culture idolizes autonomy and individualism, but these values run contrary to what Jesus worked so hard to teach his first disciples. He gathered them into a diverse, motley crew and taught them to work together. We need to learn again to do the same. This keeps us from the isolation of personal silos or internet echo chambers where we just hear the same things. Diversity in community helps us change and grow rather than stagnate and calcify. It helps us discern the voice of God together and move with integrity.

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Spiritual Practices

A second signpost for times of uncertainty is returning to spiritual practices that have grounded Christians throughout our entire history. The Ana-

baptist Reformation was called the Radical Reformation. The word *radical* is based in the word for *root*. We need to return to the roots of our faith yet again. This is not the work that many will choose. But for those who want to follow Christ, it is the only way. And people are doing it. They are seeking out retreats—not business meetings in pretty settings but real soul-searching, silence-listening, God-encountering experiences. People are developing a "rule of life" to guide their daily activities and spiritual growth. They are investing in spiritual friendships and small groups for accountability, seeking out spiritual directors to journey with them, finding prayer practices that sustain them, and engaging in many other life-giving spiritual practices.

Engaging regularly in spiritual practices connects us to living waters, sustaining and fortifying us for the challenges we are facing.

Spiritual practices ground us in the goodness of God. When people find a practice that nurtures their spirit, it is like the roots of a strong tree growing deep toward underground streams. Engaging regularly in spiritual practices connects us to living waters, sustaining and fortifying us for the challenges we are facing. When a friend of mine was struggling in a new place, a wise mentor asked her, "Where can you go that you come back from fuller?" Spiritual practices are the kinds of practices that fill us up when we are empty and help us tap into the waters of life. They are essential for a vibrant life of faith that weathers the storms of uncertainty.

Mystical transformation

In her book *Healing through the Dark Emotions*, Miriam Greenspan teaches that by going through rather than ignoring or pushing away difficult emotions, we allow them to become great teachers of wisdom. Traditionally the word *alchemy* has been used to describe the mythical process of transforming lead into gold. In her book, Greenspan uses this word to describe the process of sitting with our dark emotions of grief, fear, and despair and allowing them to "alchemize" into gratitude, faith, and joy.[3] For example, when I sat with my complicated grief about my father's death, I learned more about relationships. Each relationship is different, and therefore each grief is carried and worked through differently. I learned about factors in my relationship with my father that shaped me to be the

3 Miriam Greenspan, *Healing through the Dark Emotions* (Boston: Shambhala, 2003).

person I am. By intentionally examining these factors, I had the opportunity to choose more consciously how I would live my life going forward. Instead of feeling stuck in my grief, I found that the energy that facing it brought me moved me to a place of deeper understanding. Once it was metabolized, I was enabled to sit with others who were experiencing grief without being triggered back into my own unprocessed emotions. I could be a grounded presence to help them process their own grief.

This same process of facing uncertainty collectively can lead us to deeper understanding of our present age and that which the Holy Spirit wants to birth for the next generations. When we take time and energy to sit with our unease with change and uncertainty, we can allow the Holy Spirit to transform the uncertainty into mystical spirituality. Acknowledging mystical experiences leads us to places of awe and wonder. Sitting in mystery allows us to give up control and the need to know all the answers and gives the Spirit of God space to work.

Metaphors and Parables

Another signpost God gives us comes in the form of metaphors and parables. When Thomas asked Jesus to show the way, instead of giving the disciples a road map, Jesus gives them himself: "I am the way" (John 14:6). The disciples must have been feeling deep uncertainty as Jesus was moving toward his death. He was saying things the disciples did not understand, but instead of offering clarity, Jesus became more mysterious, speaking in deep riddles. Jesus often used parables to get his ideas across, sometimes using unlikely and even startling images like an unjust judge, a persistently unproductive fig tree, and a camel in the eye of a needle. Jesus encouraged his disciples to shift their thinking away from simple formulas. This way of teaching prepares us as Jesus followers to become more comfortable with mystery. Jesus's parables are powerful teachers. We can also seek out modern parables, poetry, and song lyrics that carry wisdom to guide us in this time.

Ecumenism

A final signpost I have observed is greater cooperation across conference and denominational boundaries. Some people have become much more open to gleaning wisdom from a plurality of denominations and faith traditions. This is a mark of the future church. Whereas the church was fragmented into many denominations during the Reformation, the Holy Spirit is inviting us to unite again. Dialogue and active cooperation are

happening at many levels: interpersonal, informal, and formal discussions about what we hold in common as well as respect for and even celebration of differences. Congregations are sharing buildings, resources, even staff between denominations and beyond. They are building relationships and learning from each other, looking across the fences that used to divide and learning from each other's ways of living out Christian faith.

