

Horizons

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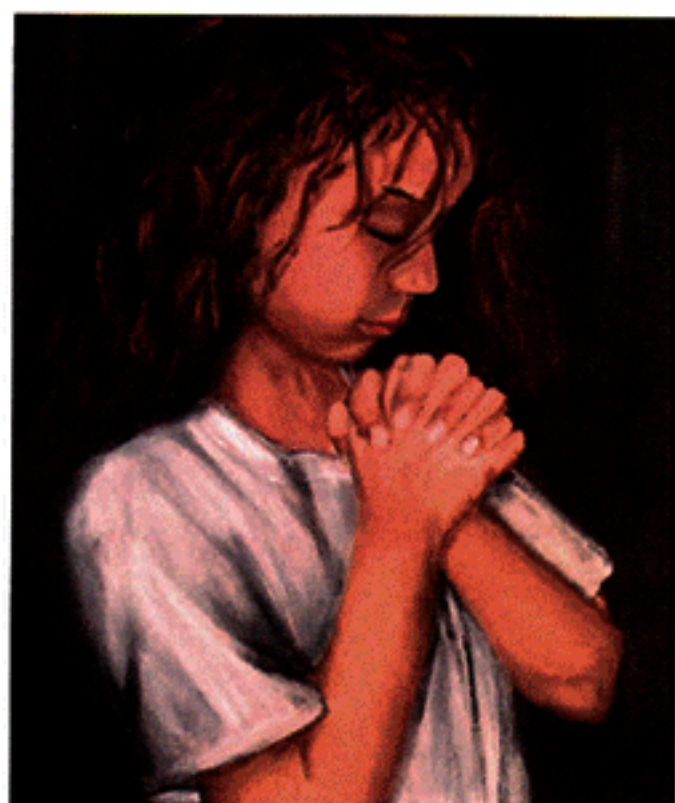


Hope in the Face of Fear

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About This Issue

Hope in the Face of Fear



There may be nothing to fear but fear itself, but that still leaves plenty to keep us occupied. And as Lara Blackwood Pickrel points out in her article, fear tends to be sticky—it lurks, silently shaping us and the way that we engage with the world. So even if we manage to hold ourselves to one fear, we'll feel fear's grip in a multitude of ways.

In the following pages, you'll encounter a number of suggestions for coping with fear. You might just need to examine a particular fear and listen to your instincts before you can shelve a fear. Or maybe creating a disaster plan will help allay fears of natural disaster. Maybe your fears are urging you toward action on a particular issue. Thankfully, whatever our fears, we can find hope in God's abiding love.

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Lessons of the Birds and Lilies

Choosing Faith over Fear

BY JOYCE HOLLYDAY

Democrats want big government to run everything. Republicans just want to protect corporate millionaires. Citizens in favor of universal health care are socialists. Citizens who oppose health care hate poor people. People for abortion don't value life. People against abortion are woman haters. And the terrorists are out to get us all.

In the past few months, I've heard each of these opinions offered in various venues, from personal conversations to public meetings to national news reports. We don't need to listen long to the political discourse in this nation to know that we're in an era of contentious partisanship. We inhabit a muddled and complicated purple world that too many people see only as red or blue. And the fuel that drives this color-blindness is fear.

Messages of Fear

Play ominous music during a political ad while labeling a candidate's stances "socialist and dangerous" or "elitist and dangerous" and you can scare some people away from almost anything. We're bombarded with messages that attach emotionally loaded labels to candidates and policies. Rather than encouraging intellectual or moral reflection on a choice, much politicking solicits fear-based reactions.

Back when I still allowed television into my home, I frequently watched the local nightly news. I began to take note of how many stories covered car crashes and criminal mayhem, and how many things in the world I was supposed to fear, from germs and hurricanes to terrorists and killer bees. One in-depth feature exposed the dangers of riding escalators.

The news reports were interrupted by advertisements that did their best to convince me that I was going to die from porous bones or plugged arteries, from low blood sugar or high cholesterol. Virtually every ad pushed a product—a medication, a food, a vehicle, a security system, a diet plan—without which I would meet my demise through disease, disaster or degeneration. "Have no fear," the message seemed to be, "you can take a pill [or buy a product] for that."

But the message lurking in the shadows of that message was "Be afraid. Be very afraid." We inhabit a culture of fear. We are bombarded regularly with the news that we aren't young enough, beautiful enough, strong enough, rich enough, safe enough or secure enough. We have responded as a nation by gobbling up about six times our share of the earth's resources, pouring billions of dollars

into products and services that the media promises will bring us security from the threat du jour.

Messages of Faith

The heart of Jesus' message, found in his sermon on the Mount, takes a rather different view. Pointing to the birds in the air and the lilies of the field, which thrive under God's care, Jesus declares to his followers:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. . . . But strive first for the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:25, 33).

I grew up believing this scripture. Comfortably middle-class, I had no reason to doubt it. But then I journeyed to Harlem and met people in a struggle to survive poverty and violence. And soon after that, I witnessed the distended bellies of malnourished children in war-torn Nicaragua and in apartheid-strangled South Africa.

