

Questions of Faith

October 8, 2017

Dear Pastor,

I'm so tired of being scared. The world feels like it's spinning faster and faster. It feels like things are getting worse in the world and there is nothing I can do to stop it. Why does God allow his children to live in such fear? Why does he allow us to teeter on the edge of nuclear annihilation?

The consuming fear you are experiencing was also the experience of Jesus in the garden on the night of his arrest. His prayer began, "Abba, Father" which is literally translated, "Daddy". If you pay attention to his prayer it literally begins, "Daddy, please don't let this happen to me (his arrest, mock trial, torture and being nailed to a cross to die)". If anyone ever questions the full humanity of Jesus, this one prayer answers the question - Jesus was scared for his own well-being. As scared as any human can become for their own well-being. As scared as you are now.

But then something quite dramatic occurs. Jesus' focus changes. Jesus directs his attention from himself and returns it to God's will. "But only if it be your will". Jesus' entire ministry has had one single focus, pursuing God's will. In a dramatic slip into his full humanity, Jesus focused on himself, became overwhelmingly frightened, and pled for his well-being. But then something happened. He permitted the faith that he had nurtured all his life to strengthen him and direct his focus again to pursuing God's will. It was then that the soldiers burst into the garden - burst into the garden with their torches, their swords and their hatred.

Things suddenly got very bad, very quickly.

One of the disciples, seeing what was happening, "struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear (Luke 22:50)". Simply, the disciple tried to stop the injustice. Jesus responded, "Stop! No more of this!" Then Jesus touched the slave's ear and healed him. Jesus' focus was no longer on himself. Jesus' focus was on others. Jesus' focus was on the well-being of others, on their wholeness. It was that single-minded, steady focus on others that gave him the spiritual and emotional strength to accept and endure what would happen in the next twelve hours. And it would be awful.

Jesus would die, in considerable humiliation and pain. Even his last breath, his last words on the cross, were spoken to ease the pain of others, “My God, My God, why have you left me all alone?” These were not words spoken in fear and a sense of abandonment, though at first glance, that is what they seem. Rather, hanging from the cross, Jesus saw fear and a sense of abandonment in the eyes of his mother, his disciples, and others he loved. It was then, with his last breath, he knew his work was not yet finished. Jesus needed to preach one last sermon - a sermon of hope. But he could not do it alone. He only had a little breath left in him. So, he gave to the people gathered at the base of the cross a prompt: “My God, my God, why have you left me all alone.” These are the first words of Psalm 22. Those gathered that day at the foot of the cross would recognize these words of King David.

And, then, they would begin reciting the entire Psalm to themselves. That Psalm, Psalm 22, has three movements. First is David’s cry of anguish: “My God, my God, why have you left me all alone”. The second movement is David’s insistence that, in spite of God leaving him all alone, David will not let go of hope in almighty God - because David remembers God’s faithfulness in the past. The third movement comes with a sense of David’s embarrassment:

“Now I see, now I know, you never abandoned me, you were always there, even in the darkest moment. Therefore, God, I will praise you for the rest of my life”. And when Jesus saw in their eyes that they had finished reciting Psalm 22, saw hope restored in their eyes and heart, Jesus then knew his work was done. Jesus said, “It is finished” and dropped his head and died. With his last breath, Jesus did not focus on what was happening to him. Jesus sought to restore hope for others.

All I can say is that the fear you feel right now is natural. It is felt by many. Jesus felt it. As followers of Jesus, what we have is Jesus’ example: Be honest to God with your fear, as Jesus was in the garden, then turn your focus from your own survival and well-being and ask, “How, O God, might I do your will and help others with their fears and insecurities”?

It is a joy to be your pastor,
Doug

***If you would like to submit a question to this column,
email your question to doughood@firstdelray.com.***