Jesus promised his disciples that he would never leave or forsake his followers. He promised them a Comforter, an Advocate, a Guide to walk alongside them and lead them deeper into the Way.

The mass exodus of members from congregational life leaves the institutional church in a precarious position. There are not enough volunteers to run the long-standing programs and sit on established committees. There are not enough donations to pay the staff and heat the buildings. And if the church was just a country club, this might be the end of it. But it is not. The church does not belong to the executive ministers or national directors or joint councils or executive boards or cardinals or popes or any other structure. The church is the bride of Christ. Jesus promised his disciples that he would never leave or forsake his followers. He promised them a Comforter, an Advocate, a Guide to walk alongside them and lead them deeper into the Way.

The age of the Holy Spirit

Tickle outlines her understanding of this new age, explaining that for about two thousand years before Jesus, the Israelites had a particular understanding of God in the "age of Yahweh." Then Jesus came and ushered in deeper understandings and teachings about who God is and how we understand the Divine Mystery. Tickle goes on to talk about new stirrings she has observed, from the beginnings of a strong charismatic movement about one hundred years ago in North America that has blossomed throughout South and Central America and many countries in Africa and Asia. She has observed a strong movement of the Holy Spirit in leading the people of God. These observations lead her to declare that we are now entering the age of the Holy Spirit.[4]

4 Tickle, *Great Emergence*, 82.

In the age of the Holy Spirit, God is leading the church away from certainty into mystery. We need to leave the fishing boats of our worldly understandings and individualism on the shoreline behind us and follow the Spirit as she leads us. Following the Spirit will take self-discipline. Following the Spirit will require leaving our propensity for power and structures that hinder the Spirit's movement. Following the Spirit will mean listening to the prophets among us who call us to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. They call us to love our neighbors and open our eyes to seeing beyond the people who are just like us to expanding our horizons, embracing diversity. Prophets call us to care for creation and take risks to speak truth to power. Following the Spirit entails cultivating the gifts the Spirit gives. As the body of Christ, we need to work together and learn from each other. This collaboration will get messy as people try different things. Some things will work, and some will not. We need to be courageous and try, nevertheless.

The Holy Spirit is at work, gathering people, gifting people. We are singing and living a new church into being! It is a church that leans into rather than shying away from uncertainty, moving through it and allowing the process of alchemy that fosters embracing mystery; one that gets excited about new ways of thinking and being; one that experiments and fails and offers grace; one that plays because we know that engaging in play is important in building community and learning new things and following Jesus.

Trusting the Spirit means divesting ourselves of authority and traditional structures. Trusting the Spirit means leaning into mystery. Trusting the Spirit means seeking the way of Love.

We can trust the Holy Spirit to lead us in this work. Trusting the Spirit means divesting ourselves of authority and traditional structures. Trusting the Spirit means leaning into mystery. Trusting the Spirit means seeking the way of Love. John teaches that those who practice love know God (1 John 4). Love is from God, and those who love know God. We are made to love and be loved. Practicing love can lead us toward a new way of being the church together. Jesus tells Pharisees in Matthew 22 that the greatest commandment is love. This love is two-fold: love of God and love of neighbor. This is the love that we must turn to in the midst of uncertainty. It is the only way forward for true disciples of Christ. We must root ourselves in

the kind of love Jesus taught us. It is only then that we will find our way into the next era.

About the author

Laura Funk has had an active practice in spiritual direction with Butterfly Journeys for over a decade. She was invited to be the volunteer spiritual director in residence for Mennonite Church Manitoba in 2021 for one year. She grew up in the Mennonite Church, actively participated in an ecumenical congregation for seventeen years, and then returned to membership in the Mennonite Church. She and her Roman Catholic life partner enjoy exploring nature through walks in their neighborhood and further afield. She also just may have some doilies from her great grandmother.

Contemplation, action, and uncertainty

Three grounds for life

Amelia Pahl

> *Contemplation is the highest expression of [one's] intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. . . . [Contemplation]* knows *the Source [of life], obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes both beyond reason and beyond simple faith. . . . Contemplation is a more profound depth of faith, a knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words or even in clear concepts. . . . For in contemplation we know by "unknowing." Or, better, we know* beyond *all knowing or "unknowing."*
>
> *–Thomas Merton*[1]

I am here to suggest to you that uncertainty, obscurity, "unknowing," and the like are the necessary, fertile ground for a truly rich contemplative practice. If you already agree with me on that point, then I am also here to suggest that contemplation (also called contemplative prayer) is itself the necessary, fertile ground for meaningful and life-giving action in the face of uncertainty. These three "grounds" for life—contemplation, action, and uncertainty—do not follow each other in any consistently linear order; the deeper you dig into one, the more likely you are to encounter the other two. However, in a world where both mature contemplation and life-giving action are often difficult to find, I suspect that our surest way of success will be to begin by digging deeply into the rich soil of uncertainty. In doing so, we will define the Christian practice of contemplation, which will in turn have something to teach us about the nature of truly prayerful action. Contemplation and action, rightly lived, are not inherently op-

