

Post-Fire Monday morning...

As I look back, I remember two odd thoughts from Saturday morning: 1) I had an urge to tell my wife to be extra careful as she left to take two of our daughters to their Girl Scout event; I just had a weird feeling. 2) At 9:00 am I drove to the highest point in Yorba Linda with my youngest kids. Each week we drive to that spot and then zoom down the street on our way to some "special time". We looked out on Catalina, clearly seeing all the cities in between us and that island (and hearing the Santa Ana winds blow around the car and bend the trees around us). I literally thought: this is a perfect day for a fire.

After having our donut date together, I turned to head toward Costco, at the far eastern end of Yorba Linda. "Oh my..." I said as soon as I see the plume of white smoke. My kids asked what was the matter, and I pointed out the smoke. When we arrived at the Costco parking lot the smoke was mostly staying over the Santa Ana River and I felt no imminent danger. We left Costco at 10:15 and conditions were much the same. It may seem odd for my non-southern-Californian friends, but fires happen around here. Seeing smoke is like hearing a tornado warning when there is no visible storm. You are aware that there is danger, but you keep functioning.

A few moments later, when I turned onto the side-street in my neighborhood I was once again looking east. "Oh my!" was expressed with more animation, because I literally thought another fire must have started in the canyon at the end of our street. The smoke was much thicker than before, much wider, much higher in the air, and looked ominously close.

I turned on the television and they interrupted their coverage to show the Yorba Linda fire. When I saw the area I immediately began calling some Elders who lived in that area. "I can't talk right now, I'm fighting a fire" said one. "We've loaded up the cars and we're leaving now" said the other. I told them I was going to the church to meet them. I gathered up my kids and a few of their play toys and headed to the church.

I got there before noon and immediately began calling everyone from our church who lived in the affected area, inviting them to the church. We got pizza and drinks and welcomed people as they arrived. All the while the smoke got more abundant as the source got closer.

I was calling my wife at 12:30 and telling her to come to the church when they were done and I would go get some of our things from our house "just in case". Rather than take the time to stop at the church, she suggested that she could get to the house more quickly and then get our dog, our pictures and documents in one fell swoop (she has the gas-guzzling SUV). After what seemed like an eternity to me, she arrived at the church. I was thrilled to have my family together! I met them as they parked, and Lisha looked at me and said, "It's really bad up by our house". She then mentioned a couple of important items that she had not been able to get. I checked in with kids, and then took off to our house.

It is sobering to drive up a steep hill with palm trees and hedges on fire knowing that this is the only entrance (and exit) to our street. We live on a cul-de-sac at the bottom of a hill on a short street called Juniper Avenue. I was able to weave through the neighbors who were leaving in their cars as I drove to my street. The winds were gusting at

hurricane force, I later found, and the smoke and embers were flying across the street horizontally as I drove. When I pulled into our driveway I opened the garage, turned on our sprinkler system, and ran in to get the forgotten items. After loading the car, I began hosing down the eaves all around our house and the deck off the master bedroom (the only exposed wood on our house). When I finished the deck I looked up our street and saw the trees were on fire. I shouted out to our remaining neighbors that our church was open and then tried to calmly navigate my way back to the church.

I honestly expected that our house would not be standing when I returned.

More people had arrived at the church while I was gone. Everyone had moved inside since the sun was literally darkened by the smoke and ash. After finding my family for a hug, I went back to the phones with a couple of others to call more church members. In the midst of the trauma YLPC was a wonderful refuge. We tapped the art supplies of the children's ministry and kids were drawing and coloring. Parents took turns watching children, pets were walked and played with, and lots of conversations continued throughout the afternoon. People arrived in their cars and RV's and we all compared experiences, swapped cell phone numbers and tried to discern what was rumor and what was true about houses burning and displaced people.

Our place of refuge was interrupted around 4:30 when the Police began evacuating the area around the church. I began to ask every family if they had a place to go. We found a place for those who didn't have one, and then everyone left as I locked up the building.

My family went to stay with a family who live far enough away from the church to be safe. We began to watch the coverage of the fire while our hosts graciously fed and entertained our kids. We were devastated to see a live shot of the top of our street, the corner of Juniper and Deodar. The newscast literally said that the firefighters had left the area for a more pressing situation and that the fire was being fought by homeowners in the neighborhood. This confirmed my worst fears. It was maddening that the helicopter's camera did not pan out for a view 100 yards down the street.

After everyone was fed and prepared for bed, Lisha and I took off with one of our hosts (Gary) and tried to get back to our home. The roads were all blocked, and no vehicles were being allowed. We had to park over a mile away and hike up to our house ("at your own risk" the officer said.) In the darkness we could see some of the houses that were no longer there. As we walked down our street we were relieved to see our house standing, and some of our neighbors visiting in the street. Lisha went inside the house to get some clothes for our kids as Gary and I began wetting down the eaves with hoses.

Since fire was clearly visible on the hills around us I determined to stay the night at our house. After a quick tour of the neighborhood, Lisha and Gary were shuttled to the road block by a neighbor. I watered our deck and eaves a few more times that night. I tried to monitor the wind and check for embers every 30 minutes. I turned on our sprinkler system again to run through its program. I could clearly see flames on the hills and the glow of fire behind the ridges all around Yorba Linda. At 3:45 I went upstairs, set the alarm for 4:45, and laid down facing the sliding glass door so that I could see if the fire advanced. When the alarm went off I walked around the house, saw that the fire was not advancing our way. I sent the Alarm for 6:00 and did the same thing again. The light of day was never more welcome. I could clearly see the plumes of smoke were far away, and I began to prepare to get to church.

Although it was challenging to get to church (roadblocks still enforced) we were able to gather for 2 simple services of singing and prayer—no sermon, no offering. We read from Psalm 46 (God is our refuge and strength!) and enjoyed some great fellowship. There were dogs and cats at the church who received some extra affection, and coffee and donuts for all who showed up (some still wearing their clothes from Saturday.)

After worship Lisha and I could not get back to our house. We parked our cars and again made the trek up the hill (with kids and dog this time). We entered our house and stopped to hold hands for a prayer of thanksgiving. We had another displaced family over for dinner and then retrieved our cars.

We have one report of some friends of our congregation losing their home, but many, many “near-misses” reported. There are a number of families on our street that I am going to check on today, but we have heard from almost everyone in our congregation.

We are safe and grateful to God (even if we are a bit exhausted!) Thanks for your care!

-Pastor Daniel White