

*Living through Angst*

Psalm 27:1, 5-9; Matthew 4:12-23

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As I mentioned in the announcements, we are showing the documentary **Angst** this morning following worship. In preparation for the sermon this morning, I looked at the lectionary to see how I might tie in my sermon with the issue of anxiety. And of course, the Spirit came through! The Psalmist directly addresses the issue! This is just another confirmation that the Scriptures speak to issues we all face.

As human beings, we all have fear. It's normal. And as one wise child in a youth sermon said on December 29<sup>th</sup>, there are some things we NEED to fear...that fear keeps us safe sometimes. She is right. But there is a difference between feeling fear and living in fear~~where fear rules your life.

Jesus knew how common fear is as a human emotion. The fact that God came to us in human form in order to experience the fullness of what we experience is no small thing. In chapter 14 of John's gospel, Jesus is quoted as having said:

'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid' (John 14:27)

Those words were said in the context of Jesus foretelling his disciples of his impending betrayal and death. He was telling them he would be leaving them shortly. For good. Those who had walked with him so closely, who had endured both acceptance and appreciation as well as scrutiny and danger for having called others to follow him, most assuredly were anxious. They were being asked to live on without the comfort of Jesus' presence and guidance by their side.

It seems as though what the disciples might have been feeling at the least on an existential level...and what Jesus was addressing, as well as what I believe my own anxiety is about, and maybe yours too...is this: ***Am I really going to be alright? Am I and those I love, are we, are you, going to have enough money, enough food, enough mental, emotional and physical wherewithal to be OK in this world until we die? Is my body going to do what I need it to do? If I die, will my loved ones have what they need?*** Maybe it's posed in a more global way: Is our country going to be OK in the midst of what is happening politically? Is our world going to be OK, or are we all at risk of a nuclear attack, another terror attack or massive fire or flood from the changes happening to the climate?

Those are deep questions, and for some they are felt on a deeper level of having lived in uncertainty throughout life.

Ignoring the questions is not the answer. Burying them deep inside only will wreak havoc on our bodies, our mental and spiritual health and relationships. So, in our context, we turn to our faith. Isn't this precisely where faith in God comes in? Knowing that we are not alone? That, in fact, the God of the universe DOES care and IS present with each of us, even when we have doubt?

If you need a manual for dealing with life's emotions, go to the Psalms. They are chocked full of every emotion you can think of. More than a few times I have encouraged people who have sought counsel in my office to open up and read through them, just to get a sense of the ancient spiritual wisdom which can be found. Some may say, "But if I admit to being afraid or angry, I'm not being faithful." NOT true! In fact, I would argue that expressing anger, fear or doubt to God implies intimacy in the relationship.

The psalmist in today's lesson addresses the problem of fear and how to find ways of feeling it without letting it dominate our lives. The Psalm itself contains a curious back-and-forth between expressions of confident faith and the fear we all feel at times. It would appear that the Psalmist is struggling in some kind of situation that naturally provokes fear. He feels as if his enemies are trying to "devour his flesh" (Ps. 27:2), describing his struggle as if he were under siege in battle (Ps. 27:3). In fact, the situation is so intense that the Psalmist even cries out in fear that God might turn away from him, cast him aside, and forsake him (Ps. 27:9). Whatever the specific problem is, it's clear that the person who is composing this prayer is afraid.

And yet, right in the middle of his expressions of fear, the Psalmist also declares his confident faith that God's presence is like a light that keeps him safe. So he seeks God's presence in the place where the people of Israel of his day believed God could be found: in the Temple.[3] He does so in the hope and faith that "(God) will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble" (Ps. 27:5). It is God's presence that calms his fears. As he says at the beginning, "the Lord is my light and my salvation," and "the Lord is the stronghold of my life." Since he trusts that God constantly surrounds him with the light of his presence, the Psalmist concludes, "whom shall I fear?" (Ps. 27:1).

I wrote this sermon on Monday. In my email blast from the church this week, I mentioned that I had come upon the headline: **Expert: Anti-Semitism breeds anxiety in world**. The article was on the front cover of the Journal News in Westchester County, which I saw on Tuesday. Journalist Peter Kramer interviews Dr. Zev Cohen, a young psychiatrist in Manhattan who has a practice with mainly orthodox Jews. Dr. Cohen also works in forensics, interviewing criminal defendants for courts to figure out why they did what they did. Dr. Cohen's work has seen a huge uptick following the spate of Anti-Semitic attacks in and around Manhattan over the last few months—including the attack at the Orthodox Rabbi's house in Monsey, NY on December 28. That incident sent 5 people to the hospital, the most serious of whom is still in a coma. The assailant has been charged with federal hate-crimes. And while many, including the assailant's family are saying he has a history of mental illness, Dr. Cohen says that the issue must be

viewed with a larger lens of bias against others due to their faith. The effects on his clients of this attack and on others in the boroughs has been debilitating. “The anxiety rises with each new incident...we are living in an age of anxiety, not just in the Orthodox population, but in American society...You look at the rates of anxiety in children and adolescents and the rates of depression: They’re off the charts. One reason, many observers agree, is this amplification in the media and social media, of bad things that happen in the world.”

Dr. Cohen says he works with the tools his clients have...one main one is their faith. He says, “For Orthodox Jewish patients, it’s important to talk about their faith and the anxiety that they’re feeling. A big tenet of Hasidic Judaism is trust in God. It’s a pillar of Hasidic Judaism...Another touchstone concept...(for them) is the idea of divine providence, that God is watching over each and every single person in the world.” He says he deals with a concept with which we grapple in our Christian faith, “There is an inherent tension between the sense of divine providence and seeing bad things happen to your fellow Jews. We can’t eliminate the tension...but I think having the conversation ultimately is reassuring because it connects people back to their identity, their faith, their sense of community.” (The Journal News, Tuesday January 21, 2020)

I daresay, that the tension Dr. Cohen speaks of is real for many people of faith. “If God is good, how can God allow something like this to happen?” That tension is at the root of that existential question I posed earlier: “Am I really going to be OK?” That tension is why there are many atheists and agnostics.(Atheists: there is no God; Agnostics: there is a God, but God exists but is unknowable, unavailable).

So, where are you? And if you find yourself anxious on any level (and I daresay, it would be nearly impossible NOT to have some sense of anxiety in the world in which we live today), how do you reckon with your faith?

Talking about it is the first step. Being in community with others who can hear us and embrace us and reassure us that we are loved and will be ok—to mirror those things back to us is key. Developing your faith life with God through prayer and scripture reading is essential.

Here, in this space, we affirm, that each and every one of us is a beloved child of God; that God loves us and is present with us—always—without exception, no matter what we’ve done or not done. We are God’s own.

AND so is every person outside these walls as well. For us, the call is to share that message hope. Poet William Blake Batchelor addresses this idea in his poem, “On Another’s Sorrow”

Can I see another’s woe, And not be in sorrow too? Can I see another’s grief, And not seek for kind relief? Think not thou canst sigh a sigh And thy maker is not by; Think not thou canst weep a tear And thy maker is not near. O! he gives to us his joy That our grief he may destroy; Till our grief is fled and gone He doth sit by us and moan.

('On Another's Sorrow': William Blake Batchelor, M (ed) (1995) Lion Christian Poetry Collection  
Oxford: Lion Publishing)

May it be so! Amen!!