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Christian faith and life beyond fear

Told from one angle, the story of Christian faith is a story about life that moves beyond fear. Before the Gospels end with resurrection, Jesus has been arrested, tortured, and crucified; his followers are in hiding; and his body has disappeared. His disciples, in other words, had every reason to be afraid. Yet the history of the church reminds us that the disciples did not surrender to fear. Instead, they shared the “Good News”¹ of a promised salvation.

This movement beyond fear finds parallels throughout the Christian scriptures, called the New Testament—from suffering to succor, from oppression to liberation, from death to life. On a personal level, a central dimension of Christian discipleship in the scriptures is *metánoia*, a turning around through repentance (e.g., Mk 1:15). Yet another kind of “turning around”—a series of radical turns or reversals—animates the Gospels. The Almighty became incarnate as a baby in a humble stable. This child, the son of a carpenter,² became a Jewish teacher, and his followers, who included the lowest members of society, said he was the messiah. This man, Jesus, is executed by the Roman imperial power, but his terrible death is understood to lead to bodily resurrection and everlasting life. As this happens, the instrument of Jesus’ execution becomes the emblem of his church.

The reversals in these Gospel stories serve as touchstones to which Christians through the centuries have appealed in striving to live beyond their fears. Thus, this essay seeks to introduce a Christian perspective on fear. I write as a Lutheran Protestant, but hope that what I say conveys

¹ “Good tale” is the literal meaning of “gospel,” a derivation from Old English.

² Mt 13:55. Cf. Mk 6:3, which says that Jesus himself was a carpenter. This may well be a pun, since the Greek word here, *téktōn*, has the sense of a craftsman, creator, planner, or master of an art. For Christians, Jesus is the master of his disciples’ lives and the planner of their salvation.

commitments that diverse Christians would recognize and affirm, points of broad convergence if not consensus.³

We begin, first, with the Gospels and the early church in order to explore basic features of a scriptural account of the relationship between faith and fear. Second, we consider the implications of faith for “life together.” Here, a brief glance at two early modern thinkers, Hobbes and Luther, helps contrast two alternative models of social life—one grounded in fear, the other in faith. The aim of this exploration is not to produce a list of particular strategies Christians have pursued in response to fear. Rather, I hope to gesture at possibilities from the Christian past for thinking about, envisioning, and enriching life in the present and future.

Fear in Christian scripture

The Gospel of Mark ends dramatically. The last line that scholars agree on describes the encounter of Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, and Salome with an unexpected man in the otherwise-empty tomb of Jesus. The man tells the three women that their leader has been “raised” and tasks them with informing the other disciples. At least at first, however, they do not. Their initial reaction to the strange encounter is understandable: “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8).⁴

Flight, terror, amazement, silence: these are unsurprising responses to finding a missing body and a stranger, an event the three women experience as another cause for fear in the wake of the crucifixion. And the troubles did not go away, either. The first few generations of Jesus’

³ Dagmar Heller, “Baptism: The Basis of Church Unity? The Question of Baptism in Faith and Order,” *Ecumenical Review* 50, no. 4 (Oct. 1998):480-490. On the diversity and unity of Christianity, see James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (SCM, 1977); and John Macquarrie, *Christian Unity and Christian Diversity* (SCM, 1975).

⁴ All biblical citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

followers had much to be afraid of. In Roman-occupied Israel, they faced charges of blasphemy and the Roman perception that Christians were a subversive political threat.⁵ Nero blamed Christians for the fire that destroyed Rome in 64 CE, an accusation that initiated ongoing (if inconsistent) persecution.⁶ Perceived spiritual threats exacerbated these worldly ills. Throughout the Gospels, for example, are confrontations with demonic evil.⁷ And as suggested in Mark above,⁸ the disciples' faith in Jesus was shaken after the crucifixion, after their messiah was murdered and his body disappeared.

Notwithstanding these sources of fear, Christianity spread, first throughout the Mediterranean and then into the wider world.⁹ And notwithstanding scholarly debates about what comes after Mark 16:8,¹⁰ we know that Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, Salome and other disciples did not give into silent, inactive fear. All of the Gospels have Jesus appearing to the disciples, renewing their faith, and enjoining them to share it. As the disciples proclaim Jesus' resurrection and form new communities, they discover that action in the face of fear is a central feature of faith.

