

Living with Uncertainty

Reflection by a city priest

Do you worry that you may get infected with the Coronavirus (COVID-19) by going to the grocery store, to work, or to church? Are you nervous when the person standing next to you suddenly sneezes? Do you wonder when this new virus with corona/crown-like spikes will go away so that you don't have to live with uncertainty?

Believe it or not, since the turn of this century we have lived with uncertainty at different levels almost continuously, due to terrorism and security threats (2001), church scandal and crisis of trust (2002), economic recession and financial crisis (2007), several disease outbreaks from 2002 to today: SARS (2002), bird flu (2006), swine flu (2009), MERS (2012), Ebola (2013 and ongoing), etc.

The current Coronavirus outbreak seems to be the most severe as it has reached virtually all continents, locked down 60 million people in Hubei Province, China, and the entire Italian population of a similar size, turned cruise ships into outcast vessels that are being shunned by several countries, and put our own Santa Clara County on the map for the high number of cases. The fear of getting sick, in particular, has spread more quickly than the virus itself, covered the entire globe, and made the financial markets stumble. The psychological and financial impacts seem more evident than the pathological effects.

We want to be in control, but life is full of uncertainty in any area: health, work, finances, relationship, marriage, parenting. No matter how much or how well you prepare, things can still go wrong. You don't know for sure what your future will hold. You "do not even know what tomorrow will bring" (James 4:14). There's always some level of uncertainty, some unexpected outcome.

Your relationship with God is even like an exploration into an unknown, uncharted territory. There are times when you feel God is right there, other times God seems absent, and most of the time you are not sure either way and just pray routinely. So don't be surprised if you have to struggle with confusion or doubts as you walk with God in your journey of faith.

Just ask Abraham, who is called our father in faith, and he will have a lot to tell you. Abraham was called by God to leave his father's house, and to go to a land that God would show him (and his wife Sarah). But he did not know where God would lead, and how long it would take. Likewise, God's promise to give Abraham a multitude of offspring had no timeline or details. It took about 25 years before he had his son Isaac and four centuries before the promise of land came true.

God did keep his promises, didn't he? Can you picture yourself being in Abraham's shoes, or sandals? It should not be a surprise if he was puzzled and confused in his journey of faith.

Abraham embodied what St. Paul said centuries later: "We walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). When he was still known as Saul of Tarsus, Paul was so confident in what he knew and zealous in what he believed that he persecuted those who followed Jesus of Nazareth. Then one day he was struck blind by a great light from heaven. Three days later, his vision was restored, and he became a new person walking in the light of faith in the Risen Lord, whom (or whose disciples) he persecuted. He now became confident that nothing in this uncertain world could separate him from Jesus.

The first disciples of Jesus did not go through that experience, but they had few clues when they began to follow him. They did not fully know who Jesus was, or where he would lead them. At different places and on various occasions, they gradually realized that the Master whom they were following was more than a preacher or a miracle worker. Jesus was "transfigured" in different ways before them through what he did and said. They slowly began to comprehend he was the embodiment of what they read in the Scripture.

Still, right before his ascending into heaven, some of them remained doubting (Matthew 28:16-17). They never graduated from the school of Jesus! They remained his disciples and needed to grow more in their faith, to walk by faith, not by sight in an uncertain world.

If these days you feel worried by the unknown, fearful by illness, constricted by social distancing or even quarantine, you are only human. When her Coronavirus-contaminated cruise ship docked in Oakland on March 9, 2020, a passenger said,

“It’s kind of unnerving, unsettling that you now would have to step into the unknown.”

Whatever happens these days and the next months or years, remember that Jesus is with you and really understands you. He took a lot of risks in coming into this uncertain world, to be one of us, to share our human condition, even suffering and death. In his agony in the garden of Gethsemane before his Passion, Jesus was sweating with blood. He’s not out of touch with this human world, though it’s a lot different from the world and culture he lived in twenty centuries ago.

Maybe you’re called to listen to the Lord, as a voice from the cloud said to his disciples at his Transfiguration, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” When his disciples fell on their faces as they heard this voice, Jesus said, “Rise, and do not be afraid.”

No matter what life throws your way, he asks you to trust in him, to leave your comfort zone to follow him. In this time of uncertainty, the only certainty that we have is Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of God’s promise, the reason for our hope. Jesus our Companion said, “Tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matthew 6:34). To St. Theresa of Avila in her darkness, he assured her, “Nada te turbe” (Let nothing trouble you).

He can help us walk by faith, not by sight, in an uncertain world.