1 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 1–2, emphasis original.

posed, and uncertainty itself may be the key to cultivating mature attentiveness and responsiveness to the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst.[2]

Contemplation and uncertainty

Contemplation has everything to do with uncertainty, at least potentially. Mild uncertainty is characterized by a lack of clarity in the situation at hand, an inability to discern the best way forward or predict the outcome of a certain action. At a far greater scale, the uncertainty with which we look today upon a world ravaged by greed, oppression, and climate change may be characterized by the near total extinction of any sense of the future. In other words, when we talk about "the uncertainty of our times," we are talking not only about a lack of clarity as to how best to move forward but also about the realization that a great number of near-futures are possible, including ones in which humans no longer exist. Twenty-first century "uncertainty," then, is not only the postmodern whiplash after modern arrogance but also symptomatic of our dawning understanding that we have pushed the earth beyond its ability to renew itself. We are "uncertain" because we have virtually no precedent, no way to know what the future will look like.

The uncertainty with which we look today upon a world ravaged by greed, oppression, and climate change may be characterized by the near total extinction of any sense of the future.

Everything turns on our response to this uncertainty, this loss of direction and future. We can take to the streets, demanding radical change by flinging ourselves against the oily body of corporate greed, or we can try to shut out the fear by living only for our personal pleasure and consumption. I would argue that both responses are partially right, but they need ultimately to be chastened by the discipline of contemplation.

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2 Many of the reflections and ideas in this essay are my own in the sense that, unless explicitly specified, I am not drawing from any single source but am speaking from the totality of my experience. However, these reflections and ideas are decidedly *not* my own in the sense that countless wise people have enriched my understanding and practice of contemplation over the years, including Thomas Merton, Wendell Berry, Mary Oliver, Sarah Coakley, Martin Laird, Thich Nhat Hanh, Pema Chödrön, Rumi, Rainer Maria Rilke, Richard Foster, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, Matthew Fox, Joanna Macy, Brother Roger of Taizé, Pádraig Ó Tuama, John O'Donohue, Henri Nouwen, and many more. Without their guidance, I would have nothing worthwhile to say here.

Rather than reacting against the loss of future in self-righteous anger or self-gratifying defeat, we find in the discipline of contemplation a turn *toward* the uncertainty, embracing it as a good friend. This is because in contemplation we find that uncertainty is often the incubator of insight, preparing us to encounter the One who cannot be known. Thomas Merton puts it this way:

> *If nothing that can be seen can either be God or represent Him to us as He is, then to find God we must pass beyond everything that can be seen and enter into darkness. Since nothing that can be heard is God, to find Him we must enter into silence. Since God cannot be imagined, anything our imagination tells us about Him is ultimately misleading and therefore we cannot know Him as He really is unless we pass beyond everything that can be imagined and enter into an obscurity without images and without the likeness of any created thing.*[3]

If God is beyond all sight, sound, and imagination, then the contemplative desire to experience God must first be purged of its false visions, hopes, and plans, for they will only serve to distract the seeker from the real presence of the living God. From this perspective, the uncertainty of our twenty-first-century world is a gift in that it offers us a ready opportunity to be purged of our false certainties, preparing us to see with new eyes the glory of God. We might say that the desert of the third-century fathers and mothers has become the climate change of the twenty-first-century contemplative!

I would suggest that contemplation *must* characterize our (Christian) response to contemporary uncertainty because it is only through the discipline, quiet, and attentiveness of contemplation that meaningful, life-giving action will find its strength.[4] Contemplation, as we have hinted, is fundamentally about prayer—that is, the communion of human and divine. In a basic sense, it is about coming to understand that, in the words of Martin Laird, "our deepest identity, in which thoughts and feelings

3 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 131.

4 I emphasize that contemplation is what must characterize the *Christian* response to uncertainty because other traditions will use other words and concepts, each suited to the particular spiritual logic of its context. The spiritual practice of contemplation dives deeply into the Christian spirit specifically, but other ways of expressing deep presence and action can and do exist (such as the Buddhist practice of mindfulness as taught by Thich Nhat Hanh).

appear like patterns of weather on Mount Zion (Ps 125), remains forever immersed in the silence of God."[5] It can be easy to think of contemplation as a sort of mind-break, helpful for resting the stressed-out brain and catching our breath, so that we can step, reinvigorated, back into the fray of life. But the contemplation that Laird and Merton describe is not so much a spiritual pit-stop as it is a method for learning to attune ourselves to the Life beneath and beyond the fray. This suggests that contemplation is not, at its core, the half-hour or so spent sitting in silence but rather an all-pervading attunement to something much deeper than the surface of our daily lives.

