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Fears in the garden

by Robert McAllister



"The Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane," from the studio of El Greco (1590s)
(Newscom/Oronoz/Album)

LENT

They came to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray. My soul is sorrowful even to death." He prayed to his Father: "Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will." (Mark 14:32-36)

Were you frightened in the garden, Jesus? You knew they were coming to get you, but did you know what would happen next? I guess you knew some of it because you knew the scriptures. But you didn't know how it would feel, how it would hurt, how degrading it would be, how lost you would feel, how alone you would be. Your fear must have been overpowering.

I'm frightened because I have Alzheimer's. I don't know what's going to happen next. I don't have any idea how I will feel when I can't remember who I am or what I'm doing and my thoughts are confused and my emotions in turmoil.

Did you wonder what your friends and family would do when you were taken away? Would they know how painful it was for you? How could they know? Would they try to help you but find they could do nothing to change the course of what was to come? Would they be fearful for their own safety? Would some of them abandon you?

How will my husband and my children and my friends understand what is happening to me when Alzheimer's takes away my memories of our life together? Will they worry about me? How can I tell them about it? How can I explain to them what is happening in my mind and my body if I can't understand it myself? What will it be like? I'm afraid, Jesus!

Was it difficult for you to pray when sorrow overwhelmed you? Why were you sorrowful? Were you sad because of what was going to happen to you? Were you sorrowful over what happens to all of us? Did your human feelings take over and cloud your thinking? Did you pray for all of us?

Sometimes my feelings take over and confuse my thinking and I feel like I'm a different person. That makes it difficult for me to pray. I, too, get so sad sometimes, thinking and wondering and worrying. Even though you were the Son of God, your human nature must have been fearful about what was going to happen to you. You cared about what would happen to your mother and your friends. I worry about what will happen to my husband and my children. I pray for them like you must have prayed for all of us.

Your friends fell asleep and ran away. They were afraid. I wonder if my friends will always be there for me. Will they fear my illness and turn away? Will I be so different they won't know me? Or will they just say they don't know me, like Peter did?

You begged your Father, "Take this cup away!" I understand that, Jesus, because that's what I do. How many times have I asked to have this cup taken away? I have told the Father over and over I didn't do anything to deserve this punishment. But he doesn't seem to hear me, and I guess in the garden you felt he wasn't listening to you. But he did give you the strength and peace of mind to continue on the path in front of you.

Jesus, please ask our Father to give me peace and love in my heart. You accepted everything that happened and that's what I want to do. I don't ask to escape the road ahead but I ask you to walk with me along the way. I will continue to live each day with gratitude for the gifts you have given me: a gentle and able caregiver, the belief that my life continues to have meaning, and the awareness that each new day is an opportunity to love and to be loved. Even now there is reason to rejoice and be glad.

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[Robert McAllister lives in Columbia, Md. Jane McAllister passed away the Thursday after Ash Wednesday, shortly after these reflections began appearing in *NCR*.]

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