Faith: a source of strength

By Chaplain Douglas Vrieland

It has now been more than a month since the big earthquake struck the northern parts of Honshu March 11 and brought in its wake tremendous destruction from a tsunami and terror from a damaged nuclear power plant. As I write this article, the bad news continues. Japanese authorities have upgraded the nuclear crisis to a level 7, putting it on the same level as the 1986 accident in Chernobyl - although since no reactor cores have exploded, the danger is much less than that disaster. Additionally, we continue to experience dozens of aftershocks, strong enough to destroy buildings and even whole communities. When will this nightmare end? When will our family members be allowed to return and life in Japan get back to normal?

Today is Good Friday, one of the most sacred days of the Christian faith. It is the day, according to Christian belief, when "all hell broke loose," when the devil had free reign and put Jesus Christ, the son of God, to death on a cross. According to biblical accounts, on Good Friday it was dark from noon to 3 p.m., and Jesus cried out these terrifying words: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But Good Friday is not the whole story. It is followed by Easter, by the resurrection and by new life. Evil and darkness were not able to defeat goodness and light. For Christians, the key is the power of an almighty God.

Christianity is not alone among the world's faiths in believing in the ultimate triumph of goodness over evil. The Jewish faith marks Passover this week, remembering the time when God delivered the people of Israel from the oppression of the Egyptians. The Pharaoh of Egypt was a brutal tyrant, forcing the Israelites into servitude and using them as a free labor force to build his impressive empire, while refusing to give them the materials needed to complete the work. But again, as the story goes, the Pharaoh, the evil one, was defeated. He and his entire army drowned in the Red Sea while the Israelites walked safely through on dry ground.

Our Japanese hosts recently celebrated the Kanamara Matsuri in Kawasaki. This Shinto fertility festival with its prominent phallic imagery, seeks divine protection against the demonic powers that would destroy the power of procreation and the hope for the future. Wiccans and the adherents of other pagan faiths observed a similar fertility celebration last month with Ostara, which coincided with the vernal equinox. The first full moon following Ostara is dedicated to Eostre, the Saxon Lunar Goddess of fertililty. Both the English words "estrogen" and "Easter" trace their etymology back to Eostre. The symbols of the egg and the rabbit both come from this pagan background, and were adopted by Christian missionaries and given new meanings.

My point is not that all religions are basically the same, a point that is often made more out of ignorance and wishful thinking than out of any objective evidence. As a Christian I certainly would not want to equate the image of the cross or the empty tomb with the phallic image of Kanamara Matsuri. Rather, I am suggesting that whatever our religious convictions are, they can serve as a source of hope, encouragement and strength during these troubled times. During this wonderful season of religious celebration, I invite all of us to utilize our religious rituals as a source of needed strength as we continue this journey into the unknown future of life in post March 11 Japan.

Navy Ten Nautical Miler race set to run June 5

From NSA Mid-South Public Affairs

Naval Support Activity (NSA) Mid-South is proud to be once again hosting The Navy Ten Nautical Miler, the only foot race ever to be measured in nautical miles. The race will take place June 5, 2011, at the base in Millington, Tenn., with a start time of 6:30 a.m.

NSA Mid-South also hosted the inaugural run last June, approximately a month after the base had been flooded out by an average of four feet of water May 1, and race organizers considered the fledgling event to be a rousing success. Nearly 450 runners from all over the country entered the event, and this year, the number of runners is expected to double.

At the end of last year's event, Stephen Hill was victorious, having run the 10 nautical mile route in 1:07:23. Jessica Myers took top honors for the ladies, with a run time of 1:23:47. The top three scorers in each of the 19 age groups and divisions also received awards, and everyone who completed the race earned an anchor-shaped finisher's medal.

Last year's race saw a unique wrinkle as a group of NATO service men and women in Farah, Afghanistan, chose to run their own satellite version of the race. This year, race coordinators are hoping to expand the event to several satellite locations, allowing deployed service members around the globe the opportunity to participate.

Also new to the race this year is a close partnership with Team Fisher House, a charitable organization that allows runners to solicit sponsorship for Fisher House, a home away from home for military families to be close to a loved one during hospitalization for an illness, disease or injury, not unlike the service provided by the Ronald McDonald Houses at many children's hospitals.

Likewise, Team Fisher House works similar to the St. Jude's Heroes program that many Mid-South runners are already familiar with. In addition to the Navy Ten Nautical Miler, Team Fisher House works closely with the Marine Corps Marathon, Air Force Marathon and Army Ten Miler races as their primary support network.

For more on the Navy Ten Nautical Miler or to register, visit the official website at http://www.thenavy10nm.com/; the race is also on Facebook at http://www.facebook.com/Navy10nm.

Visit the websites http://www.teamfisherhouse.org/ or http://www.fisherhouse.org/ to learn more about Team Fisher House or the Fisher House program.