Characteristics of contemplative practice

Once we have accepted that the uncertainty of our situation forces us to release our many hopes and expectations for what the world *should* be like, contemplation encourages us to start being attentive to what *is*. Put another way, as we release our expectations and images of what God is like, we create more room within ourselves to encounter the living God who is beyond all our images and expectations. In contemplation, we enter into the obscurity of God by practicing attentiveness, what Laird calls "stillness" and "watchfulness."[6] We watch without expectation or judgment. We observe the comings and goings of life around us as well as the flow of thoughts and feelings within us. We watch and wait on God like the ten virgins in the parable, knowing not when God will come or what it will be like but only *that* God will come as surely as the dawn (Matt. 25:1–13).

In contemplation, we seek to find the balance between vigilant readiness to receive God and the constant need to release our expectations of what the encounter with God will be like.

From this, we may begin to see how contemplation has the potential to profoundly impact our ways of thinking and asking questions. In a certain sense, contemplation is the art of attention without fixation, a deep attunement that nevertheless respects mystery. In contemplation, we seek to find the balance between vigilant readiness to receive God and

5 Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 14.

6 Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 4.

the constant need to release our expectations of what the encounter with God will be like. This tension is powerfully invoked by British theologian Sarah Coakley, who advocates for a theological method that is rooted in contemplative prayer. For Coakley, "theology is always, if implicitly, a *recommendation for life*," one that "invites ongoing—and sometimes disorienting—response and change, both personal and political, in relation to God."[7] Coakley calls this "theology *in via*" because "the task of theology is always in motion (*in via*), always undoing and redoing itself, not only in response to shifting current events, but because of the deepening of vision that may—and should—emerge from such [contemplative] ascetical demand and execution."[8] In other words, our theological reflection would do well to root itself in the wisdom of contemplation, which understands that we must get out of our own way and allow the Spirit to "chasten" our desires for mastery and certainty by (re)directing them toward the living God.[9]

The wisdom of contemplation understands that we must get out of our own way and allow the Spirit to "chasten" our desires for mastery and certainty by (re)directing them toward the living God.

But contemplation is not only a reorientation of the intellect; it is also a reorientation of the body. In describing "the actual *practice* of contemplation that is the condition of a new 'knowing in unknowing,'" Coakley writes that "it must involve the stuff of learned bodily enactment, sweated out painfully over months and years, in duress, in discomfort, in bewilderment, as well as in joy and dawning recognition."[10] Contemplation takes place in time and space, within our very embodiment. It asks us to discipline both thought and action by bringing them through the crucible of silence and stillness. In this way, contemplation also invites us to see that thought and action can never totally stop (nor should we want them to), but we *can* learn to be attentive and faithful to *this* breath, *this* movement, *this* stirring of the heart. Thus, a contemplative practice that enables good and life-giving action amid uncertainty will begin with the attentiveness

7 Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 18, italics original.

8 Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 18–19.

9 Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 13–15 and 51–52.

10 Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 45–46, emphasis original.

and stillness necessary to withhold judgment, release certainty, and observe the minute building blocks of action.

Contemplative action

It should be increasingly evident by now that true contemplation challenges the dichotomy that we often make between "action" and "inaction." Consider, for example, Wendell Berry's poem "Grace," which draws us into the vibrant heart of contemplation. There Berry closely and carefully contemplates the woods in the morning light, observing "how flawless its grace is."[11] With Berry, we might learn something about action once we slow down enough to observe (contemplate) the actions of the land that holds us. The trees are never still. They are always in motion, growing, deepening, ripening, and returning to the earth. A surface-level glance with human eyes would suggest that the trees do nothing in particular. But in the stillness and silence of contemplation, we begin to touch the deeper, unceasing movement of Life, where action may at times be as slow and quiet as a snow-covered forest. We may come to contemplation with raging hearts and unsettled minds, angry and afraid of the state of our world and future, wondering how making space for stillness and silence could ever accomplish what we believe so obviously needs to be accomplished *right now*. But the deeper we dig into the rich soil of contemplation, the more clearly we will hear God's gentle voice: *Give those fears, the anger, the uncertainty to me; enter deeply into the simplest of actions, your breath, and know that I am the One who moves your bones*. Action, we come to realize, is not something we can force entirely of our own individual will, for action at its deepest is the continuous and infinite breath of God in us and through us.