Jesus' promise seemed to be a mockery of their privation and pain. At a moment when I was ready to rail at God through tears about this injustice, I was reminded that *righteousness* is defined as "right and just relationship." Children die of starvation, not because God wills it or overlooks their cries, but because we have not learned how to live justly and generously. We have given in to our fear.

A Shared Promise and Bounty

I'm grateful for a Bible commentator who has suggested the term *commonwealth* to refer to what is commonly called the kingdom of God. This political term implies that

God's resources belong to all. It's a reminder that Jesus didn't deliver this promise to individuals, but to a community.

We have all that we need. The only question is whether we will share it, so that all are recipients of the bounty. If so, the audacious promise holds. If not, some among us do indeed need to worry about what they will eat and drink and wear, spending all of their energy trying to meet basic needs. Others will feel pushed to view anyone with a different perspective as a competitor or, worse, a threat.

The early Israelites, our ancestors in the faith, spent forty years in the desert after they fled from slavery in Egypt. Theologian Walter Brueggemann speaks of this as a "wilderness training school" for people who weren't yet ready to handle "a land flowing with milk and honey." In the wilderness, God sent manna from heaven every day, and the Israelite families were commanded to pick up only what they needed. If they hoarded, Exodus 16 reports, the manna "bred worms and turned foul." Our ancestors were formed in that wilderness into a community based on equality and committed to the common good, where the needs of all were met.

Before they left and headed toward the "land of promise," God commanded that they put a measure of manna in a jar, to be a reminder for generations to come of how they ought to live. I'd like to know what happened to that jar. As soon as the wilderness was out of sight, the hoarding and accumulating began. Some among them grew rich, while others became destitute; some were satiated, while others died for lack of food.

Abundance and Scarcity

Centuries later, we suffer the same dilemma on an unprecedented level. Corporate CEOs rake in millions, while laborers in fields and sweatshops around the globe slave for pennies a day to grow, pick or manufacture cheap goods for our consumption. Nearly half the world's population—three billion people—live on the equivalent of less than two dollars per day.*

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, mystified ones among us asked, "Why do they hate us so much?" One common response was, "They hate what we have."

But, I think that in fact, most of the world simply wants what we have: food, shelter, education, personal security, medical care, freedom. Policies and practices that originate in our nation and other wealthy nations far too often deprive people in other countries of these same essentials.

Our nation possesses some of the greatest abundance human civilization has ever known, but we act as if scarcity is our lot. Living as if in scarcity means we must have enemies. We see those who are different from us as competitors, rather than as sisters and brothers.

The only strategy I know for not living in fear is staking our lives on the promise of Jesus and trusting in

the true security that comes when everyone has all that they need. I know how difficult this is. And I'm grateful for some models of sacrificial generosity along my journey. In times of fear—when a natural response is to point fingers, call names and hoard goods—some people choose instead to trust God and tie their well-being to the common good. They celebrate the truth that we were created for interdependence.


Models of Faith

In 1983 I journeyed to Nicaragua to help establish Witness for Peace, a nonviolent, ongoing, prayerful and protective presence in that country's war zones. Our delegation of faith leaders and activists spent a night on the floor of a church in the tiny town of Ocotal. Around us, U.S.-backed forces known as contras were raiding vulnerable villages and terrorizing the population.

We shared the space with refugees, mostly women and children, who had fled under fire from their homes scattered throughout the mountains, leaving behind what little they owned. That night was filled with the cries of frightened children and punctuated with the sound of gunshots.

When our group awoke before dawn, the refugee women were

already slapping out tortillas and cooking them in a dome-shaped clay oven. They invited us to partake in their meager breakfast. Uncertain about where they would spend the next night or find their next meal, they shared everything they had with us—affluent strangers from a country that was sponsoring a war against them. Our communion of tortillas and coffee at dawn was a sacrament of generosity and trust that profoundly touched me.

Almost three decades separate me from that moment. I have used this story as a sermon illustration probably more than any other from my travels around the globe. I have longed to be like those women. I don't romanticize the poverty and violence that they suffered, but I envy their clarity and strength. They had learned how to live for each day and share all that they had. And because they trusted in God's provision and in their care for one another, they were able to release their fear and live in faith. 

Joyce Hollyday is a co-founder and co-pastor of Circle of Mercy, an ecumenical congregation in Asheville, North Carolina. She is the author of several books, including *Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice, and Us* (Westminster John Knox, 1994).

Note

*Population Reference Bureau, "World Population Data Sheet," Washington, DC, 2011, 1.



Resources

"Enough Is Enough" by Walter Brueggemann
(originally in *The Other Side*, November/ December 2001)

<http://liferemixed.net/2012/02/29/enough-is-enough>

An article exploring theologies of abundance and scarcity

Enough for Everyone

<http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/enough/about-enough-everyone>

PC(USA)'s lifestyle integrity and education program, that explores the implications for the world of how we live and spend