

Trinity United Methodist Church

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“What Is Anxiety?”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Welcome

He is Risen! He is risen indeed! Welcome to worship on this Sunday after Easter, to all of our Trinity family watching at home and to all of you who gather from beyond Isle of Wight County at your homes as well.

In some traditions of the church year, this is known as “Holy Humor” Sunday, when we celebrate that, according to some of the earliest writers in the church, the devil got a big joke played on him by Jesus, by God, on Easter Sunday, as Jesus defeated death and the grave. So in that tradition, often appropriate jokes are told on this particular Sunday, and one of my favorite ones is about the town drunk who was stumbling along by the river that went by the town one Sunday and saw a congregation of people who were in a line waiting to be baptized in the river. He found himself in line with others, and he eventually made his way up to the preacher. The preacher grabbed hold of him and said, “Have you found Jesus yet?” And the guy said, “No, no, I haven’t!” So the preacher plunged him under the water and he brought him back out, and he said, “Have you found Jesus yet?” He wiped the water out of his eyes and said, “No, no, I haven’t!” So the preacher dunked him under again, holds him under a little bit longer, brings him back up out of the water: “Have you found Jesus yet?” The drunk is just spewing water. “No, no, I haven’t!” So the preacher dunks him under, holds him under a good while and gets his arms and legs kicking and flailing, and he pulls him back out the third time and says, “Have you found Jesus yet?” And the drunk says, “Well, are you *sure* this is where he fell in?”

It's really, really odd telling a joke to an empty room. But hopefully you're either laughing or groaning at home.

We join together in prayer. I hope that you've had an opportunity to download and receive the bulletin for today. You'll find there the prayer that is written by Bishop Sharma Lewis, our bishop here in Virginia, for this current crisis of battling the virus. So I invite you to join me and say along with me the words of this prayer.

Almighty God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, We thank you for your blessings, past, present and future. You are our rock and the source of our hope in all things and at all

times. As Jehovah Jireh, our provider God, we ask you this day to stretch out your mighty hand and eradicate from the face of the earth forever this virus called COVID-19 that is spreading rapidly from continent to continent.

We also pray that you, Jehovah Rapha, our healing God, would place your hand upon all of those who have been stricken by this virus and restore them to full health. Be with those who have lost loved ones and are grieving. Protect all who are caring for those with this virus and keep them from contracting it themselves.

Calm our fears and provide us with your peace that surpasses all understanding. Strengthen us with the joy of the Lord and help us to hold firmly to the hope that only you can provide. Unify us that we, the Virginia Annual Conference, may be able to experience anew the promise of your presence in and through the unity of our faith, hope and trust in you in the days ahead and forever. We offer this prayer in the mighty name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Scripture: Luke 22:39-46 NIV

39 Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. 40 On reaching the place, he said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." 41 He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, 42 "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." 43 An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. 44 And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

45 When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. 46 "Why are you sleeping?" he asked them. "Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation."

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Open our ears and our hearts, oh Lord. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

One night about seven years ago, something happened to me that hadn't happened before then and, thankfully, hasn't fully happened since. I don't remember much, but what I do remember is that I was sitting on the living room couch, staring off into space, staring straight ahead at nothing in particular. My wife, Bekah, was trying to get my attention, and I remember that I could hear her, but for whatever reason, I could not respond to her. My gaze remained fixed straight ahead, and it was one of those

moments like you see in movies where everything seemed to be in slow motion. I have no idea how long this episode lasted. It felt like forever, but it was probably more like a few minutes. Thankfully, it wasn't long enough that Bekah called 911, though she thought of doing so. Eventually I came around. And sometime later, I learned that what I had experienced that night, due to the stresses of ministry and of life at the time, I had experienced a panic attack, or an anxiety attack.

What is anxiety? Anxiety is what we turn our attention to through worship and through these messages over the next few weeks together. Anxiety can be hard to define, because it is so different from person to person. What causes it, how we react to it, what symptoms we display of it. All of that can be very different from person to person.