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From a contemplative Christian perspective, action can be seen as participation in the Trinity. Coakley writes that "the dialogue of prayer is strictly speaking not a simple communication between an individual and a divine monad, but rather a movement of divine reflexivity, a sort

11 Wendell Berry, "Grace," in *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (New York: Counterpoint, 1998), 30. Although I cannot reproduce the entire text here, this poem bears reading in its entirety and can be found several places online by searching for it by name.

of answering of God to God in and through the one who prays."[12] Prayer is "a delicate ceding to something precisely not done by oneself," for in prayer—or contemplation—we learn to participate in an interchange that is somehow beyond simple human will.[13] This contemplative interchange draws us out of our small selves and into what Merton calls "the interior life of God," a "circle of relations [in Three Persons] in which [God's] infinite reality, Love, is ever identical and ever renewed." For Merton, this circle "is perfect contemplation."[14] What this suggests for us who seek to understand contemplative action is that God, in three Persons, is perfect, unceasing action, giving and receiving in total reciprocity. In contemplation, God invites us into this perfect action, invites us to commune with what is indeed the very heart of action: a Trinitarian dance that has been in motion since long before humans ever walked the earth. Here we begin to learn what it might mean to say with Paul, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).[15]

In contemplation, God invites us to commune with what is indeed the very heart of action: a Trinitarian dance that has been in motion since long before humans ever walked the earth.

Conclusion

We have barely dug an inch into the soil of contemplation, action, and uncertainty, but I hope that this inch leaves you curious to dig still deeper and discover more for yourself. As we have seen, uncertainty has the potential to carry us more swiftly into contemplation than if we began the contemplative journey convinced of our own security and rightness. In a certain sense, uncertainty reveals to us a key aspect of the human condition—that is, we are limited creatures whose life and sustenance depend always on God. Contemplation, too, reminds us of this truth when we

12 Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 113. Here she is discussing Romans 8:26–27.

13 Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 113.

14 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 68–69.

15 It would be fascinating to consider a contemplative reading of Galatians 2, but that would require another essay. Suffice it to say here that an essential aspect of Christian contemplation is the extremely painful experience of being "crucified with Christ," dying to old ways of being, dying to the ego-games that make us cling to possessions and identity, in order that Christ may live and pray in us.

begin to understand that "the love of God seeks us in every situation, and seeks our good,"[16] and that we are lost without this love. Contemplation gently opens us to the realization that we are neither the source of life nor the measure of true action and accomplishment, but that God nevertheless desires us and invites us to join in on the Trinity's sacred dance.

About the author

Amelia Pahl is working on a Master of Divinity at McGill University, after recently graduating from Canadian Mennonite University with a major in religion and narrative studies. Some of the things she loves dearly are trees, warm cups of tea, and singing. She lives with her wife in Montreal, Quebec.

16 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 15.

Urgent patience in uncertain times

Paul Doerksen

> *"Only people who carry a certain restlessness around with them can wait, and people who look up reverently to the One who is great in the world."*
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> *–Dietrich Bonhoeffer*[1]

> *"For in the patience of love's delay lies human blessedness."*
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> *–Pilgram Marpeck*[2]

That we find ourselves in a time of transition, turmoil, upheaval, anxiety, unease, and uncertainty seems, on the surface of things, to be a truism. The obviousness of such a description should not mute the significance of that characterization, but neither should it dupe us into thinking that we live in utterly "unprecedented times," as that ubiquitous phrase would have us believe. Nevertheless, the current lived experience of some significant level of uncertainty provides an opportunity for us to consider what kinds of Christian practices we might cultivate in these times. One such Christian practice I am putting forward here for our consideration is that of Christian patience, a practice that can sometimes drop from view in times when it's easy to think that the primary need is quick action to respond confidently to uncertainties. Oliver O'Donovan's dramatic conclusion to an essay concerning issues faced by the church generated the prompt for my consideration of patience. There he asserts "one word of caution for those who speak and for those who listen when God's word is abroad. The first, and surely the hardest

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1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Isabel Best, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 8.

2 John D. Rempel, ed., *Jorg Maler's Kunstbuch: Writings of the Marpeck Circle* (Kitchener, ON: Herald, 2010), 312–13.

demand that it makes on them is: patience."[3] Where we might have expected O'Donovan to name the importance of leaping into action, we find instead a demand to exercise patience.

I begin my considerations on patience with reference to two passages of Scripture, which serve as a brief display of the broad strokes of a biblical view of patience—namely, (1) that God practices divine patience toward creation, and (2) that humans are also called to practice patience. Regarding divine patience, the apostle Peter writes,

> *But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. . . . Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. (2 Peter 3:8–9, 14–15)*

Peter describes God as exercising patience with people, an offer that opens the possibility of repentance and salvation, and exhorts his readers, who are ostensibly the recipients of God's patience, to wait in peace for the renewal of all things.