But before turning to this action, it is worth clarifying how the notion of fear is used in the

⁵ The name Christian is a derivative from a pejorative meaning "partisans of Christ," rather than of Caesar. See Howard Clark Kee, "The Formation of Christian Communities," *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible* 2nd ed., eds. Bruce Chilton et al. (Cambridge, 1997), 482, 489.

⁶ See Martin Goodman, "The emergence of Christianity," and Adrian Hastings, "150-550," both in *A World History of Christianity*, ed. Adrian Hastings (Eerdmans, 1999), 7-24, 25-65.

⁷ Kee, "The Formation of Christian Communities," 488.

⁸ Matthew and Luke also underscore fear, but they describe the women's reactions somewhat differently than Mark. In the former, the women tell others (Luke 24:9), and in Matthew they leave the tomb "with fear and great joy" (Matt 28:8-9).

⁹ Kee, "The Formation of Christian Communities," 491-492.

¹⁰ These debates deserve mention. What comes after verse 16:8 is an unresolved puzzle. Both the longer (16:9-20) and the shorter versions of Mark are not written in the same style as the preceding verses. Thus, scholars conjecture that they are probably second-century attempts to complete the text. The grammar itself does not give a definitive answer. On the one hand, the last phrase (*ephoboũnto gár*) can be plausibly rendered as "for they were afraid of," which may entail a lost concluding phrase. On the other hand, several other New Testament verses use a similar phrase without such a concluding phrase, and may be translated as "for they were afraid" (e.g., Mk 11:18, Lk 22:2). Short of the appearance of a lost manuscript, this debate remains at an impasse. See Frederick C. Grant and Halford E. Luccock, "The Gospel According to St. Mark," *The Interpreters Bible* VII (Ambingdon-Cokesbury, 1951), 645, 915; and Kee, "The Formation of Christian Communities," 497, 512.

Bible. In Mark 16:8, the word that is translated as “they were afraid” is *ephoboũnto*, a verb associated with the noun *phóbos*. In New Testament Greek, there are two general senses for this noun and its related verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. First, *phóbos* can mean “fear, dread, terror,” which is almost certainly what is meant in Mark 16.¹¹ In classical Greek, this kind of fear connotes an active sense of flight, as what happens when someone is scared. This older connotation is invoked in Mark’s description of the women fleeing from Jesus’ tomb. Second, *phóbos* can also mean a deep awe in the face of God’s tremendous power.¹² This kind of “fear” properly mitigates or eliminates humans’ other fears of worldly powers and dangers. The latter sense is developed perhaps most strongly in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), and it becomes an increasingly prominent theme in the works of early church fathers like Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian.¹³ In turn, both senses of *phóbos* map respectively, and in a general way, onto two other words used in Scripture, namely, *deília*, fear as cowardice or timidity (Mt 8:26, Mk 4:40), and *eulábeia*, which is appropriate caution or godly fear (Heb 5:7, 12:28).¹⁴

We might summarize the New Testament’s portrayals of fear simply: the first sense of *phóbos* is properly displaced by the second. Faith in God and the salvation he promises works to mitigate fear as “terror.” When believers trust in the care of their Lord, earthly fears subside.

And so an important injunction echoes throughout the Gospels—“Fear not.”¹⁵ Faith is what

¹¹ This is also the sense of fear meant in Mt 10:28; Acts 1:43, 19:17; 1 Cor. 2:3; 1 Tim 5:20; Heb 2:15; 1 John 4:18; Rev 11:11; 18:10, 15. See W.E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 229-230.

¹² Acts 9:31; Rom 3:18, 8:15; 2 Cor 7:1; Eph 5:2; Phil 2:12; 1 Pet 1:17. See Vine, *Expository Dictionary*, 229-230.

¹³ Gen 9:2, Exod 15:16; Deut 2:25, 11:25; Ps 55:4; Is 19:16. *Ibid.*; and *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, abrd. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Eerdmans, 1985), 1272-1277.

¹⁴ Vine, *Expository Dictionary*, 229-230.

