

# Moving Through Fear in the Climate and Ecological Emergency

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Last year, in early November, five scientists published a paper in the journal *Bioscience*. They got to the point in their first two sentences:

*"Scientists have a moral obligation to clearly warn humanity of any catastrophic threat and to 'tell it like it is.' On the basis of this obligation ... we declare, with more than 11,000 scientist signatories from around the world, clearly and unequivocally that planet Earth is facing a climate emergency."*

Those 11,000+ scientists are from 153 countries. Their warning is not the artifact of opinion polls, marketing, or any agenda that expresses partisan politics. Hoping to be a catalyst for global action, they published it a few weeks before the most recent UN Climate Summit. Greta Thunberg, the well-known Swedish youth activist, put it in a more personal way to Member States at the Summit:

*"You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying; entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!"*

As a result of strategically disruptive non-actions taken by the United States and Australia (there were others), the Summit turned out to be a failure of non-action. Their disruption was surreal. It mirrored – in the sense of Ingmar Bergman's "through a glass darkly" -- the fires burning in Australia and Brazil, drought in Zambia, flooding in south Asia, waves of refugees fleeing from parts of Central America, and melting polar regions. Despite that, those thousands of scientists will not give up or give in, nor will Greta and increasing numbers of young people who speak from the streets.

Are they afraid? They probably are -- being reasonable people -- yet they're not letting themselves become frozen by their fear. They know that a lot of difficult changes must be made now, and they're refusing to let fear, anxiety, apathy, and disenchantment rule their lives.

Here I'm writing mainly for people in our congregations, communities, and holy orders. We all struggle with the strange disorientation that this fear creates. Talking about it with Janet Fedders, Minister Provincial of the Franciscan Third Order, she says that we must be willing and faithful enough "to get out of our comfort zones," knowing how easy it is to want to retreat permanently into whatever gives us feelings of relief. Br. Luis Antonio Rivera, in the Diocese of New York, expressed the same meaning in a different way: we must "fall in love again," he said, with God and God's creation. They're both talking about faith combined with courage.

Let me draw upon two quick examples of the beguiling comfort zone, one involving ordinary public conversations, like we might have at coffee hour in church, and the second from more private, pastoral meetings.

The first requires some attentive listening: Lately, I hear people asking questions like, "*what do you believe about the climate issue?*" In a sense, this is a good question. One might assume that the intent is to invite group discussion, and it could actually succeed. But in a society like ours, where education is highly valued, one would think that the better question would be: "*what do scientists say about the climate crisis?*" Our thoughts are increasingly shaped not by facts or science, but by money spent to shape how we think, individually and together. So it's no surprise that the more frequent question these days would be, "*what do you believe about ...?*" That's not far from asking which news broadcasting network we watch in our homes, or which side of a supposed controversy we take. Sometimes, that's exactly the kind of information that the person asking the question really wants to know: "*are you one of us, or one of them?*" It's an invitation to retreat into a comfort zone, and that usually ends discussions by dividing the group. Some feel secure within the comfort zone; for others, their fear is magnified. In different ways, both have become frozen by their fear.

Here's the second example. Sitting with a friend in a local diner, he shares some unexpected, private thoughts -- essentially his "daydreams," which involve suddenly discovering that the scientific facts about the climate emergency are all a mistake. We talk about it for a while, and I tell him that the same thing happens to me now and again. I can't think of anything better than to wake up one morning

and discover that it's not really real. Neither of us wish that it's a "hoax," and we both know that these occasional fantasies are not signs of weakness or cowardice. They are a deeply soulful and realistic appreciation for the almost unthinkable severity of what's going on. It's only a step away from praying for a miracle. As many of my activist friends say, we are called to facilitate the miracle that we all need – to work through our fear faithfully, finding the courage to love.

It was James Parks Morton, *may his soul rest in peace*, once Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, who helped me understand what this means for the church. Sitting in his office about twenty-five years ago, he said that what we customarily call "the church" is ultimately "the whole Creation in a process of renewal." To enter deeply into worship on Sunday mornings is to remember that deeply in the soul. "*Do this in remembrance of me,*" Jesus said. Survival depends on whether we're willing to do that: to move out of our comfort zones, take up our crosses, and fall in love again with God and God's Creation.