Opinion
Guest Voices



"Christ at the Sea of Galilee" (circa 1570s), by Circle of Tintoretto (Italian, 1518-1594) (Artvee)



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July 25, 2024

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Editor's note: This column is adapted from Daniel P. Horan' latest book Fear and Faith: Hope and Wholeness in a Fractured World *(Paulist Press, 2024).*

Fear is one of the more common themes in the Christian tradition. Its importance can be witnessed throughout both testaments of sacred Scripture, frequently appearing on the tongues of prophets and priests, victims and oppressors — and disciples, doubters and deniers.

Too often, particularly today, what the public perceives as most important to the Christian tradition usually does not appear in the Bible. Such is the case with the overt alignment between certain church leaders and politicians leading to discrimination against minoritized communities allegedly justified by Scripture and tradition, anti-LGBTQ+ views and policies, the defense of and support for systems of patriarchy and sexism and many other issues that never appear in the ministry and preaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

This distorted perception of Christianity — especially in the American context — is understandable, if mistaken, because far too many of our Christian religious leaders and ordinary women and men anachronistically project the moral, political and social concerns of their focus into the life and times of the Hebrew prophets and the Word made Flesh.

As our national election cycle reaches its final months with increasing tumult and uncertainty, some politicians will lean into the discourse of fear and try to justify their positions according to faith (one only has to see how former president Donald Trump has been invoking divine favor in his surviving an assassination attempt earlier this month).

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One of the clear takeaways from the New Testament is that fear is the enemy of Christian discipleship. One of the most consistent phrases to come out of the mouth of Jesus Christ — both before and after his death and resurrection — is "do not be afraid." And I don't think it's coincidental. Rather, I think Jesus' focus on fear — as was the case with the oracles of the prophets, or the hymns of the psalmists, or the proverbs of the wisdom literature — was because it poses a singular threat to our ability to form right relationships with ourselves, one another, the rest of creation and with God. We are reminded with predictable regularity not to be afraid, to have courage and be strong, because we are particularly vulnerable to fear and need the reminder from Jesus himself.

Fear has always been and continues to be a challenging dimension of our human experience. Its centrality in Scripture and the important consequences that fear elicits make it an important subject for people of faith, particularly those who are interested in a mature Christian spirituality. For this reason, coupled with the recognizable increase of fear in our world today, I have found myself drawn to the question of fear, how it functions and its implications for Christianity.

One especially interesting framing of this human condition comes to us from the late Vietnamese Buddhist Zen master and spiritual writer Thich Nhat Hanh. Nhat Hanh proposes the concept of "original fear" as a way to consider the lifelong dynamics of human finitude. Obviously, because he is not writing from within the Christian tradition, Nhat Hanh does not engage the Christian notion of "sin." But his reflections on "original fear" offer those within the Christian tradition some food for thought, as does his proposal that all people concurrently experience what he calls "original desire." One might think of this as something analogous to reflections on "original blessing" by the Christian spiritual writer Matthew Fox.

Nhat Hanh explains what he means by "original fear" with the following reflection:

> Everyone is afraid sometimes. We fear loneliness, being abandoned, growing old, dying, and being sick, among many other things. Sometimes, we may feel fear without knowing exactly why. If we practice looking deeply, we see that this fear is the result of that original fear from the time we were newborns, helpless and unable to do anything for ourselves. Even though we have grown into adults, that original fear and original desire are both still alive... As adults, we're often afraid to remember or be in touch

> with that original fear and desire, because the helpless child in us is still alive.

Nhat Hanh believes that the vulnerability and precarity we all experience as helpless infants affect our perception of safety, the world and ourselves, even decades after we have grown into adulthood. The fear is, as he suggests, paralyzing because as newborns we are vulnerable without qualification; we are entirely exposed and need the assistance and support of somebody else for everything. Nhat Hanh notes that "for most of us, our original fear continues in some form."

The question isn't whether we will experience fear but rather what are we going to do when we find ourselves afraid?

His suggestion, unsurprisingly, is that we need to develop a practice of meditation. We need to be attentive to the stirrings of fear and anxiety while also remembering and attuning ourselves to the desire deep within us. "That original fear — and its other face, original desire — is always there," he writes. "The infant, with his fear and his desire, is always alive in us."

How do we address this fear?

How do we face the radical vulnerability that continues to shape our lifelong worldview? Nhat Hanh notes that "much of the fear, anxiety, and anguish that we experience is there because the inner child has not been liberated. That child is afraid to come out to the present moment, and so your mindfulness, your breath, can help this child to realize that she is safe and can be free."

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This way of thinking about the persistence of fear in human experience can seem abstract to some people, but what I appreciate about Nhat Hanh's reflections is that they invite us to go deeper into time and space, beyond this particular moment of my fear and anxiety, beyond this particular circumstance in which I find myself afraid, to consider both the historical and spiritual origins of my discomfort and sense of vulnerability as well as the universality of the human experience.

On the theme of the universality of the phenomenon of fear, Nhat Hanh offers thoughts about how fear does not arise merely from the sum of our own individual

experiences but is also affected by our ancestors and social contexts:

> Our original fear isn't just from our own birth and childhood; the fear we feel comes from both our own and our ancestors' original fear. Our ancestors suffered from hunger and other dangers, and there were moments when they were extremely anxious. That kind of fear has been transmitted to us; every one of us has that fear inside. And because we suffer from that fear, we make the situation worse. We worry about our safety, our job, and our family. We worry about external threats. Even when nothing bad is happening, that doesn’t prevent us from feeling fear.

In addition to the universality of fear, another dimension of fear that we ought to name is its often-diffuse shadow existence that haunts humanity. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman summarized this aspect of fear well when he wrote:

> Fear is at its most fearsome when it is diffuse, scattered, unclear, unattached, unanchored, free floating, with no clear address or cause; when it haunts us with no visible rhyme or reason, when the menace we should be afraid of can be glimpsed everywhere but is nowhere to be seen. "Fear" is the name we give to our *uncertainty*; to our *ignorance* of the threat and of what is to be *done*—what can and what can't be—to stop it in its tracks—or to fight it back if stopping it is beyond our power.

The diffusivity of fear is a dangerous condition in that such anxiety can be tapped into and co-opted by maleficent actors who seek to capitalize on this universal human phenomenon to advance their own personal goals and ambitions. The result, as we have seen historically and contemporaneously, is increased distrust, polarization and violence.

As we continue to live in challenging and precarious times, we must be attentive to how fear is functioning — rhetorically by politicians and parties, personally within ourselves — in order to resist becoming co-opted means for another's political ends. As people of faith, we must heed the repeated words of Jesus to "be not afraid," for our succumbing to such fear will prevent us from living as authentic disciples of Christ. And in this unsettling time, we must root ourselves in Christian hope and not politicized fear.

A version of this story appeared in the **Aug 16-29, 2024** print issue under the headline: Fear and faith in unsettling political times.