

Letting Go

“Jesus said, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’”

Then the religious authorities began to complain about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’ They were saying, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves.”

These feel like dangerous and troubled times and people are caught up in fear and anxiety. For many it feels as though a way of life that has been a birthright for generations is under constant threat. On the surface, life plods along, just as it should.

This fearfulness is held at a fragile arm’s length away by going about the ordinary business of life. People go to work, have dinner with friends, observe national holidays, and in the midst of it all, people pray and pray that somehow God will intervene and this difficult time will end.

Does this sound familiar? I could perhaps be talking about the times in which we now live, but I’ve actually just described the situation in Palestine as Jesus was making his way to Jerusalem.

Then as now, in the midst of our own deeply troubled times, Jesus stands before the hungry multitude in a world often starved of peace by war, fear, oppression and hopelessness. And he offers us the bread that gives life. He offers us the good news that Jesus feeds us in both body and soul. He dramatically demonstrates that his power and grace transcend our limited understanding and that God’s abundance always out measures scarcity.

Jesus offers us what we need. But, living out of places of fear and anxiety, we are often blind to what we really need and become lost instead in what we think we want.

Jesus comes to us with a message of hope. But, if we remain transfixed by our fears we are in great danger of falling into despair and turning a dark and foreboding eye on the world in which we live as well as on the others with whom we share it.

When Jesus withdraws from the crowd, he demonstrates that he offers his gift of grace without issuing a claim to worldly power. The irony here is that they want Jesus to become a mirror reflection of the very kind of power that currently drives their own fear.

The crowd cannot seem to grasp that the true glory of God has nothing to do with worldly power. It seems that they, like us in our own anxious times, want immediate and definitive action, even as we will hear soon, violent action, rather than risking to trust that God is alive and at work in our troubled world. What is behind our driving and often inexplicable desire to put aside the true nature of our merciful God and attempt instead to wrestle the control of the world back into our own incapable hands?

I believe that there is an old and deep fear that drives our almost inescapable need for control. The fear that I’m referring to is born from the dark and threatening suspicion that life is utterly unpredictable and unstable and that danger is around every corner.

These are the messages that bombard us in the media and tell us that prestige, knowledge, wealth, influence, military might or nation can create a safety zone that protects us from vulnerability.

But, when we are faced with events like the death of a loved one, the loss of our livelihood, a threat to our health or the chaos of natural or manmade disasters, our carefully contrived illusions of control become unraveled---these slumbering primal fears are released from their nighttime prison and begin to have power over us even in the bright light of day.

These are the times in our lives that try us. These are the times that we often become consistently anxious and angry, and these times find us grasping wildly to regain control, control even over God.

Jesus shows us the true nature of God. Jesus teaches us frequently that God's greatest desire for us is joy and peace---both of which far surpass their paler imitations, which we call happiness and absence of conflict.

Jesus teaches us how to navigate the fractious human condition without resorting to denial, vengeance or violence, even in the midst of deeply troubled times. He teaches us to put away our fears and our need for control and hold instead to God's promise of hope. Jesus tells us in the gospels multiple times, "Be not afraid!"

By his very life, he teaches us that our vulnerability is the very thing that opens our eyes TO the true nature of God. He charts the way through fear for all of us and demonstrates time and again that vulnerability is a threshold over which we can step into greater compassion, understanding and peace. Yes, these are dangerous and troubled times. Then, as now, Jesus stands before the hungry multitude in a fractious world and he offers himself as the bread that gives life.

This is an extraordinary reality that is most often hard for us to grasp. But over and over he shows us that the way through our deepest fear is to let it go once and for all. And as our hands release this stranglehold on fear, they fall wide open; perfectly poised to receive the true bread of life.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+