Sermon 01-15-17

An Age of High Anxiety

Isaiah 41:10 and Psalm 56:3-4

**Sermon Starter**

One day while I was on a UMC clergy Facebook page I ran across a post from friend of mine, Rev. Pastor Dawn Flower Bundell who pastored the South Reno UMC. This little piece is very appropriate as we begin talking about fear. She wrote:

So there I was, planning, preparing, and visioning about spiritual formation with a member of the church here (which was refreshing and good, thanks Boyd!), when… lo! a friend drops by. She is an immigrant to this country, kind and good and always smiling. We talked about her possibly preparing a meal for a meeting here at church next week -- something she has been wanting to do -- and she was excited about it, giving me the grocery list and talking about wanting to make it very special, with ceremony and meaning. (It turns out that we don't need a meal for this particular meeting, but that's all good...next time). The point is this: as she was talking a mile a minute about the simple meal and what she wanted to do, she asked whether she could prepare it here at church and have someone from the church with her the entire time as she cooked. So that people would feel safe, and trust that her food was clean and safe to eat. Because she is a foreigner.

Now, I am admittedly a soft-hearted person. But the fact that she had to even consider something like that broke my heart. I tried to hold it together, but the tears welled up. And SHE comforted ME. It's alright, she said. God is in charge. There is always darkness, and there is always light, and they chase each other. That is the way life is, while we are in this transition time on earth. Meanwhile, we trust in God and stay positive, love and care for each other. It's alright.

Did I mention that she is Muslim?

**I. The Problem**

There seems so much to fear: We live in an age of terrorism, global warming, mounting deficits, school shootings, and identity thefts. We live in a period of dramatic social and technological change that add to our anxiety. 24-hour news that comes to our phones and those with smart watches feel the vibration on your wrist every time the stock market declines, or there is breaking news of a terrible accident, an earthquake, or a mass shooting. How can we not feel a level of anxiety?

Most of us wrestle with some combination of fear, worry or anxiety from time to time. My stress relates to my job, as is the case with many of us. Hardly a day goes by that I don’t feel a tightness in my chest thinking about the weekend’s sermon, the next major project, or the people in the congregation who are struggling. On occasion, I have a woken up thinking it was Sunday and I am late to church only to realize it is Friday and my day off.

I wonder what you worry about? What makes you fearful? What gives you anxiety?

My little bit of stress is nothing compared with the 57 million Americans, more than one in six, who suffer from anxiety disorders.[[1]](#footnote-1) These folks, perhaps one in six of you sitting in this room, have moments when it feels like they are having a heart attack; palms get sweaty, skin balmy, feelings of dread, the fight or flight mechanism kicking in with full force. This is the most common mental illness in America today.

What’s perplexing about the high levels of anxiety, fear and worry today is that by all outward measures, we have less to fear or worry about today than ever before in the history of the human race. We’re living longer than any previous generation. Our standard of living his higher. We’ve defeated most of the terrible childhood diseases of the past. Crime rates are down dramatically in the last twenty years. Daniel Gardner begins his excellent book, *The Science of Fear* by noting, **GRAPHIC: “We are the healthiest, wealthiest, and longest-lived people in history. And we are increasingly afraid. This is one of the great paradoxes of our time.”**

Worry, anxiety and fear can sap our strength, negatively impact our relationships, and rob us of joy. They can also negatively impact our health leading – we can literally worry ourselves to death.

Each week in this sermon series we’ll try to understand the things we fear, we’ll look at a different, practical, and key recommendations by the experts to overcoming anxiety, worry or fear. We will also look to the Bible for wisdom and examples of how the biblical authors and the people they wrote about overcome anxiety, worry and fear and lived life with courage and hope.