¹⁵ Mk 5:36, 6:40; Mt 17:7, 28:10; Lk 1:13, 30, 2:10. See *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1272-1277.

enables action “without fear,” as the adverb *aphóbōs* suggests.¹⁶ At the same time, fear in the second sense remains relevant to Christian life, not as paralyzing terror, but as proper reverence for a loving deity. In Paul’s epistles, for example, the faithful are called to fear divine judgment, but not an uncertain state after death; they are reassured that faith opens their hearts to receive salvation.¹⁷ Paul’s call “for a pure, patient, and gentle heart” thus works to alleviate earthly anxieties (Col 3:22; Eph 5:5).¹⁸

So far, we have been talking about Christianity in terms of the inner life, the dynamics of the emotions. In fact, however, faith is best understood not primarily as a matter of intellectual belief or individual psychology, but a “way of life.”¹⁹ In the Gospels, we see this way of life is the disciples’ life beyond fear—literally what comes after Mark 16:8—rather than abandoning their beliefs or becoming mired in grief in the wake of the crucifixion. The more-commonly cited version of Jesus’ charge to live beyond fear comes in the “Great Commission” of Matthew (28:19-20), but Mark’s longer ending has the disciples following a similar command: “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (16:15-20). In other words, faith for the earliest disciples meant collective work in the world, in this case, preaching the Word of God among strangers.

Faith and life together

¹⁶ Lk 1:74; 1 Cor 16:10; Phil 1:14. See Vine, *Expository Dictionary*, 229-230.

¹⁷ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1272-1277.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Christian Scharen, *Faith as a Way of Life: A Vision for Pastoral Leadership* (Eerdmans, 2008). This should not be taken to suggest that there is agreement among Christians about the definition of faith. But many (though not all) Christians would agree with Stanley Hauerwas that faith is not “primarily belief[,] hold[ing] to these 26 absurd propositions before breakfast.” Faith “is not a set of propositions — but is rather embedded in a community of practices that make those beliefs themselves work and give us a community by which we are shaped.” See the interview with Hauerwas, “Bonhoeffer: The Truthful Witness,” *Homiletics Online*, available at <http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/interviews/hauerwas.asp>.

Faith grounds this work in the world—at its best, informed by a reverential awe but free from the paralyzing fear of worldly troubles. Perhaps the most concise picture of faith is in the book of Hebrews, which tells us that it is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). The object of this faith is ultimately God—God’s promise of the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life and God’s call to discipleship and community here and now. Some phrases from contemporary Christian worship put it succinctly. In the words of Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran, and other liturgies, Christians profess that “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” An acclamation from Catholic liturgy presents the upshot even more clearly: “Dying you destroyed our death; rising you restored our life; Lord Jesus, come in glory!”

The Catholic acclamation, in particular, conveys a sense of how Christians strive to understand God’s love for humankind—profound and boundless, devoted and exuberant. To express the depths of this love, the scriptures draw on some of the most intimate dimensions of human connection, including the love of mother for child (Is 49:15, Mt 23:37). Yet such love merits joy, not sentimentalism, for faith in this loving God does not mean earthly troubles disappear. Jesus makes this point in the Sermon on the Mount: “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today” (Mt 6:34). The basis for this outlook lies in a promise and an obligation, alluded to above. Invoking birds and flowers, Jesus says that God will provide for humans just as, and all the more than, he provides for other parts of creation: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life...” (Mt 6:25). In this vision, convinced of God’s love but clear-eyed about life’s difficulties, Jesus calls Christians to focus their priorities, to leave the mire of an ongoing fear of the world’s dangers and shortcomings: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness...” (Mt 5:33).

This last phrase about striving cues us into a crucial dimension of faith: it should not rest in complacent assurances about heavenly rewards. Much as fear affects more than one's inner life, faith has implications broader than personal concern. We can view this as a two-part movement. First, Christians believe that Jesus, God Incarnate, lived, died, and lived again *for* human beings. This loving sacrifice, as an important Lutheran-Catholic ecumenical document puts it, "frees human beings from sin's enslaving power and imparts the gift of new life in Christ."²⁰ Second, in light of this liberating gift, Christians understand themselves to be called to strive to live *for* God and other people. Insofar as faith is a "way of life," it is a way of "life together."²¹ Such life together has seen incredible diversity in practice, ranging from isolated desert hermits to intense monastic communalism to parishes in contemporary American neighborhoods. But this diversity is nonetheless grounded on a shared commitment to love of God and neighbor, a commitment itself rooted in faith in God's promise of salvation.