James adds a call for human practice of patience with an emphasis that is notably different than Peter's:

> *Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. . . . As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed, we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. (James 5:7–11)*

James counsels patience on the part of the reader, offers encouragement in the fact that the coming of the Lord is near, and provides examples

3 Oliver O'Donovan, "Homosexuality in the Church: Can There be a Fruitful Theological Debate?" in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rodgers, Jr. (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2002), 386.

to follow in the prophets of Israel, explicitly offering the blessed pattern displayed by Job.

Neither divine nor human patience is waiting devoid of shape or content. Christian patience is delusionary if seen as "an invitation to escape from the tasks of large struggles against gargantuan and fast moving whirls of destruction";[4] patience is misguided if taken to mean the preserving of the status quo;[5] patience is false when it is of the sort that derives from indifference, weakness, or short-sightedness.[6] Further, I am not suggesting that Christian patience is fully expressed in what we might call "natural patience," the kind of actions taken by a hiker who pauses to rest on her way to a destination, a worker putting down of a heavy burden until new strength is found, a farmer waiting for a crop to grow, a mother with her children. While these examples qualify as the exercise of patience, they can also be construed as providing the instrumental condition for attaining what is desired, for "gaining what is coveted."[7] Rather, for Christians, the understanding of patience begins with God—that is, God's patience displayed in creation toward humans specifically, revealed most explicitly in Jesus Christ and in the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

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The patience of God

According to Karl Barth, "patience exists where time and space are given within a definite intention, when freedom is allowed in expectation of a

4 Stanley Hauerwas, "The Politics of Gentleness: Random Thoughts for a Conversation with Jean Vanier," in Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Radical Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 193.

5 Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 277.

6 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.I, *The Doctrine of God*, ed. G. Bromiley, T. Torrance, trans. T. Parker et al. (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 423.

7 Soren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. Howard Hong, Edna Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 161.

response. God acts in this way. He makes this purposeful concession of space and time."[8] Barth's assertion of God's purposeful concession of space and time is part of a much longer treatment of what he terms the "perfections of God." Barth puts forward a provisional understanding of God as the God of love and freedom. Any discussion or description of God must not make the mistake of speaking of "attributes" that have an existence apart from, independent of, God's own being. That is, if one speaks of grace or mercy, it is important *not* to say that God *has* grace or mercy, but that God *is* grace, God *is* mercy. Further, when the various perfections of God are spoken of, it is essential never to abandon other perfections when beginning to speak of any particular one. So, as Barth contemplates the perfections of divine loving, he turns to a lengthy analysis of the grace and holiness of God, the mercy and righteousness of God, and then the patience and wisdom of God. God's patience is *not* some isolated "characteristic" among other "characteristics" of God. It is a dimension of what God *is*—or as Barth puts it, "the perfection of divine patience is a special perfection of love and therefore the being of God."[9] In patience, God thus "conced[es] to this existence a reality side by side with His own, and fulfilling His will towards this other in such a way that He does not spend and destroy it as this other but accompanies and sustains it and allows it to develop in freedom."[10] God is not thereby suspending the reality of the human experience, but rather "the fact that God has time for us is what characterizes His whole activity towards us as an exercise of patience."[11]

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Jesus's display of patience in the Passion

We also see patience in action in the earthly life and ministry of Jesus, perhaps especially evident in the Passion of Christ. Christopher Vogt's work is instructive here. He understands Jesus's experience during the entire Passion as displaying four dimensions of patience. First, Jesus displays a

8 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.I, 408.

9 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.I, 407.

10 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.I, 409–410.

11 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.I, 417.

reluctant endurance of suffering, which is to be avoided if possible but endured if necessary. Second, the patience of Jesus depends on a profound sense of Providence and desire to be obedient to God, thus compelling him to wait for events to unfold so that God's purpose may be made known. It is important at this point to also recognize that we are part of the unfolding of history as participants, calling for discernment and endurance at the same time. Third, Vogt finds in the Passion a willingness to endure the difficulties entailed in sharing the task of controlling our destiny with others, most importantly with God. Vogt highlights the fourth and last dimension of Jesus's patience as something that is practiced out of love for God, his friends, and the world, bringing to view the fact that the practice of patience is fundamentally social in nature.[12] Vogt's work, done within the context of a discussion of Christian care for the dying, brings into sharp relief the fact that the patience of Jesus is not just one thing, that it is neither quiescent nor passive but rather an active shaping of a response to the fact that Jesus is going about the will of God.

