Daniel Smith had a life that would be envied by many. He had recently graduated from college with honors. He had a prestigious job, loyal friends, a comfortable home, a beautiful girlfriend and a solid income. Despite it all, he suffered from acute anxiety.

He said, “Everyday was torture. He had recurring nightmares – tsunamis, ferocious animals, the violent deaths of loved ones. He had intestinal cramps, nausea and headaches. A sense of impending catastrophe colored every waking moment. Worse, he had the distinct sense that catastrophe had already occurred. He had made the wrong decisions, gone down the wrong path, screwed up in a ruinous, irrevocable, epoch-making way.”¹

Not everyone suffers such extreme anxiety, but who does not lug around a backpack full of worries? Will the economy collapse again and bring financial ruin? Will our children come home safely? Could my headaches be the sign of a tumor? Will this plane make a safe landing?

What wakes you in the middle of the night? What grinds in your gut and messes with your mind denying you the serenity of a peaceful soul?

Anxiety may be the most common psychological complaint of our day and some say it is “a universal and insoluble feature of modern life. Everyone has it; everyone must deal with it.”²

While anxiety is a feature of modern life, nail-biting has always been an aspect of human existence. People have always feared an attack by an enemy. In earlier times, the majority of people worried about starving and finding shelter from harsh weather. Many people fretted that the gods would punish them. And in what historical period did people not dread disease and death?

This morning’s passage from the Gospel of John recalls an episode in the life of Jesus when the anxiety level of his disciples could be measured on the Richter scale.

Liturgically, we are currently in the post-Easter season – the 50 days between the resurrection of Christ and Pentecost. However, this morning’s lectionary reading slings us back to the last supper, just hours before Jesus is betrayed and handed over to authorities for his fast-tracked trial, steamrolled conviction and gruesome crucifixion.
The glory days of being cheered by throngs seem eons ago. The scribes and Pharisees have accelerated their antagonism as each attempt to make Jesus look foolish before his followers has failed to inflict the decisive blow. Jesus knows that the sand in the hour glass has nearly run out, and he wants to insure his followers that even though they have not yet reached the bottom of their downward spiral, all will be well.

Jesus informs his tight-knit band of followers that he will soon be departing. They will feel abandoned, but he assures them they will not be alone. God’s Spirit will be with them to remind them of his teachings and to comfort and guide them in the days ahead. Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Undoubtedly, their hearts were more than a little troubled and I suspect they were terrified. They had forgone the safety of the countryside to come to Jerusalem where the chief adversaries of their master ran the show. Their leader’s life was in peril, and, by association, their own lives.

In a long farewell speech on their final evening together, Jesus said that his disciples would face persecution due to their connection to him. So when he says, “My peace I give to you,” he is clearly not telling them that nothing bad will befall them. Yet, he is confidant they can experience peace, despite the daunting future they face.

While few of us face the fierce hostility the first disciples encountered, we too yearn for the inner peace that makes us feel whole. How can we experience serenity in our soul?

Some imagine they can find peace by accumulating enough wealth to give them a sense of security. Certainly an adequate income can relieve a number of financial pressures and fears. It can open new opportunities. However, it cannot insure you of good health. It cannot produce trustworthy friends. It cannot provide you with a sense of purpose.

Others seek peace by turning off the news. Reports of terrorism, gun violence and war fuel our anxieties. But, short of living alone on a small island, you cannot insulate yourself from the pain of the world.

Our passage makes it clear that the peace that derives from God’s Spirit is not dependent on a trouble-free existence. Jesus speaks of peace calmly and confidently at a moment when his anxiety level should have been too high to measure.

The peace we experience when God’s Spirit fills us is not a turmoil-free peace. We live in an imperfect world, there are hostile forces and we are fragile creatures. Accidents, illness and death are part of the package of being human. As a result, it would seem that anxiety is inevitable. However, the peace of God is not an idyllic state of immunity from troubles. The peace of God is like being in the eye of a hurricane – that peaceful center despite the surrounding turbulence. Life can be challenging, even threatening, but we can experience calmness and confidence because God is with us.

There is no doubt that sometimes we need a break from our troubles. That’s why we invented vacations. They allow us to escape from the daily heaviness that weighs on us so that we can regain spiritual and emotional energy.

We also need moments to put our problems into perspective by stepping back and recapturing our view of the big picture. Set aside the things that stress you – even if only temporarily; take a walk and focus your attention on the beauty and grandeur of God’s creation. This is not an attempt to pursue a self-centered peace that is oblivious to troubles or is purchased at the expense of others. It’s simply a temporary reprieve to regain your balance.
While it may seem intuitive to find peace by running from people with problems, you do not gain a deep sense of well-being by turning a deaf ear to human need. It’s not the way we are wired. Your life becomes more content when you make a positive difference in the life of people who struggle.

That’s because to gain internal peace you must be in harmony with God’s Spirit. This is why being in worship week after week makes you feel grounded. Prayer, gleaning wisdom from the scriptures, developing a grateful heart, and striving to live a Christ-like existence cultivate peace because these put you in sync with God’s Spirit. As you become the person God wants you to become and do the things God calls you to do, you realize that you cannot control everything, but you can live a faithful life. Being on the right track nurtures peace.

Finally, we experience peace in our souls when we work for peace in our world. Some fear what they do not understand. They slice up the world into “Us verses them” by focusing on differences rather than what we share in common. Some seek power and dominance rather than working for the well-being of others. Some are driven by suspicion rather than compassion and demand justice for themselves, but resist justice for all. God calls us to overcome hostilities and violence and all that disturbs the human soul by practicing compassion, justice and peace.

“In the early 1970’s, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Betty Williams woke up to the cauldron of hatred threatening to obliterate Northern Ireland. She witnessed the bombing death of Irish children – innocent victims in the rage-filled conflict between Protestants and Catholics. A little girl died in Williams’ arms, her legs severed, after having been thrown across the street by the explosion. Williams went home in shock and despair. Later that night, unable to sleep, the reality of what she had experienced jolted her into action. She stepped outside her door, screaming in the middle of the night. She knocked on doors – both Protestant and Catholic – that might easily have opened with weapons aimed at her face. At each house she cried out: “What kind of people have we become that we would allow children to be killed on our streets?” Within four hours the city was awake and there were 16,000 signatures on petitions for peace – the beginning of a peace process that thirty years later finally bore fruit.”

Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” If you stand firm against injustice and take a risk for peace, you will have the assurance in your soul that you are in harmony with God.

NOTES

2. Ibid.