

A LETTER TO THE ANXIOUS AND AFRAID CHRISTIAN
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So many people are scared about so many different things.

There is something about fear that can feel addicting, like returning again and again to lift the edge of a scab, or repeatedly tapping your tongue to the roof of your mouth where it was burned by last night's pizza slice. There is something uncomfortable, maybe even painful, about regularly checking in on our fears, and yet there is also something satisfying in reaching out to find that they are still present. How is it that fear can comfort us even as it terrorizes us so effectively?

Marketers and politicians and journalists of modern American society maneuver in the medium of human fear, openly admitting that they use our fears to possess our attention and to influence our daily thoughts and conversations and actions. The human addiction to fear (and the anxiety that leeches out of it) is what keeps the weapons selling, the polls adjusting, and the chyron crawling across the screen with yet another announcement of something deemed worthy of our stress and anxiety. Fears of losing land, of losing power, of losing autonomy then trigger wars across borders, moves billions of dollars, and provokes lines of suspicion to be drawn through dinner tables and between friends. Fear is a powerful motivator.

God knows, as scripture will remind us, that humanity will cradle fear like a security blanket when we are left to our own devices. Scripture tells of how people fear other people, like when Jacob feared Esau, and Elijah feared Jezebel. Scripture tells of how people fear social pressures and norms, like when Abraham feared the authority of the ruler who lusted for Sarah, and Mary and Joseph feared the shame of an unexpected pregnancy. Scripture tells of how people feared the might of creation, like the disciples in

the storm and the sailors traveling with Jonah. And scripture tells about how people feared the metaphysical power of the spiritual realm, like the shepherds in the field, and the women at the tomb.

But since the councils last modified the canon, humanity has embraced new forces to fear in addition to the old. We fear technology, whether it is the printing press, industrialization, or artificial intelligence. We fear human extinction, whether it be by nuclear fallout or rapid climate change. We fear the collapse of human institutions, whether it be governments and democracies, or Christendom itself. We collectively spend our time disagreeing about what we should do to manage these fears—diplomacy or violence?, regulations or free markets?, negotiate or boycott?—but we still seem to collectively agree on one thing: that our fears are unquestionably worthy of our constant attention and anxiety. We often appear to believe that our choice to obsessively pick at the edge of the scab of fear is what will ultimately keep our fears at bay, no doubt forgetting that it is by repeatedly lifting at the edge of a scab that we allow infection to grow.

It may be that a difference between the fearful humanity of the first century and the fearful humanity of today is that modern humanity possesses far less fear for the metaphysical, spiritual realm than did our ancient and vintage counterparts. For about sixteen hundred years after Jesus rose again, human societies accepted a certain amount of helplessness concerning their fate. It was often understood as fact that people were at the whim of forces they could not see and could not comprehend—local, foreign, or angry gods who would either withhold the rain or drown them in floods, who would either cause their crops to flourish or strike them with pestilence, who would cause one baby to be born in a palace and another in a manger. Perhaps the right sacrifice, the right

pilgrimage, or the right ritual might appease the unseen forces that ultimately controlled their lives...but perhaps not. Ultimately, it was accepted that life was not under the control of ancient human hands.

But today, we are in control, rarely assuming that there is any force that we cannot manipulate. When one is diagnosed with breast cancer, we point the finger at the BRCA gene and treat the disease with surgery and chemotherapy, all while raising money for further cancer research with a 5k fun run. When the hurricane lands, we point the finger at climate change and use money and the newest machinery to repair the damage, so that we might rebuild better than before. When we are too hot, we install air conditioning. When we are too cold, we put heating packets into gloves capable of insulating our fingers from subzero temperatures. When there is famine and drought, we ship water and food from around the world to help stem the suffering. Today, we are not seemingly at the whim of any unseen force that we do not understand.

One would think the Christian church, with its fearful wonder and awe for the Almighty God whom we can not see and can not control, would stand as an exception to the practice of paying constant attention to our fears. But the Christian church throughout time has not proved to be an exception to the rule—far from it. When the printing press allowed for mass production of texts, the church created and suppressed the Index of Forbidden Books, choosing to stoke fears that these texts were dangerous to the faith. When the Enlightenment emphasized reason, individuality, and secular governance, the church stoked fear about the erosion of traditional, moral values, and worked to suppress new philosophy and thought. When Darwin presented the theory of natural selection, the church stoked fear that evolution was incompatible with scripture (and incompatible with

attendance in heaven), choosing to suppress it's teaching both in religious and in secular venues alike. Over the decades, as a mode of control, the church has stoked fears in and has suppressed technology, science, women, LGBTQIA+ communities, ecumenism, and many more. Over and over again, the Church that has been entrusted with the Good News that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God," has instead put notable energy into promoting a gospel of fear as a vehicle for control—consciously or unconsciously insisting that, should the church not exercise it's authority and control, then the Good News of God might indeed be overrun and made obsolete by human curiosity, exploration, and innovation.

Why does the church do this? Perhaps we have forgotten that Jesus was afraid too. His heart was troubled as he foretold his death. He crouched over in tears and blood and sweat as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. He cried out in anguish as he hung dying on the cross. He was afraid of the very thing we are most afraid of: death and extinction. But at no point did he aim an accusatory finger at another in blame. At no point did he provoke fear against the authorities that arrested him—he not only upheld their value and worth (like when he healed the soldier's ear), but also insisted that the neglected and oppressed were equally as valuable and worthy as they. At no point did he attempt to suppress the influence of the powerful—he instead met them at their dinner tables to challenge them to consider a different interpretation of what they were certain they already knew. At no point was Jesus on earth to save God from the actions of humanity. Rather, he arrived on earth to embrace humanity as God. Jesus had everything

to fear, to the point of losing his life. And when his greatest fear became reality, his faith and existence was not extinguished, but was eternally set free.

So many people are scared about so many different things. But if Jesus was not extinguished by his fears, then neither shall we be extinguished by ours. We as Christians must not trade this Good News that we have been given to share for a 24-hr news cycle of fear that wraps us in a blanket of anxiety and false control. No amount of fear can diminish the unseen and unknown spiritual power of God, who didn't conquer fear by controlling it, nor by suppressing it, nor by redirecting and magnifying it, but only by surrendering to it.