**II. The Anatomy of Worry, Anxiety and Fear**

So much of our worry, anxiety and fear comes from two of our brain’s systems that are designed for our protection and self-preservation. One of these we know of as the “fight or flight mechanism.” It is the body’s smoke detector. When it detects a potential threat, before your conscious brain even processes the threat your early warning system has already sounded the alarm. Hormones are released triggering a cascading series of effects in your body: your heart rate increases, blood is shut down to unnecessary functions in your body and diverted to the muscles, your blood pressure increases, your pupils dilate, all as your brain prepares your body for the imminent threat.

Last month our smoke alarms went off when I didn’t have the fan turned on while broiling in the kitchen. Unlike newer homes where the smoke alarms are all wired together so when one goes off they all go off, ours are not. So, one goes off, then another, and for some unknown reason, who knows maybe sympathy, a third goes off. In a minute or so the alarms go off and the dogs calm down. It’s not a real threat. For people with anxiety disorders – their interior smoke detector is going off but there’s not really a threat – the body triggers all of the fight of flight activities – the person’s heart races, pounds, they have shortness of breath, and more.

Now there’s a second mechanism built into your brain that is intended to anticipate future events – particularly needs like food or water or shelter – but also threats. This system doesn’t respond to current threats, but it prepares you for things in the future. This system anticipates and brings to mind things that are potential threats or simply things critical for you to be mindful of. It might snow, take your gloves. It’s cold, have the kids wear their coats. Wear your seat belt, you could be in an accident.

The problem with this system is your imagination – your imagination, coupled with the data you receive from others, from the news, from the old tapes that play in your head, can lead you to anticipate threats that are not real, or which are real but whose chance of affecting you are minimal. The imagination can inflate threats and lead you to catastrophize – to assume the worst possible things are going to happen – in your dreams that might be showing up with your boxers on to preach – but in your waking hours it is a host of fears like the ones we’ll consider in the next few weeks.

Animals at times have no way of gauging how serious a particular threat is. I think about our little dog Newton. **GRAPHIC: PICTURE OF NEWTON**. He can be a pretty tough little dog – barking up a storm at real or imagined threats – some a block away. That sets the poodles off and we now have a trio sounding the alarm. But when it is thundering outside or on the fourth of July with fireworks, that’s a different story. Newton may be off barking but Sasha **GRAPHIC: PICTURE OF SASHA,** youngest poodle, doesn’t understand the sounds, doesn’t know that it is safe in the house, and she shakes, quivers and hides. We tend to do the same thing in response to threats – we hear the noise, don’t know how much of a threat it really is, but we imagine the worst.

Here I love this acronym about fear: The Fear is the result of **GRAPHIC:**

**F**alse

**E**vents

**A**ppearing

**R**eal

**III. The First Clue: Face Your Fears**

So, how do we combat our fears, worries and anxieties so they don’t control us? Each week I’ll mention one practice recommended by experts in the secular fields relating to anxiety and worry, and one key related to Christian spirituality. Most are simple, but proven strategies.

The first key from the field of therapy is sometimes called **GRAPHIC:** **EXPOSURE** or Exposure Therapy, though it’s a common-sense approach you know as simply, **GRAPHIC: Confronting Your Fears.**

Often when we feel anxious about something we avoid it, and the worry, anxiety or fear continues. Exposure calls you to clearly identify the source of your fear or anxiety, and then to slowly face your fears by exposing yourself to them, usually starting with small steps and gradually increasing the experience of exposure. Since our fears are typically unfounded, when we confront them we find they are no longer controlling us, instead we conquer them. I’ll give you an example.

A few years ago while on a cruise, it was decided we should go ziplining through the canopy of the Alaskan forest. Now I do not do well with heights. I do not like being up high on ladders or looking over the edge of cliffs, things like that. Airplanes are okay. So are helicopters, though aerodynamically they shouldn’t be able to fly, but that’s for another time. So, the climbing up the hill wasn’t bad nor was climbing up a bit onto the tower. However, I got a bit nervous thinking about that leap of faith I would have to take to step off the platform and be suspended in mid-air with only a harness and some metal contraption holding me onto this cable racing at 40 miles an hour or so between two trees. **GRAPHIC: Ziplining**. Don’t stop in time and SPLAT into a redwood. However, being a guy, I couldn’t let on I was nervous. The first zip was short. Not bad. The second zip was a bit longer, okay, I am getting the hang of this. After about four legs of the course I was feeling really good about this adventure, until we came to the bridge. **GRAPHIC: SUSPENSION BRIDGE.** A cable suspension bridge to the next part of the course. There is always some nut who wants to bounce or swing the thing holding you up. We made it safely to the other side and **GRAPHIC: rappelled down** to the ground from the final station.