Patience in the power of the Spirit

Before Jesus went to Jerusalem to be crucified, he promised his disciples that he would ask the Father for another Advocate who would be with them forever. This reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit as the coming of the gift of an Advocate is central to John's account of things, especially in chapters 14–17 of John's Gospel. Here Jesus tells his disciples that while he will leave their immediate presence, they will not be orphaned because the Spirit will come to abide with them, teach them everything, and remind them of all that Jesus has said to them. The apostle Paul, in Romans 8, shows his readers that life in the present circumstances ought to be shaped in part at least by an understanding of the glory that will be revealed. Such an eschatological posture is not some misguided notion that we know the future and how things might unfold or that we can control the shape of

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12 Christopher Vogt, "Practicing Patience, Compassion, and Hope at the end of Life: Mining the Passion of Jesus in Luke for the Christian Model of Dying Well," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 24, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2004): 138–43.

that unfolding. Rather, the future remains open precisely because it is the arena of God's activity, which Christians can understand to some degree, not in terms of apocalyptic timelines or calendars or some such speculative activity but in terms of the shape of things that we have seen in Christ by the power of the Spirit. Thus we have a high calling "to offer to the world in the present a foretaste of the ultimate glory that God is bringing definitively in the future."[13] But a reminder to look to the future, an eschatological posture, is not a call to ignore the present; rather, the present becomes an opportunity to be open to the work of the Spirit, who helps us in our weakness, intercedes for us, makes known the will of God, and so on (Romans 8:1–30). Put another way, the work of the Spirit provides the power of the possibility of living the life of patience within the space and time provided by God's patience revealed so clearly in Jesus Christ. In sum, God's patience is expressed in Trinitarian form, which is essential for the faithful life of the church. As David Lauber writes, paying "close attention to God's patience will enable the church to reflect more faithfully on God's presence and action in the world, and to grasp the profound effects of the affirmation that God acts slowly; God takes time; God has time for his creatures and makes time for his creatures. God acts in this fashion not because of inattentive indifference but because of the strength of his resolve to bring his creatures to saving perfection."[14]

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Human patience

The practice of human patience is related to divine patience but is not analogous to it. Turning our attention to human patience ought *not* to lead us too quickly to a facile conclusion that runs something like this: because God is patient, humans too ought to be patient—or that the pa-

13 Philip D. Kenneson, *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 125. Kenneson's chapter "Cultivating Patience in the Midst of Productivity" informs much of my discussion here.

14 David Lauber, "'For the Sake of This One, God Has Patience with the Many': Czeslaw Milosz and Karl Barth on God's Patience, the Incarnation, and the Possibility of Belief," *Christian Scholar's Review* 40, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 169–70.

tience to which humans are called can be understood as being modeled directly on God's exercise of that virtue. In a perceptive account of God's work in creation as a display of patience, Paul Daffyd Jones, drawing on Karl Barth, focuses on God's granting of space and time to the created world, wherein "space is opened for creatures, empowered by God, to combine forms of activity, passivity, receptivity, invention, and collaboration as they heed and make good on God's patience."[15] Jones observes that seeking to conform human striving to God's action and attitude toward the world seems to seek for analogy which is *not* necessarily present in the relationship of God and human.[16]

God's patient provision of time and space includes Christ's urgent petition that each and every one of us should act, without delay, in a manner which honors the covenant of grace. God's patience, one must even say, awaits a *dis*-analogous response. We are not asked to do the impossible: correspond ourselves to the God who has time and space, and who gives time and space to act in freedom and obedience. Nor, for that matter, are we asked to exercise restraint or to take on the responsibility of incarnating God's patience. Our task is otherwise: to move toward and purposefully to inhabit the Kingdom that is the in-breaking gift of the patient God.[17]

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Even while acknowledging the disanalogous nature of human patience, nonetheless, Christians are called to exercise patience. To see what this might look like, I turn to the early Anabaptist tradition. In particular, I turn to the work of Pilgram Marpeck to reflect briefly on the nature of human Christian patience, especially as he relates patience to peace. For Marpeck, the pursuit of peace is not primarily a technique or strategy

15 Paul Dafydd Jones, "The Patience of God the Creator: Reflections on Genesis 1:1–2:4a," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no. 4 (October 2019): 384.

16 God's patience toward creatures does not involve as logical consequence that humans ought to under all circumstances exercise only patience. Hans Frei, "God's Patience and Our Work," in Hans W. Frei, *Unpublished Pieces: Transcripts from the Yale Divinity School Archive*, ed. Mike Higton with assistance from Mark Alan Bowald and Hester Higton, 1998–2004, 94.

