

“Anxiety Into Joy”

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Isaiah 44:24, 28b, 45:1-7

Have you ever lost a small yet valuable possession, like a key to a safety deposit box? Or a precious stone given to you by a relative now gone? Or perhaps one in a pair of gold earrings?

The first emotion often when we lose something precious is anxiety. Our heart begins to race. Adrenaline begins surging through our body. Maybe we panic.

This happened to Kelly in 2015 when she was sitting on her couch and glanced down to see that the diamond was missing from her wedding ring. The experience was heightened for her because she had dealt with debilitating depression and anxiety in the past. Losing something so precious was a trigger that was about to send her reeling.

During those dark days in the past, Kelly would often express desperate feelings to God in prayer, proverbially shaking her fist in the air.

“What is going on? Have you completely forgotten about me? Why won’t you answer my prayer? How can good possibly come out of this intense pain? Is there purpose in this darkness?”

She frantically searched the whole house to no avail and was about to panic, but calmed herself enough to do a google search: “How do I find a lost diamond in my house?”

Over and over again, Kelly found the same answer. The advice was to turn off all the lights, get down on your hands and knees with a flashlight and shine it over the ground. If the light hits the diamond it will sparkle and you can find it easily.

This solution made sense to Kelly, and with renewed hope she turned off all the lights in the house and began in the laundry room on her hands and knees with a flashlight. Within a minute she saw her diamond sparkle underneath the dryer.

After the fact, Kelly said that it was the darkness that enabled her to find the diamond. She never would have found it in the light. The most valuable lessons she found were learned in the dark. Her faith was refined and strengthened when she encountered Jesus through the darkest times.

As we begin the season of Advent and head into the darkest time of the year, we are challenged to be humble. We can embrace the darkness and understand that it can reveal that which we seek. We don't need to be afraid of the dark.

Advent offers us a season of time in which we are invited to slow down and take stock of our surroundings and the condition of our souls.

We are invited into the space of waiting, with a challenge to be patient.

As we consider our environment, let us notice the darkness — the very real and even foreboding darkness. There is indeed evil in the world. It is ugly and makes life difficult.

But let us also notice the light. Sometimes we seem to be consumed by darkness, but when we take a moment to notice, we will see that there is always at least a glimmer of light, and if we focus on that glimmer, it will grow.

This pattern is found over and over again in Biblical stories.

I want to read for you a passage from Isaiah this morning. As so many Biblical stories, it came out of a dark time in the history of the Jewish people when they were in

exile in Babylon. Not only was it a dark time, but the Jews had been utterly humiliated in front of all the surrounding nations.

You see, the Jews political system and military forces had been overthrown by Cyrus, king of the Babylonians, and their central temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed.

In the Middle East and Northern Africa around 530 BCE if your military was defeated, people considered it not only a downgrade to your government and your people, but to your god. Your god must also be less than the country's god who defeated yours.

In those days, you, your nation, and your god are humiliated when you suffer political or military defeat.

This idea came from a dualistic philosophy that was prominent in those days that may have come from Greek origins. In this worldview, there are forces at play behind the scenes — some would call them gods, or cosmic powers, or spirits, or supernatural forces.

These entities pull the strings that are played out in every day life. If you serve a weak god, then your world will crumble in the face of more powerful gods. This was the assumption under the surface of

political and military battles, and you can see it littered through these ancient stories.

Dualism held that with two forces, one must prevail over the other. One must win and the other lose. One is good, the other bad. One is righteous, the other evil. One is lord, the other a servant. One holds power while the other is powerless. Light ... darkness.

Does this sound or feel familiar? Perhaps we have some of the same assumptions integrated into our worldview today, undergirding how people relate in government, business, in civic organizations, even churches, as well as families, and other relationships.

How often do we get cornered or corner others in conversations that become arguments with family or friends where the only goal is to win, assert our rightness in the face of another's opinion or idea? Perhaps this happened around your Thanksgiving table on Thursday this past week. If you notice this, you are seeing a dualistic worldview.

So in about 530 BCE, the Jews lost and were facing significant personal and community humiliation and the humiliation of their God.

At points like these, human nature seems to be to question one's religious beliefs, get angry, and also to get anxious because all of the things that once were secure are now unstable. This was the experience for many Jews in those days.

Thankfully, the prophet Isaiah was on the scene reassuring the Jews of God's continued presence in their dark and anxiety ridden lives.

Listen for how the words of Isaiah wove a counter narrative to the prevailing dualistic worldview and asserted the possibility for joy in anxious times.

READ ISAIAH 44:24, 28b, 45:1-7

Isaiah was asserting that the God the Jew served, and whom we serve today, was in no way inferior to Cyrus or the god of the Babylonians, even though the Babylonians defeated them. In fact, God was not subject to any other God or power that they faced in their day or that we face in ours.

Isaiah refuted the common belief that a nation's god was in lockstep with the interests of that nation. God certainly acted on behalf of the Jews through history, but God was never beholden to a nationalistic agenda.

Instead, God has a bigger picture in mind that transcends the smaller view of any particular nation, and bends toward universal justice while standing against oppression wherever it is found.

This is why the prophets often spoke against the Jewish rulers and sometimes supported them. God always stands with those who are oppressed, whether inside or outside the human made boundaries of faith.

This bigger God is who Isaiah proclaimed to the people. And because God is bigger than the human made dualistic categories, there is space for joy to flourish among the people, because even while they were still in darkness, God had not forgotten them. God had not abandoned them.

God also finds us in the middle of our darkness.

If we read on in the story, we will discover that God encouraged them, while living in exile and in the middle of public humiliation, to enjoy life, be generous, and live by the principles they were taught.

There is still goodness, and there can still be joy in the middle of what they experienced as anxiety ridden darkness. In fact, because of the darkness there can be joy.

Let me read again Isaiah 45:3.

I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.

These words were spoken as if by God to Cyrus, the king of Babylon. This puts things into perspective. If God intimately works to give good things even to rulers who kill and imprison innocent people, then what might God give those who intentionally serve God?

How much more does God provide joy for those who find themselves in darkness, are being oppressed, feel lost, and experience loneliness? How many of you want to grab onto that promise?

Beyond the individual, God knew them intimately as a tribe, as a community, as a people. God had not abandoned their wants and needs, their community causes, their community pain. God knew all of it and was bending justice in their direction that they might live fully and joyfully.

We serve a God who has the power to transform anxiety into joy!

Now that's a reason to celebrate!