**IV. Wrapped in a Thundershirt**

While the psychological and medical practices to address worry, anxiety and fear are important, for the last three thousand years humans have coped with worry, anxiety and fear with the help of their faith. They didn’t have Xanaz and Zoloft nor the psychotherapists to talk to. The words “fear” or “afraid” appear over 400 times in scripture. The people of biblical times had a lot to be afraid of. Wild animals in the wilderness, illness, enemies, wars and destruction, the occasional earthquake, floods, droughts, famine, dying in childbirth, death by disease, as well as a world that felt more dangerous in part because it was not completely understood.

The most often repeated refrain in scripture is found on the lips of God, or an angel, or Jesus; over 100 times God says to his people, say it with me, **GRAPHIC: DO NOT BE AFRAID.** Here again is our passage from Isaiah this morning, **GRAPHIC:**

**So do not fear, for I am with you;**

**Do not be dismayed, for I am your God.**

**I will strengthen you and help you,**

**I will uphold you**

**with my righteous right hand. (**Isaiah 41:10)

When I read scriptures like this, I read them as though God were speaking directly to me. I may even respond to each line, “Thank you Lord that you are with me. Help me not to be afraid. You are my God. I trust that you will strengthen me and help me and hold me by your mighty hand.”

David, Israel’s most important king, wrote or inspired many of the psalms we find in the Bible. He was a poet and a warrior. He was also often faced with peril. At one point, before David became king, King Saul, became jealous of him, and sought to kill him. David fled for months from Saul, and several of the psalms he wrote come from this time period. Other Psalms come from times when David was king but his enemies were seeking to destroy him. He was rightly filled with worry, anxiety and fear. His response to those times was compose and to sing psalms to God. When he sang about his trust in God, and when he wrote about it, he felt peace. Join me in reading the words of David from Psalm 56, our scripture reading for today, **GRAPHIC:**

**Whenever I’m afraid,**

**I put my trust in you—**

**in God, whose word I praise.**

**I trust in God; I won’t be afraid.**

**What can mere flesh do to me? (**Psalm 56:3-4)

I remember some years ago, being in a strange place, getting lost and being a bit anxious. Now I have heard when some people get in that kind of situation they sing hymns. Me, I pray. It calms my nerves and helps with clarity. So, when we are feeling worried or anxious about something, ease the fear by doing something familiar, like singing or praying.

Instead of imagining that we’ll die of cancer, or that our future is grim, or that our enemies will defeat us, or that the world is on the verge of falling apart, in prayer and praise and singing I imagine and trust that God is with me, that he will strengthen me, help me and hold me by his mighty right hand.

Which takes me back to Sasha. There are two things that will calm Sasha down when the thunder is sounding outside. One is being held by Kelley or me – she’ll fall right to sleep. The other is something called a Thundershirt. You wrap your dog tight in the shirt, pressure all around, and it calms them, because with their shirt they feel held. It is surprising, but it really works – she feels safe, held, her little brain senses that she’s safe. Prayer and singing is like that thundershirt. When we sing and pray we trust that God is holding us, enveloping us in his arms and that he won’t let go.

Don’t give in to False Events Appearing Real. Try facing your fears. And put your trust in God, praying and even singing to him, imagining the very things he promises, **GRAPHIC: and you will find a peace that passes understanding that will guard your heart and mind.**

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. <http://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/anxiety_and_physical_illness> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)