17 Paul Dafydd Jones, "On Patience: Thinking with and beyond Karl Barth," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68, no. 3 (2015): 288.

but rather an expression of a vibrant and real *Christian spirituality*, which finds that expression in the exercise of patience. Patience makes peace possible (insofar as it is possible), and that patience is itself made imaginable through the humanity of Christ, understood within a Trinitarian framework, enlivened by the Holy Spirit, and practiced by the church both internally and externally. Marpeck offers this succinct description concerning true patience: (1) patience is made possible when we are mindful with all our heart of our entry into this world with its fragility and suffering; (2) every injustice and sin must be punished with the severe justice of God; (3) we must offer up our own will and surrender to the will of God; and (4) if someone arrives at this point, "then the innocence of Christ becomes his innocence, and he suffers as one who is innocent." Therefore, at bottom, "genuine, true patience flows from this basis"—namely, the work of Jesus.[18]

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Marpeck directly connects Christ's practice of patience with what becomes possible for the Christian: "He, through patience, conquered it all, just as we also overcome, even in death, through Christ our Lord, if we are truly related to Him in the covenant by His grace, and we persevere until the end."[19] And again, with reference to an "outer ceremony," Marpeck directs his readers to eat the bread and drink the cup, and thereby "show that Christ died for you, giving His body and spilling His blood for you, and show that, in the death of Christ, all your solace and life is directed. *In this* act, too, are seen the works of Christ, which are *love, patience, humility.* Each believer is called upon to continue them."[20]

Thus it is clear that Marpeck does not understand the practice of patience as a series of actions, or even a disposition, as much as the receiving of a gift, the receptive posture of which makes sure not to seize God's offered grace. Rather, God allows sinners glimmers of hope, which we must

18 Rempel, *Jorg Maler's Kunstbuch*, 386.

19 Pilgram Marpeck, *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, ed. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen (Kitchener, ON: Herald, 1978), 165.

20 Marpeck, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 274, emphasis original.

anticipate with patience.[21] God's generosity, not human effort, is central here; generosity extended by God, by whose gifts, including patience, will "be found among true believers until the end."[22]

Marpeck makes extensive use of horticultural images to intensify his admonitions regarding the Christian practice of patience. Discerning the difference between weeds and fruit is not the only task facing the faithful Christian; discernment is also necessary to be able to distinguish between blossom and foliage, on the one hand, and mature fruit, on the other, making sure not to judge people before the right time, understood as the appearance of fruit, not blossoms or foliage.[23] Here too Marpeck asserts that mature fruit is only made possible by the work of Jesus Christ. Life before the incarnation of Jesus Christ was like a winter storm, indicative of sin and sleep, conditions which are now past and gone. The coming of Christ is our summer, and now flowers can bloom, argues Marpeck, whereas before Christ, the fig tree and vine developed buds or blossoms but no fruit, while with the advent of the Holy Spirit, the first fruits were borne.[24]

Just as it takes time for sin to produce its real fruit, so too does it take time for faith to bring forth its fruit.[25] In both cases, the flowering of sin and of faith, the exercise of patience is crucial for the body of Christ, if it is to avoid sin as it seeks to be faithful in relation to the non-coercive passing on of the faith, the non-coercive practice of church discipline, and more generally the living out of Christian faith. The church opens the possibility of what Marpeck terms as "improvement" in the Christian life; judgments made in love and patience are always concerned with improvement, but never before its time.[26]

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21 Marpeck, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 394. Marpeck claims that Christians simply assume too much: "Oh God, how utterly impatient we are to await your comfort" (394).

22 Marpeck, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 72, 73.

23 Marpeck, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 323.

24 Rempel, *Jorg Maler's Kunstbuch*, 111.

25 Marpeck makes this point as part of an argument against the practice of infant baptism: "If it were the case that there is no abomination of idolatry in infant baptism, and people place or seek no trust or salvation therein, they would certainly have no haste in baptism, but would patiently allow faith to proceed, which is the true salvation for all who are baptized." Marpeck, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 243.

26 Marpeck, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 333, 347.

The uncontrollability of the world

Living in uncertain times highlights what Christians know but sometimes forget—namely, an acknowledgement of the uncontrollability of the world in which we find ourselves, which is nonetheless God's world. While practicing patience within the space and time given to us by God's divine patience is important, it cannot stand alone as *the* practice; it does not stand alone as a panacea. Surely we must be aware of how patience may be distorted in different ways, how it may be falsely equated with inaction or slowness as a self-standing virtue. The practice of Christian patience in a time of uncertainty is an urgent call and demand made on the Christian, precisely because God's word is abroad in these times. And, like the father in the biblical parable hurrying in joy to embrace his wayward son, we know that the final urgent sprint of that story is shaped by and comes only after and as part of enduring, waiting, watching, and hoping.

About the author

Paul Doerksen is associate professor of theology and Anabaptist studies at Canadian Mennonite University (CMU). He acknowledges with gratitude financial support of a research grant from CMU, which enabled spending three months of research time on the topic of Christian patience as a visiting fellow at New College, School of Divinity, at the University of Edinburgh. Paul is married to Julie, a pastor at River East Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba.