

## FEAR NO EVIL

Norman Cousins tells us of an incident at a high school football game in Monterey Park. Several people left their seats because they became nauseated. They reported to the physician in attendance that they felt queasy after drinking cola bought at the concession stand. He, in turn, asked that a public announcement be made to request people not to drink any cola beverage because of the danger of contamination.

“At that point,” Cousins noted, “about two hundred people became instantly ill and had to be hospitalized.” Their recovery was subsequently enhanced by the news that there was nothing wrong with the cola after all.

If you had been there and had been one of the two hundred people who got sick, would you have been mortified when it turned out that there was nothing wrong with the cola after all? I vividly remember a Saturday morning when I was in the fourth grade. Saturday morning was big-chore time. In my case, it meant cleaning all the animal pens and stalls. It seemed like a big job to me. And every week, it was there to do over again, and looking bigger. On this particular Saturday morning, I just was not feeling well at all. My stomach hurt, I felt sore all over, it was like my head was in some kind of vise, and everything felt weighted down.

I had not been in bed very long when my friend Travis called to invite me to go riding. My parents shrugged and said I probably was not well enough, but if my illness should pass and I got my chores done, I could go. Well, I felt much better in no time – about three seconds. In fact, I so overrecovered that I got all the pens and corrals cleaned in two hours instead of the normal four, and they were cleaned better than usual, just to make sure there would be no reason to keep me home.

That memory still haunts me, because I was not kidding about feeling rotten that morning. I still wonder if I was really coming down with the flu. And I doubt that any of those two hundred people wanted to miss the game and go visit the hospital. They really did feel sick and were no doubt anxious, wondering if they had been severely poisoned.

A couple of years ago, at least half of the people in this country were seriously frightened, truly wondering if they would ever see the beginning of the next year. The details of the situation have not changed much; no great conversion has swept over the nations of the world. There is no real reason for more confidence now than there was then, and there may even be reason for a little less. But somehow the worst of that particular wave of fear has washed over us and passed on. Isn't it strange how fear comes and goes like that?

I am only pointing to the obvious fact that fear cripples us. There is always a lot to fear. No human has ever lived a five-minute span of time on this earth in which it was not possible to reasonably imagine great disasters occurring. The potential for fear is always with us – always all around us. And each and every time we become fearful, it is disastrous. It is not always easy to recover and go clean the corral or to sheepishly get out of the hospital and go home. Sometimes the fear sticks and cripples us for life. Sometimes the fear destroys things hard to replace.

A scuba diver, for instance, is not likely to panic twice. Down under, most anything she does in fear will kill her. But the scuba diver knows that. That's a great advantage. A diver simulates, thinks, imagines, and constantly trains herself not to panic.

Sometimes in the course of normal days, we forget to stay in training. Then fear catches us unaware and we run in front of cars, ruin a relationship, or do not recover in time and somebody has to operate. (Or we blow the deal, the job, the marriage, or the life.)

I am not likely to end up in the hospital over a cola scare. You may not be likely to get the flu to avoid cleaning the corral. But all of us have our own vulnerable places. And fear cripples us all – cuts our power, corrupts our perspective, warps the patterns of our love and our life.

One of the things the Christian Faith is best at is freeing people from fear. Faith in Jesus Christ is a giant fear-killer. There is a lot of verbiage floating around, and we all know that talking about faith is not always the same as having it. But any person who actually starts walking the Christian Path also starts losing fear after fear.

Reason does not help against fear unless it is backed by authentic conviction, experience, and emotion, but it can still line it out for us so we can see where we are and what to do.

First of all, it is not possible for us to believe in the love of a personal, almighty God without starting to lose our fears. “*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*” (Romans 8:35) We do not start out with full-blown faith like that, but we also cannot touch the love of Jesus without getting onto the theme. Slowly, relentlessly – sometimes not so slowly – it grabs our fears by the scruff of the neck and throws them out of our lives. In our day, the *sword* is nuclear war, the *peril* is overpopulation, the *nakedness* is depleted resources, the *famine* is everything from losing a promotion to actual starvation. Even then, it’s the *persecution* that frightens some of us – the not being liked, accepted, approved of.

With any of these things, the plan is simple: You fix it if you can. If you cannot fix it, you try to improve it, making it better than it was. If you cannot improve it, you try to cut the losses, minimizing the damage as much as possible. Fear begins with that last step. If you cannot improve things, how bad will the damage get? But fear comes heaviest with the next level. What if you cannot minimize it, stop it, delay it? What if it comes down to the bottom line, like the bumper sticker that reads: “Cancer cures smoking”? What if the headlines read: “Chemists announce abortion no longer an issue – secret chemical leaked into waterways in recent experiment leaves all males sterile”? Or: “Pentagon announces there will be no more population problem after tomorrow”? What do we do if things really *are* beyond our control? Funny that it takes some of us so long to realize that they really always have been. Nevertheless, if they blow up the world, that is serious, but it’s not like some final disaster. It’s not like some irreparable or incontrovertible loss. People who think so either do not know God or do not understand the definition of “almighty.”

Second, you cannot get into the Christian experience without facing and coming to terms with death. We do not save that for last or hide it in some secret mystery known only to 32nd-degree saints. The crucifixion of Jesus is right at the front door of the Christian Faith. That’s why, in so many ways, the first step is the hardest. You do not come in here and then find out you do not have to die. You have to die to get in here! Baptism is drowning. Every communion meal, we remember: take death unto ourselves again and come through it. Paul says we “*die every day.*” (I Corinthians 15:31) Jesus says, “*take up your cross daily and follow me.*” (Luke 9:23) The whole concept of dying with Christ is not saved for the veteran saints. It’s for openers – for the novices and initiates and beginners.

Again and again we stumble onto the mystery and miracle of it. I do not mean just in the past or in Scripture; I mean we experience it for ourselves and we discover it in people all around us. Again and again, story after story, we hear the great note of freedom that comes to people who surrender to their own death and go beyond it. A hospital, an accident, a near accident, a crisis, a suicidal depression – and then the familiar but incredible thread: “I felt like my life should have ended right there. It was like it was finished and over. And now each day is like a bonus, an unexpected gift, a special extension I have no rights to or claims on. It belongs to God, and so I try to let it be any way God wants it. But I died back there at that last fork in the road.”

And not only do we hear it again and again, but is it not also from the very people who seem most alive, most fearless, most full of love and peace and joy? Of course! That is the doorway into the Christian Faith. (And not all who come through it call it “Christian.”) This Life is borrowed time in an impermanent realm. There is no security here. There is no reason for us to expect resolutions, solutions, vindication, or final satisfaction here. Knowing that is a great release, and so the fears begin to crumble.

Third, when things get rough, we do have Christ’s presence with us. Strangely enough, this really is more for the seasoned saints. Not that the Holy Spirit is not present with each of us always, but it takes most of us quite some time to learn how true and powerful and perfect our shepherding is. That’s a whole beautiful subject of its own. Fortunately, in times of trial and crisis, we tend to reorder priorities and clear channels almost automatically, and thus we often become much more aware of the Spirit’s presence. So this also belongs with the ways in which faith in Jesus Christ is a giant fear-killer.

How do I do the opposite of pounding the pulpit? I need to say this – not quietly, because it’s very important – yet it needs to come softly, light on its feet: Fear is the greatest of sins. It shares this position with pride. It is the backside of pride. Fear separates us from God, from our true selves, from each other, from the truth. If we want to know where we are being faithless, apostate, sinful, and rebellious, we have only to look to our fears. If we want to know where we are doing the most damage, we can look to our fears. If we want to discover where we most need to apply our faith and invite Christ into our conscious living, we can look to our fears. The reason I need to put it lightly is because if you hear it at all, it still comes crashing down as if all the prophets of the past were pounding pulpits. After all, losing our

fears is one way to summarize the whole Christian drama. Our fears keep us from loving, from healing, from knowing our identity, from knowing each other, from being able to do the miracles Jesus tried to teach us, within and without.

So the book of Hebrews reminds us that we are the household of God (another way of saying “citizens of God’s Kingdom”). Moses was a great servant in that household. Christ is the Son, set over the household. But *we* are the household – “*if only we are fearless and keep our hope high.*” If not – if we are not a people shedding fear and helping each other and anyone who comes here to shed their fears – well, we may have a sign out front and our name in the paper, but we are not really what we say we are. Where Christ is, people lose fear and come to life. If that is not happening, Christ is not present. (Well, He is not being acknowledged or followed.)

So if you are not in training, get back into training. Be like the scuba diver or the soldier or whatever your favorite image is of a person who cannot afford to react in fear. Simulate, imagine, take yourself into the places and situations you know are fearful to you. Then bring the power of your faith to bear: The love of Almighty God. The death you have already died in Christ. The presence of the Holy Spirit with you. And sometimes when you meditate, bring that best phrase of the 23rd Psalm before you: *I will fear no evil.* Just that one phrase. Let it sit there in your consciousness until everything else has ebbed away. *I will fear no evil.* Then let it talk: NO evil? No EVIL? Do you mean it? Stay with the meditation until you mean it.

Does evil have any power? Is not all evil – all of Satan’s tricks – merely a corruption of the good? Only God has true power. Satan is a liar. Evil cannot last; it has no patience. It is not that well-organized. It has not got vision or commitment or love enough to keep it going for long enough. If you have decided to trust, what do you trust? God? *I will fear no evil.* I am not trying to do the meditation for you; just hinting enough to hope some of you will get into it. Of course, some of you are afraid to pray or meditate. You fear it, not knowing what might happen to you if you get into the clutches of the Divine Power. It’s okay to fear the good. That makes sense. Goodness and God have real power. That kind of fear is the beginning of wisdom. And for some odd reason, people who truly fear God do not stay apart from God for very long.

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In the seventeenth year of his work as a missionary, he had never been in more peril. Surrounded by hostile and infuriated tribes and strongly tempted to flee, he wrote in his journal: “January 14, 1856. Evening. Felt much turmoil of spirit in prospect of having all my plans for the welfare of this great region and this teeming population knocked on the head by savages to-morrow. But I read that Jesus said: ‘All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.’ It is the word of a gentleman of the most strict and sacred honour, so there’s an end of it! I will not cross furtively tonight as I intended. Should such a man as I flee? Nay, verily, I shall take observations for latitude and longitude to-night, though they may be the last. I feel quite calm now, thank God!”

Later, upon receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Glasgow, he recalls it: “Would you like me to tell you what supported me through all the years of exile among people whose language I could not understand, and whose attitude towards me was always uncertain and often hostile? It was this: ‘Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world!’ On those words I staked everything.” And as you know, David Livingston went back to Africa and went right on staking everything on those words, until time and life ran out.

The question is not: Will time and life run out?

The question is: Will we live it in fear or in faith?