

From the Pastor's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, September 11, 2022

Judy told me, “Those are all classic symptoms of anxiety.” I was floored.

It was an otherwise normal Wednesday-at-10-a.m. counseling session a couple of years ago and my counselor, Judy, had just told me I was suffering from anxiety. And for whatever reason, I struggled to hear her. In my head I was like, “Listen here, lady. I’m more than happy to come in here and acknowledge that on my worst days I feel like I’m tap dancing on the edge of a deep, bottomless hole of sorrow and dread, but that’s just how depression works. But don’t you go saddling me with *another* affliction!” I didn’t say that, but I did try to protest. I actually said to her, “Oh, I didn’t think I was anxious because I took that symptoms survey when I first came here and anxiety was really low for me.” She kindly, if not a touch dryly, reminded me that that was over two years ago and that we were living through a global pandemic, so – yeah – maybe my situation had changed a little. Counselors are extraordinarily patient people!

Last week was a hard week of focusing on the losses that necessarily attend to any transition, but it may yet prove to be the easier of these two weeks because losses are often more easily accepted than anxiety. Loss and woundedness happens. We know that down deep. We don’t like it, but we’ve seen people come and people go. We know that as we age, we change – and those changes often involve a loss of capacity. At the very least we remember the “Circle of Life” song from *The Lion King*! Again, we may hate loss, but some part of us knows it is inevitable.

As for our wounds, well, those can even be virtuous. We can be wounded because we were trying to help someone or as a result of our giving it our all. Football season has just begun and I’ve been a fan long enough to know all of the plotlines. Inevitably, one of those plotlines this season will involve a 24-year-old young man who battles through some nagging injury in order to help lead his team to victory. This is such a common plot point that the camera operators even know which shot to look for: Get the guy on the bench, helmet off, steam rising from his head and body, towel around his neck, and a look of utter exhaustion on his face. Or, even better, the towel is over his head –

because the level of his exhaustion is too great for mere mortals like me to look upon (a real Moses-with-a-veiled-face sort of thing) and his teammates are coming over, tenderly patting him on the back. Tender not, to be clear, because he is fragile, but because one must be reverent when touching the semi-divine. Anyway, that’s what the NFL gives us so that we sit through commercials for electric trucks and Doritos! So, yeah, last week’s loss and wounds can be noble and a much easier thing to approach than this week’s topic of anxiety.

As a reminder, this is week two in a sermon series on transitions and since transitions are far from easy, we are being brought face-to-face with some of its rougher characteristics. The Good News that we’re finding is that these hardships are not ours to face alone, but can actually be part of our life in Christ; indeed, were parts of Christ’s own life. And so, we can face our wounds not *only* as an inevitable part of life, but even as a “thin place” between us and God – that is, our wounds are not contrary our holiness, but can be the very location of it since Jesus’ risen body still had wounds.

Anxiety, though, is going to be trickier and before we get to the hopefulness we can find in Christ, I think it prudent to explore one of the ways we – all rather unwittingly – help cultivate anxiety in life. For this, I draw your attention to our Old Testament reading from 1 Samuel. Now, for context, this is still pretty early on in Israel’s history. We are well past the time of Moses and Israel being freed from Pharaoh’s bondage and are presently at what will turn out to be the end of the “judges” era in their history. It is easy to forget that for much of their early life, Israel was a confederation of twelve tribes. They were held together by a shared story of liberation, shared laws, and shared rituals, but their leadership and their worship was not centralized because there was not, yet, a holy city, a holy king, and a holy Temple to serve this function. And here’s the thing: There didn’t need to be! Yahweh is, apparently, more than content with this confederation of twelve tribes. It is, instead, members of these tribes that start clamoring for a king. And why did they do this? What seeded this particular idea? Well, they had started comparing themselves to other nations.

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It's an old adage – and probably all the truer because of its staying power – that “comparison is the thief of joy.” And in small ways we've always known this. A 16-year-old gets his first car – let's say a red-but-rusty 2009 Chevy Malibu – and he's pretty sure it's the greatest car ever. He loves it. Learns to change its oil, washes it every weekend, makes his friends not eat in it. Then, one day, he pulls into soccer practice and discovers a teammate driving a 2018 Jeep Grand Cherokee with great speakers and Bluetooth capability. All the sudden, all he can see is the rust, not the red; and all he hears is that one belt that slips and squeaks. It even, somehow, lost its “new car smell”! Is the Chevy Malibu any different? No. Obviously. This young man is. And he's different because he's begun to compare what he has with what others have.

Well, so it is for Israel. These other nations have these towering temples and palaces; they have defined kings who rule with conviction and strength. All of the sudden, Israel's piddly judges look like what they actually are – a bunch of, admittedly highly-esteemed, merchants, farmers, and craftsmen who use their best wisdom to lead the community. There is disappointment and, quickly on its heels, insecurity – insecurity that those other nations' palaces bespeak a power greater than Israel's own; insecurity that there must surely be legions of well-trained troops who could storm the city walls of these various tribes without even breaking a sweat. Until now, Israel hadn't considered itself weak because they leaned into a story of how God conquered Pharaoh – the most powerful leader of his day – and brought Israel into safety and prosperity in the Promised Land.

No sooner does that comparison lead to disappointment and that disappointment lead to insecurity than that insecurity leads to anxiety. The thinking switches from foreign kings who *could* attack to foreign kings who *will* attack. And now we're in a panic spiral. Now, anxiety has attacked.

