

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

February 7, 2021—The 5th Sunday After Epiphany

Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

GIVING UP ANXIETY: MY LENTEN FAST

Years ago, as Lent was approaching, I read an article in the Christian Century magazine entitled: “Giving up Anxiety: My Lenten Fast.” I felt like I could have written something quite like it, and then I wondered if some of you might feel the same way. My understatement for this morning is to say that one of the byproducts of our journey through 2020 and into 2021 has been a lot of anxiety. A LOT of anxiety! The author, The Rev. Dr. Lauren Winner, is an Episcopal priest and the Associate Professor of Christian Spirituality at Duke Divinity School. This was written in 2012, so just replace her fears about the Avian Flu with the Coronavirus and you’ll get the idea. She wrote about worries and anxiety:

Giving Up Anxiety: My Lenten Fast,” The Rev. Dr. Lauren Winner, Professor at Duke Divinity School, The Christian Century, Feb. 8, 2012, pp. 32-33.

“I worry that avian flu is finally going to hit this year and I will get into my car and head west to my stepmother’s remote farm, but I arrive too late for the quarantine, or my stepsister will pull up the same moment I do and there will be enough food for only one of us and my father and his wife will be forced into some 21st-century blended–family Sophie’s choice.

I worry that my identity is being stolen by someone right this second and every cent drained out of my bank account and a Lexus bought with a credit card in my name.

I worry that I have forgotten a crucially important appointment, or maybe that I’ve forgotten that I’m supposed to be giving a lecture in Saskatchewan right this second and there’s a small group of people sitting in an auditorium somewhere, angry and wondering where I am.

I often think I’ve lost my driver’s license. Driving to the airport, I pull out my license five times, ten times, just to make sure I wasn’t somehow deluding myself when I last checked, three minutes ago back near exit 57.

It’s breathless, compulsive behavior, behavior that makes no sense that has no reason. It feels like diesel fuel is coursing through my sternum, and there is no focusing on anything other than the object of my panic: avian flu, my lost driver’s license, suddenly empty checking accounts.

Or I boil water for tea and as the tea is steeping, I check four times to make sure I’ve turned the stove burner off, and even after I leave the house that afternoon, I worry that the stove is on, that the house is burning down and I call my neighbor and ask him to go check. The stove is always off.”

As Dr. Winner looked toward the beginning of Lent, she decided that that year she was going to give something up. Some people give up chocolate or sugar or caffeinated drinks for Lent. She wrote that she was giving up anxiety.

She wrote that the way she was going to do this was by using something she learned at Al-Anon. For those of you unfamiliar with this group, Al-Anon is a self-help group for family members and friends of those who are alcoholics. Al-Anon helps people learn that they can’t change the alcoholic person in their life, but they can change how they interact with that person.

Dr. Winner said she began attending Al-Anon because of her mother’s drinking, writing “...there, someone made the completely shocking suggestion that my feelings needn’t always be the last word in my head and that I could tell a feeling---fear, anxiety, some sort of obsession –that for the next 15 minutes, I wasn’t going to pay it any heed. After a quarter of an hour, I could go back to the feeling if I wanted to, or I could choose to ignore it for another 15 minutes.”

“This distancing myself from a feeling for 15 minutes is possibly the most sanity-making practice anyone has ever offered me. It has short-circuited my spirals of hideous emotions more times than I can count, and during Lent I find myself invoking it at every turn: no anxiety for the next 900 seconds; maybe I will check for my driver’s license or go online to see if my bank account has been hacked, but not now. “

Dr. Winner then turns to the life of faith for help, in taking these 15-minute breaks from our anxiety, or fear, or obsession, or whatever it is that haunts us. It may be a lengthy list after the year we’ve lived through! She writes about how in the early centuries of Christianity there were people of faith who went out into the desert to pray and meditate, sometimes for many years. They are known as the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Some of them taught that the way to deal with something like being anxious or worrying all the time is to first notice it. Pay attention when you are feeling that way.

Once you’ve noticed that feeling, quarantine it (quarantining--something that we know a lot about!); quarantine it, instead of letting it take over, build walls around it and choose not to feel that way.

And then these desert teachers say there is one more step. Replace that feeling with a prayer. Instead of worrying or being anxious and fearful, pray.

Pray for help, pray for God’s Light to fill up that place of fear or anxiety, pray for someone else. Pray.

