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“Of What Are You Afraid?”

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Psalm 66:8–20; 1 Peter 3:13–22

For every fear or anxiety we have, you and I also have a coping strategy. Sometimes our coping strategies successfully mitigate or contain those fears so that we can live productively. Sometimes those coping strategies provide only a thin veneer as a cover. And then some coping strategies compound the problem.

Mark Twain said: “I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened.” Some people call this “borrowing trouble,” worrying about possibilities instead of realities. This actually may be a form of coping, focusing on something that is not real as a way of avoiding what is real.

Yet the truth is that real situations cause us real suffering, and these need not be merely a figment of our imagination. Gasoline prices going through the roof; aging parents becoming infirm and sickness afflicting our children or spouse; a business is failing; a family member serving overseas in harm’s way. We don’t have to make stuff up to be worried.

In college and grad school, my frantic end-of-semester cramming predominated my methodological approach to study. Only in my second graduate program did I finally figure out my fear of impending assignment due dates or exams were best addressed by systematically studying. That’s obvious enough, but some of us are slower than others. That coping strategy proved far more effective for me.

Have you ever known people with a pressing project due date who invariably clean their house or their office before starting the project? Now what's up with that? And if you happen by my office and notice it organized and tidy, it's merely a coincidence.

We attempt to contain our fears with coping strategies.

A State Trooper pulled a car over for speeding. When the officer approached the car, he noticed it was an elderly woman. He asked for her driver's license, registration, and proof of insurance. The woman pulled out a handful of cards from her purse and handed them to him. As he was rifling through the stack to find the information, the trooper was surprised to discover she had a concealed weapon permit.

He inquired if she had a weapon in her possession. She responded that she did: a .45 automatic in her glove box.

For some reason, the trooper asked if she had any other firearms. Yes, she said, a 9 mm Glock in her center console.

The trooper then asked if that was all the weapons she had in her possession. "I have one more, a .38 special in my purse."

The trooper thought for a few seconds, and then asked her, "Do you mind telling me what you are so afraid of?"

She looked him square in the eye, and said, "Not a darn thing."

What are you afraid of, and what coping strategies are you using?

I believe the vast majority of human fears and anxieties have to do with suffering, with a loss or potential loss of some kind. Our text from 1 Peter says: "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.... [I]n the days of Noah, eight persons were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from

the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ....”

God in Christ addresses directly the need of human beings. The divine strategy is for Jesus to go through the challenges rather than avoid or deny or somehow contain the challenges. Faith is never a safety net from life’s perils; it does not provide a secret detour or insurance policy from trouble.

The passage from First Peter is addressed to a wide variety of Christians in Asia Minor. That group was suffering not only the commonplace incidents of daily living, but primarily because they had identified themselves as Christians and were living in ways that their non-Christian neighbors did not understand.

First Peter speaks about the ancient story of Noah, another character ridiculed and rejected by his neighbors. First Peter reminds his community that in the days of Noah, eight persons were saved through water. He applies that same understanding to Christians in their baptism—baptism is not merely the veneer of removing dirt from the body; it is the restoration of a wholesome conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ!

First Peter claims that the Christian community is changed because of Jesus Christ’s suffering. How might that be true?

Dr. Abraham Verghese served on a medical team that cared for victims of Hurricane Katrina. Over the years of practicing medicine, he had learned to steel himself from human suffering in order for him to maintain the objectivity needed to do his job as a doctor.

In New Orleans, he treated an elderly gentleman who had been rescued from his home.

The home was destroyed and the man perched on a narrow ledge for two days without food or water. A boat finally picked him up, and he was dropped off on a bridge packed with other refugees.

Dr. Verghese was deeply moved by the man's story. The doctor uttered to him the only words he could think of: "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." The doctor had betrayed his professional distance that kept him both objective and safe. The man stood up, shook his hand, and said, "Thank you, Doc. I needed to hear that."

Later on, the doctor reflected about this encounter and the way he tried to insulate himself from human suffering. He realized that his training and approach ultimately limited his goal of healing. He concluded: "The willingness to be wounded may be all we have to offer." (Abraham Verghese, "Close Encounters of the Human Kind," *New York Times Magazine*, Sept 18, 2005, 192; by way of *Feasting on the Word*)

Is that enough?

You and I have traumatic experiences of tragedy and heartbreak. It might be seeing an 18 year old boy clinging to life in a neurointensive care unit, or a 48 year old man with a wife and two children die of a massive heart attack. There is nothing I can do to change the reality of such situations. I don't want my loved ones to go through that, and I don't want to go through it.

Most of the time I am not in any position to prevent such things. But the one thing you and I can do is to be present when such moments come. I can walk with others and others can walk with me through such awful realities. We can tell each other the truth about how terrible our situations are, and we can cling to each other and the hopes we share.

Walking with each other in such a manner may prove not only to be more effective in addressing the fearful realities of our lives: it may prove to be redemptive.

That is the claim First Peter makes about Jesus Christ and our association with him through baptism. We walk through the valley of the shadow, not around it. We are invited to come with all our fears and anxieties.

The second claim First Peter makes is the motivation for remaining faithful in face of opposition and perhaps even persecution. We may not think of ourselves as

people who have faced persecution. But I think more of us have than we may realize.

The bullying of children and teens is not a new phenomenon—it is only recently at the forefront of the news media. People who have been bullied have a sense of what it is like to be persecuted.

People of color or minority groups have been ostracized and marginalized in such a way as to depersonalize them. Depersonalization is the first step to oppression and persecution. If we don't consider something human, then we do not accord it any rights or protections.

One of the balancing acts of the Christian community is learning to suffer injustice *and* advocating for those persons or groups who are experiencing injustice. The community of faith can rejoice in its own suffering for doing good, but it must never become silent in the face of dehumanization or persecution of others. First Peter puts it this way: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

When my rights are trampled, I do not want to speak with restraint or gentleness or reverence! Do you? Truly it is a spiritual challenge. And there are times when we grow weary of well-doing and feel that our lives of faith make no difference or impact for good.

It is then that we must remember who it is that we serve, who it is that will be the judge and redeemer, who it is that loves and grants grace and provides, even in the midst of challenge and anxiety and loss.

A prayer associated with Mother Teresa helps to put this in context. It is known as the “Do It Anyway” Prayer.

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere, people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway.

The good you do today will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.