Contrary to popular media images of a protagonist responding to a crisis with great aplomb and vigor, panic will send most of us into our worst ideas, not our best. And so it is for Israel, who immediately begin to demand a king so that – and this is key! – they can be “like other nations.” This

is, of course, not just a bad idea, but is theological apostasy. Yahweh's entire purpose for creating Israel was to create a people who were different – marked, set apart, made a holy nation through whom God would bless all the nations of the earth. Israel's anxiety has become a stumbling block to their very purpose for existing in the first place. Well, so it can be for us even today. Our anxiety can often be the cause of our abandonment of our meaning and purpose for being. Anxiety is a merciless thief.

In God's patience, it is explained to Israel what this demand for a king will mean. It will mean having to sacrifice sons to war and daughters to the court (where, we should be clear, they'll live as servants in labor and even be exploited in their bodies; those harems don't just materialize out of thin air, after all!). It will mean taxes on that which the earth produces for the people. It means losing your best oxen, your best cattle, your best servants. It means making do and getting by. It is not a rosy picture, but anxiety is always all too happy to sacrifice its best in fear of the worst. Well, so it can be for us even today. Our anxiety often robs us of our best, leaving only a fleeting sense of security in response. Anxiety is a merciless thief.

If you know Israel's history, then you know that this dynastic period of having kings only lasts about two to three generations. First is Saul, then – quickly – David, then Solomon, and then – all of the sudden – the kingdom is divided and we have two, rival Jewish kings that occasionally war with each other. But none of that should be all that surprising because it is little more than the externalization of the internal war of anxiety at work in each of God's chosen. Israel didn't so much process their anxiety as externalize it to everyone's detriment. Well, so it can be for us even today. Anxiety is often at the root of violence.

Today, the church is tempted to the joy-robbing comparisons of measuring ourselves against other churches, against a culture that makes brunch and youth sports more important than Sunday morning worship, and – worst of all – comparing ourselves against who we were just a generation or two ago. Indeed, one of the worst joy-robbing comparisons that churches can make is to

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measure the current church against the idealized and nostalgic memory of the 1950s and 1960s church. I'll have much more to say about the dangers of nostalgia in a few weeks, but for now let's focus on how that act of comparison seeds our own anxieties. It's the way in which we make ourselves feel as if we aren't measuring up to the demands of this moment because we're not doing the same things as those who were just trying to be faithful in their moment.

So, that's the archeology of anxiety in many instances, but it isn't the whole story of being anxious precisely because not all anxiety is inherently bad or unreasonable. For an example of reasonable anxiety, we must turn to our Gospel story of Jesus praying in Gethsemane on the night of His arrest. If ever there was a night in which to lose sleep and sweat things out, it is this one. For whatever reason – be that human wisdom or divine revelation – Jesus knows that the hour of His arrest and subsequent crucifixion is upon Him. He knows that the coming hours and days will be marked by extreme suffering. And while He is bold and faithful in trusting that even this pain is part of God's plan for Him and for all of us, we still see Him in full anxiety.

It is significant that Jesus' response to His anxiety is prayer. Whereas Israel demanded power, Jesus leans into prayer. And while I want to avoid a simplistic "pray away" message here, I also don't want to discredit Jesus' instincts. His life, after all, is the model for our lives. The way to avoid the "pray away" fallacy is to focus on the content of these prayers.

Too often, we believe that prayer is little more than our telling God all the things that are bothering us... as if an omniscient God doesn't already know this. And while I trust that God loves us enough to hear us out as we unfurl the laundry list of woes – while I trust God is patient with us in God's love for us – Jesus models something a bit more. Jesus speaks God's will back to God. Jesus knows His life – like the lives of Israel before Him and your life now – has been marked, sealed, set apart for a holy purpose. He prays that back to God – "not my will, but yours."

I noted a moment ago that when churches compare themselves to their own pasts, they make the first mistake of assuming that the call on their lives today is supposed to be the same as the call on the lives of those who came before. We assume, as an example, that because that previous generation was supposed to be big and build a new education wing on the church that we are supposed, I don't know, also be big and build an even newer education wing? That's the thing about comparative anxiety – it doesn't make a lot of sense once you start saying it out loud! What we need in that moment is someone like a Judy from my opening story. We need someone to kindly, if not dryly, remind us that that was two generations ago and – maybe – our situation has changed a bit. Such a reminder forces us to discern what we are called to now rather than merely remember what we were called to before. So, yes, pray, but pray God's purpose in *this* moment. We pray this purpose as a reminder of just how good God's best is for us today and with the hope that we will resist sacrificing this good on the altar of our anxiety.

Yet maybe what I want to most leave you with is this: Anxiety happens. It's present even in the life of our fully divine, sinless Lord. Anxiety is not, itself, a sin. Like every emotion, it is to be accepted and embraced as real, while not capitulated to as inevitable. The worst thing we can do is be like Israel before and enthrone our anxiety as king over our lives just because we want to be "like other nations." For that is the tragic, if not darkly comedic, twist in this story: Those "other nations" built their palaces and citadels because *they* were anxious. That's right! They had seen a federation of twelve tribes in possession of a prosperous land and they had grown insecure. Once so understood, that entire story becomes an arms race of anxiety – and, clearly, no one wins in that situation.

So, as we continue to work through this season of transition as a community of faith, let us commit to embracing our joy rather than comparing it to others' joy. Let us seek out, together, God's purpose for us in this moment. Let us utilize the resources God has given us, rather than sacrifice them on the altar of our anxiety. And let us follow

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Jesus to prayerful Gethsemane without falling
asleep in the task.

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