Dr. Winner gives an example: “So if your distraction is about food—it is 2 p.m., and you ate lunch 90 minutes ago, but you find yourself daydreaming about the muffins you baked last night or the cookies’n’cream yogurt you have sitting in the refrigerator—one thing you can do is notice the thought and then tell yourself you can’t think about the yogurt (for 15 minutes). The other thing you can do is replace the yogurt with prayer. She writes: that is what I will try to do to my anxiety this Lent—not just ignore it for quarter-hour increments, but sidle up alongside it with a prayer.”

I want to add another layer to Dr. Winner’s ideas for dealing with anxiety and worry as people of faith. Both our New Testament and Old Testament lessons have a lot to teach us. Whether or not you choose to focus on giving up anxiety for this Lent, I’d guess that dealing with anxiety and worry is something we all might deal with every now and then. I know I’m not the only one in this church who worries about things.

Dr. Winner talked about sidling up beside her anxiety with prayer. This is exactly the example we have from Jesus in this morning’s story from Mark. There are many times in the Gospels that you can read about Jesus going away to lonely and deserted places to pray. When I was reading Mark this week, I noticed for the first time that it talks about Simon Peter and the disciples hunting for Jesus. He obviously went far enough away that he wouldn’t be disturbed.

Now for those of us who are single, finding a deserted place to be alone in prayer isn’t difficult. But I’ve had parents of small children and teenagers, and couples after one or both of them has retired, say that it is impossible to find a lonely, deserted place to be in prayer.

But it can be done! I’ve had moms tell me their 10 minutes in the shower is their only time for prayer. And I’ve had couples dealing with the new world of retirement talk about time alone in the car, plus I have heard about hiding in basements and garages, and sending spouses out for pretty unnecessary errands.

However, you find the time, time in prayer is foundational to living with anxiety and worry. It is foundational to life.

You may have noticed in your bulletins that I printed a passage from Philippians 4 under the sermon title today. Paul writes to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say,

Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

These are promises for us to hold onto as we live this life of faith, and as we take 15 minutes breaks from anxiety, and replace it with prayer.

First “the Lord is near.”

We are not alone, no matter what we are struggling with, our God is near...ALWAYS.

Secondly Paul writes: pray, ask for help, don't worry, pray.

And there is a promise for us as we pray:

God's peace that goes past anything we can understand,
will protect our hearts and minds and keep us close to Christ.

There is peace for everyone who lives with anxiety and worry, even
you and me.

But we forget. We forget that our God is always near. We forget to pray. And we're not the only ones. The prophet Isaiah was speaking to the Israelites who were slaves in Babylon. They'd lost everything they'd ever known; they'd been dragged into exile. They were people who knew a lot about anxiety and worry.

In verse 27 that we read this morning we hear the people saying: “God has lost track of me. God doesn't care what happens to me. (The Message translation)

And so twice Isaiah says to them and to us: “Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.”

I hope some time today you will read all of Isaiah 40 to hear the poetry and power of this chapter.

Who is this God who is near to us? Who is this God who has been here from the beginning of Creation?

This is our God, who gathers us in God's arms like a shepherd with young lambs,

This is our God who holds us like a mother holding her children.

This is our God who knows the names of all the stars and not one of them is missing from God's care,

and this is our God who knows each of our names and not one of us is missing from the loving care of God's heart.

Who is this God who is near to us?

This is our God who doesn't ever get worn out, or tired.

This is our God with loving strength enough to meet each one of us in our anxiety, our worries, our troubles and our fears.

This is our God who longs for us to choose God instead of worry and anxiety.

This is our God who will give us the strength to tell our fears, our compulsions and our anxiety,
“I'm not going to pay attention to you for the next 15 minutes, and I'm going to pray instead.”

This is our God who knows we get faint and tired and weary with all that life holds, and sometimes we do fall exhausted not matter how young or old we are. God knows!

And this God who loves us, who knows us by name, who promises us peace that goes past all of our understanding,

Who says to us: "Wait!"

Wait for my strength, wait for my power, wait for my love, and wait for my comfort,
wait for me to give you what you need. Take 15 minutes and wait!

And then in the words of Isaiah, when we choose to wait for God's powerful love, we will find that God's strength has become our strength,
and with God's power we will mount up with wings like eagles,
we will run and not be weary,
we will walk and not faint.

The choice is ours as we enter Lent:

We can live in anxiety that the stove is still on at home, that our turn will never come for the Covid vaccine, and life will never feel normal again.

OR we can sidle up beside our anxieties and worries with prayer,
and discover that in our human weakness and need
we are soaring with the eagles,
flying by the grace of God's power and love.

SEE 12-02-12