One of the earliest and most important examples of life together comes from Acts 2:43-47, a depiction of the community of the apostles:

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Today, of course, many Christian communities neither have "all things in common" nor sell their goods to sustain communal life. But some basic features of those gathered with the apostles

²⁰ World Federation and the Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, 4.2, para, 22, at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html. The Joint Declaration resolves some of the doctrinal fault lines between Lutherans and Catholics about justification, the making righteous of the sinner before God.

²¹ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together in A Testament to Freedom*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (Harper-Collins, 1995).

remain relevant principles for modern Christians communities—awe of God, collective concern, worship and meals “together,” an attitude of “glad and generous hearts.”

The Reformation and the broader early modern period might seem like an unlikely place to turn for another vista on life together. The picture of amicable community in Acts stands in stark contrast to the acrimony and struggle that characterized the church many centuries later. At least in the West, it was the Reformation that gave us denominational schisms, hotly traded polemics, and woeful brutality.²² But Reformation debates also reminded Christians of the saving and so freeing implications of faith—forgiveness of sins, freedom from enslavement, and “new life in Christ,” as the modern Catholic-Lutheran document put it. At his best, Martin Luther is one of the clearest Reformation voices on these implications. Luther’s preoccupations also make him a valuable resource for considering the ways that Christian faith works against fear. Luther’s biographers disagree about what exactly Luther feared (death, the Devil, sin), but they do agree that his theological output was, among other things, an attempt to come to terms with his fears.²³

In his famous essay “On the Freedom of a Christian” (1520), Luther described the nature of the Christian life beyond fear and the kind of freedom from fear that faith enables:

Thus from faith flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a cheerful, willing, free spirit, disposed to serve our neighbor voluntarily, without taking any account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss. Its object is not to lay men under obligations, nor does it distinguish between friends and enemies, or look to gratitude or ingratitude, but most freely and willingly spends itself and its goods, whether it loses them through ingratitude, or gains good will.²⁴

²² The earlier split between Roman Catholicism and Byzantine Orthodoxy was a gradual drift, coming to a formal head with mutual excommunications in 1054.

²³ For a psychological emphasis on Luther’s fear of death, see Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (Norton, 1958), esp. 83, 153; and Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death* (Belknap, 1999). For an emphasis on Luther’s fear of the Devil, see Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (Yale, 1989).

²⁴ Martin Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, in Henry Wace and C. A. Buchheim, eds., *First Principles of the Reformation* (John Murray, 1883), at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/luther-freedomchristian.html>.

Convinced of salvation, Luther asserts, the Christian can live in “love and joy.” With the ultimate problem (salvation) addressed, the Christian has “a cheerful, willing, free spirit.” This state leads to service to “our neighbor,” without regard for personal gain or divisions among friends and enemies.

Luther lived in a time of horrors—early death, deadly disease, religious persecution, bloody warfare—and he was honest about that: “In the experience of life we see that we are subjected to all things, and suffer many things...” As in the Sermon on the Mount, faith does not eliminate threats to human life. Nonetheless, it can sustain a hope that can defang the fears that accompany such dangers:

This is a spiritual power, which rules in the midst of enemies, and is powerful in the midst of distress. And this is nothing else than that strength is made perfect in my weakness, and that I can turn all things to the profit of my salvation; so that even the cross and death are compelled to serve me and to work together for my salvation.

Luther here draws on his faith to see “enemies,” “distress,” and personal “weakness” as resources for strengthening his resolve and tenacity: they can test and sharpen our convictions, as heat refines steel. He is further assured by the scriptures that the worst—“the cross and death”—cannot shake or undermine the promise of “salvation.” Even as Luther wrestles with what shakes his very existence, we glimpse the moving possibility of life beyond fear: freed from the weight of sin and eternal death, the Christian’s faith turns the worst into a wellspring for “spiritual” discipline.

