

SLD02.28.10 Second Lent
Emory Presbyterian Church
Philippians 4:6-7
Luke 12:22-29

Breaking Free – from Anxiety and Worry

So I've been worrying all week about what to say this morning about breaking free from anxiety and worry. I've been quite an object lesson to myself. Thursday morning when my e-mail stopped working and even three hours of Bill and Nabb's attention couldn't fix it, my anxiety escalated close to outright panic. The irony was not lost on me.

But time is so limited and there's so much else demanding my attention! How am I supposed to stop in the middle of it suddenly to be "holy and faithful and wise?" I love to preach but I also love not to preach because sometimes there's just so much else to do. And anyway, whenever I get overwhelmed and anxious and tired, the well I drop my bucket down runs dry. And then I get more worried and can't even turn on the spigot of God's Word. And I'm just getting to old for this marathon sermon-writing thing to the wee hours of Sunday morning.

And here's Jesus all glowing and holy and saying to his disciples, "don't worry, be happy" like some first century Meher Baba and from time to time I personally just feel punching him out. I mean, fine, I won't worry about food and clothing – never have much – it's the relentless march of Sunday sermons that disturbs *my* calm. Never mind the flaccid, unpredictable economy, body parts that don't work like they're supposed to, and a kid who won't grow up.

I don't mean to whine but if Jesus were a single mom and a solo pastor, or a man in his prime facing down a deadly disease or somebody who's just been laid off, or is about to be, it might be easier to swallow his "trust me, don't worry, be happy" advice. Or at least not dismiss it altogether.

But the thing is, I *can't* not worry. I'm a mom, a pastor, a sister, a friend, a type A personality with a higher than average titre of perfectionism, maybe even a soupçon of OCD – I'm *wired* to worry. You wired me to worry, God, don't try to tell me different.

Last week I talked about Lent as a time to drag the entropy of life, what weighs our spirits or stunts our growth, drags out into the spotlight. Whatever for? How are we supposed to “break free” from who and how we are? From how God made us?

Short answer: I wouldn't know. That's what I've been so anxious about. Rarely if ever have I been able to break free of whatever emotions in which I happen to be drowning at the moment.

Maybe you're not like that. Maybe none of you ever gets lost in whatever feelings happen to blast through in a moment of hurt or rage or indignation or fear. Maybe you don't get anxious. Not everybody's a drama queen. But for those of us who are, even those who are just more quiet about it, I am hopeful that it may be helpful to us, if not to resolve the issue, at least to name it.

Hence these massive, imposing, engraved stones representing the hard, cold nature of those relentless demons, immovable and inflexible as a headstone. These stones, courtesy of Karen, are here in the chancel, central to our worship, blocking the altar, with the cross peeking out from behind, because I want acknowledge squarely in the context and communion of the church, so that there's no question in anybody's mind that we in the church are every bit as subject to them as anybody else. That they loom large in many of our lives, both as individuals and as a community. We “faithful” are in no way immune from these destructive emotions, and God has something to say about that. I hope.

Now, just to be clear, we're not just talking moods here, the ebb and flow of human emotion in any given human day. We're talking rather the intense reactions grounded in our gut that well up and grab and grip and torque us until they begin to shape our character and constrict our vision and animate our action and affect our m.o. in the world.

It happens. You know it does, because you can feel it, in yourself and sometimes, even more easily, in someone else. How hard is it to pick up on the gloom of depression in another? How long do you have to be with someone you might define as "high strung" to know the fretful angst that defines their days? Who hasn't quickly gotten the message to walk on ice around someone who's angry?

At one time or another, the human emotions represented by these stones become elephants in the living room of all our hearts. And when they come trumpeting in, they tend to take up all the space and all the oxygen and all the perspective and, sometimes, all the hope.

So what, exactly, are we to do? I anxiously asked myself. How are we supposed to stop worrying, striving, fretting? And how long can I keep asking that question without coming up with an answer?

You know, when I first decided to tackle this sermon series, I imagined God would give me something to say each Sunday to allay the power of shame, to mitigate the destruction of anxiety, to avoid the deathtrap of resentment. But so far that's not what's happened. Instead, all God seems to be doing is leading me to lead you to face squarely the presence and power of these ubiquitous, instinctive, and very destructive responses to fear, powerlessness and disappointments and just sit with them a moment. In community. In *our* faith community. In the presence of God.

And then maybe to explore them a bit, to poke around, honestly, openly, humbly. Maybe dig up a psychological or scientific insight. Joke a bit about our powerlessness over these negative, life-sucking emotions despite our best efforts. Is that the best we can do?

Jesus clearly tells us to stop worrying; he just doesn't tell us how. Paul offers some helpful hints: through prayers of supplication and thanksgiving, let your requests be known to God. Says if we do, the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding (he's got that right) will guard our hearts and minds.

Dame Julian of Norwich, 14th century English mystic with whom we are a little familiar from the summer saints series, preaches that same Pauline confidence. Her famous words are at the top of your worship bulletins. "All shall be well," she writes, "and all shall be well. And all manner of things shall be well."

How does she know that? Especially in the midst of the dirty, chaotic, war-infested world of 14th century England, how does she know that? What gives these spiritual greats such certainty – Is it something they did? Something they believed? Something "done unto" them? Did *they* make it happen?

Don't worry. Pray. All will be well.

All week I've been worrying – is that it? What if we *do* pray? How come few of us arrive at that peace, that freedom from anxiety that Jesus and Julian and Paul talk so much about?

Not that we don't try. The practices of meditation, prayer, yoga, mindfulness, affirmations, tai chi, exercise, spiritual reading, and Prozac surely help by slowing us down, quieting our minds, centering our bodies, at least for a minute. For more serious

practitioners, maybe even for *more* than a minute. Incorporating some of these disciplines or interventions in our lives do seem to offer a certain, limited protection against anxiety.

I read an interview with biologist and science writer, Janine Benyus, recently. Benyus' professional focus is on development of what is called "biomimicry." You know "mimicry," miming something, imitating it, emulating something that it does. Apparently biology, or nature, is full of examples, models, and principles for us humans to emulate to solve our problems.¹

The article gave the example of the company Seventh Generation, seller of environmentally friendly cleansers, who asked Benyus to help them improve their product. And one of the first things that Benyus and her team noted was that the natural world doesn't use soap to remove dirt even though it's important for certain things to stay clean. Like leaves, for example. If they get too much dust on them, they're not able to photosynthesize. So how do they stay clean?

Benyus discovered that "A lotus leaf, for example, has little 'nanobumps' to which dirt particles adhere very loosely." When rainwater comes, the dirt balls up on these bumps and rolls away, picking up remaining dirt particles as it goes. So the plant ends up using the kinetic energy in rainwater to clean itself for free. It's called the 'lotus effect.'"²

So I started thinking that maybe prayer and yoga and tai chi or any practice that calms and slows the mind, maybe accumulate over time to form a kind of spiritual sheath around one's essential being, a protective covering of little nanobumps of grace to which particles of anxiety and worry adhere more loosely along the lines of that "lotus effect." And it could be.

¹ David Kupfer, The Sincerest Form of Flattery, Janine Benyus on the Virtues of Imitating Nature." *The Sun*, December 2009, Issue 405, pp.5-11.

² Ibin, p. 8.

Only I've tried all that stuff and I still get anxious.

But this sermon series is about breaking free from destructive feelings and back when we planned the service, the concept developed that the rocks would break and the light of Christ would show through them. But should they break in or break out? Karen asked. Do we, by our actions, practices and disciplines, chip away at their tough exterior? Maybe. A little. Or is something else cracking them, breaking through them what sullies or saddens or shadows our spirit? And it hit us that the only thing that could break through these stones was not *our* efforts, but by the powerful, piercing, shattering, healing, light of Christ. These harsh, heavy stones of blame and shame, anxiety and worry, resentment and bitterness, discouragement and depression that dominate our chancel during this season of Lent, and our spirits whenever they feel like it, are clearly more than we can manage away with practices or piety. Even if those beliefs and practices help, we still remain at their mercy. Only the light of Christ, the light of God's unstoppable intention of redemption, can penetrate the stolid, immovable grip of what drains our spirits.

Acts of will, right belief and practices of peace may indeed cover us with protective goose pimples of grace. But in the end, the action or word is not ours but action and Word of Jesus Christ that somehow, someday, in the mystery of love, breaks us free from the patterns and cycles and instincts of the feelings that imprison us. *We're* not the ones doing the breaking, the freeing, *Jesus* is.

You know, just before Jesus commands his disciples not to worry, he tells them the story about the rich man who says to his soul, "Soul, you have ample goods stored for many years." But God says to the man, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

So it is, says Jesus, with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God. (Luke 12:19-21) And what does it mean to be rich toward God other than to allow oneself to be pierced by shattering, healing light of Christ, the light that was, is and ever will be. The light that neither death nor darkness will overcome.

When that light came to Paul, first it blinded, then transformed him that he might know the risen Christ. When that light came to Julian, it sliced through her suffering that she might gaze upon the compassionate face of God and know that all, indeed, would be well. And when that piercing, penetrating, shattering, healing light comes to us, it brooks no resistance from the sin and brokenness of this world.

God, what have I to say about breaking free from anxiety?

Be still and know that I am God. (Ps. 46)

John is facing down a debilitating disease.

Be anxious for nothing. (Phil. 4:6)

How can Elise finish a dissertation with two babies and an exhausted spirit?

Come to me all who are weary. (Mt. 11:28)

What if the economy tanks again?

Do not be anxious about tomorrow. (Mt. 6:34)

There not enough time to get everything done!

My help comes from the Lord. (Ps 121)

Massive earthquake rocks Chile early Saturday, killing at least 147 people.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart. (Prov. 3:5-6)

How much is enough for retirement?

Do not worry about your life. (Lk. 12:22)

How does all that fit together, the challenges of life and the imperatives of faith? Or, as Julian asked, “Ah, good Lord, how could all things be well, because of the great harm which has come through sin to your creatures?”

And this was God’s response to her: “I make all things well, and I can make all things well; and you will see for yourself that every kind of thing will be well.”

“And in these words,” says Julian, “God wishes us to be enclosed in rest and peace.”

Breaking free from anxiety and worry - we cannot make it happen but God can. The God who loves and delights in us, and who created us to live fully the life we have been given, can, through the powerful, piercing, shattering, healing light of Christ Jesus is able to redeem us from all powers of darkness.

Meanwhile, if you, like me, still can’t abide the theological surface skim of “don’t worry, be happy,” let’s just try to take Jesus’ words seriously enough to *try*, in times of emotional drowning, to remember them. AND to remember that we are not the one making the break, *Jesus* is.

Because those cracks in the rocks? That light peeking through? That’s the redeeming light of Christ Jesus, and there is no holding it back.

To the glory of God. Amen.