Luther was, to put it mildly, no political theorist. He believed in firm law and order, but beyond that he was attempting no more than to delineate the life of a Christian within the political structures of his day. Other Christian thinkers, like Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin, were far more concerned with the social and political implications of faith. But even in Luther

we can discern the outlines of life together through faith—love of neighbor without concern for personal gain, regard for one’s “enemies,” joy in daily life, intentional charity.

The stakes of such an approach to community become clearer when we contrast Luther with Thomas Hobbes, another fearful early modern. The Englishman’s and the German’s lives bookended the beginning and end of the Reformation, but the contrast runs deeper than that: Hobbes turned to fear as the ground of community in *Leviathan* (1651), while Luther turned to faith to eliminate fear and enable the work of love. Put simply, one offers a vision of life in fear, while the other offers us a vision of life beyond fear.

Hobbes begins *Leviathan* by emphasizing the world’s essential uncertainty and danger. Humans are bellicose, reason prone to err, matter unstable, and “life is but a motion of Limbs.”²⁵ In such a world, the norm, which he famously names the State of Nature, is only “continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.”²⁶ Life together is possible in this dangerous world, but an escape from fear is not. When Hobbes details how people manage to cobble together political life, he emphasizes fear. The State of Nature’s “continuall feare, and danger of violent death” is simply redirected in political life to the “feare of punishment” generated by a “visible Power to keep [people] in awe, and tye them ... to the performance of their Convenants.”²⁷ Fearful obligation, rather than liberated love, guides human action in such a political order.

This grim view of human life is rooted in Hobbes’s preoccupations with uncertainty and fear. As noted above, Luther was a fearful man, and he was driven by “the fear of not knowing things as they really are” along with “a sense of tragedy regarding the fate of humanity living in

²⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Penguin, 1968), 81.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 186, 196.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 223.

the midst of illusion.”²⁸ In other words, then, Hobbes and Luther shared many of the same concerns and assumptions, but took different responses. As we think about the basis for life together, this distinction is important; it offers us two options for community, and it remains relevant, even if centuries separate us from the early moderns. Indeed, the distance is more of time than of influence. Hobbes’s ideas, for example, have decisively shaped how we think about politics in the West, and his preoccupations continue to guide political thought.²⁹ More generally, Hobbes articulates an attitude that remains deeply embedded in our assumptions about community life; fear (of neighbor, stranger, etc.) remains a central characteristic of how we approach life together. As a result, the alternatives offered by Luther and other Christians remain crucial resources for imagining and living something else.

Conclusion

It is clear that fear is a major feature of American public life today. Consider what we worry about—violence, other crime, terrorism, environmental catastrophe, financial collapse, not to mention everyday preoccupations and anxieties. In response, this essay has briefly traced some basic dimensions of Christian faith in relationship to fear. We begun with the possibility of life beyond fear as presented in the Gospels. We looked at distinct scriptural understandings of fear. We then considered Christians’ faith in God’s saving and liberating love and two distinct visions of life together—one beyond fear, one grounded in it.

In a “culture of fear,” the resources of Christian faith—as Hebrews has it, “the assurance

²⁸ Susan E. Schreiner, "Appearances and Reality in Luther, Montaigne, and Shakespeare," *The Journal of Religion* 83, no. 3 (Jul. 2003):345-380.

²⁹ See, e.g., the famous essay by Judith Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, ed. Stanley Hoffman (University of Chicago, 1998).

of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1)—seem pertinent, even pressing.³⁰ Christians today are called to act, rather than give into silent fear. This is not unlike the first disciples, who proclaimed a message of salvation rather than resignation after the crucifixion. In light of the New Testament, Christians can live in reverential awe of God, something that displaces an ongoing fear of people and other dangers. At the same time, Christians might offer their witness more generally within a diverse America. As a lyric from a popular praise song has it, “They’ll know we are Christians by our love.” Christians would do well to remember the challenge implicit in this lyric. Communities and relationships founded on love of God and neighbor, rather than fear, surely can foster a profound conversion, in this case to something “hoped for” and all too often “not seen.”

³⁰ Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear* (Basic Books, 2000).