Tim Newman is an author at *Medical News Today*, and he has some very helpful information in one of his articles about anxiety. He calls anxiety the “ever-present uninvited guest in our lives.” That anxiety seems to be rampaging through society like a noncontagious, cognitive plague, forming a low-level hum that hides in the corners of our collective minds. He points out that anxiety is a nebulous term that covers a great deal of psychological ground. He uses the word picture of a wedge, that at the thinnest edge of the wedge, before an exam or a job interview, we would certainly feel anxious most often. And that kind of anxiety is both understandable and normal and is not a cause for concern. At the widest end of that wedge, however, anxiety can arrive as a symptom of another mental illness, such as panic disorders, post-traumatic stress syndrome, phobias, or obsessive-compulsive disorder. He says when anxiety is a person's primary symptom, it may be referred to as “generalized anxiety disorder,” described as people with generalized anxiety disorder feel anxious most days and often struggle to remember the last time that they felt relaxed. As soon as one anxious thought is resolved, another may appear about a completely different issue. Does that sound like you or somebody you know?

Generalized anxiety disorder affects more than 3% of the country's adults, which is actually likely a higher number due to those who are undiagnosed and untreated due to the stigma around seeking help and diagnosis with mental health matters. Also, social anxiety is a very common display of one's anxiety: Being anxious in social situations.

On one hand, anxiety is a good thing, because it's a biological response that has been hard-wired into us and into other species as well. It's that fight-or-flight syndrome that kicks in and that has helped us and other species survive up to this point. However, anxiety becomes a problem when that life-saving mechanism is triggered when no actual threat is present, when it's triggered at inappropriate times. Anxiety is a problem when that trigger gets stuck in the “on” position all of the time.

An anonymous person said that “anxiety is mysterious. It can feel like an invisible cage that keeps you prisoner on your sofa, unable to move for fear of something that you can’t quite identify.” I’ve definitely been there.

Anxiety overall is part of the human condition. It’s wired into us by God, and therefore we can find it addressed in scripture, in the Bible. The psalmist in Psalm 55 says, “Listen to my prayer, O God. Do not ignore my cry for help. Please listen and answer me, for I am overwhelmed by my troubles. My heart pounds in my chest. The terror of death assaults me. Fear and trembling overwhelm me, and I can’t stop shaking. O, that I had wings like a dove; then I would fly away and rest.” Are you or somebody you know longing to fly away and rest?

One of my favorite stories of scripture is about Elijah, the prophet, in 1 Kings, when he has the great showdown with the prophets of Baal. Baal, of course, has proven ineffective as a god. Our God, the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the god of Israel shows up in a mighty way. And Elijah, it goes to his head, and he ends up killing all of the prophets of Baal, and Queen Jezebel, who is a follower of Baal, doesn’t like this and has plans for Elijah. And so we read in 1 Kings 19: “Elijah was afraid and fled for his life. He went to Beersheba, a town in Judah, and he left his servant there. Then he went on alone into the wilderness, traveling all day. He sat down under a solitary broom tree and prayed that he might die. ‘I have had enough, Lord,’ he said. ‘Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors who have already died.’” I know my anxiety is real high when I have that very thought: *I have had enough*.

And in scripture, death is often associated with anxiety. It speaks to the darkness with which we humans often struggle. Even Jesus, being fully human, struggled with anxiety. In this scene from his life that we read from Luke 22, here we see Jesus at his most human. You see the disciples at their most human as well, overcome with grief, and their response is to fall asleep, which is often a very common response to grief and especially to anxiety—when all you want to do is just sleep.

We read that Jesus was in anguish. It’s the only time in scripture that this particular word is used, translated as anguish. He was in anguish to the point of sweating blood. And that word *anguish* in the Greek is associated with words like “conflict” and “battle.” Something deep is going on within Jesus. It’s an awareness of this interior struggle that He is having, a war within, if you will. This inner tension of awareness of an imminent decision.

And who among us hasn’t faced anxiety when faced with making a big decision? Here’s Jesus facing perhaps the most important decision in all of human history. Thank goodness that He’s fully human, but also fully God, because no other human could have made it through that particular decision except for Jesus. Even so, we might paraphrase

the prayer that He prays to say, “either get me out of this, Father, or give me strength to get through it.” I can just imagine Jesus kneeling there and feeling perhaps the hand of the angel on His shoulder, that angel who is sent to strengthen Him, when He’s really hoping maybe God would answer His prayer the first way, by letting Him out of it. But when He feels that strength from the angel, looking up and going, “All right, then.” It’s in this moment, being fully human as we are, that Jesus, in experiencing the depth of human grief and loss and fear and inherent anxiety that comes along with it, by going through it, that Jesus redeems all of that, as he redeems so much else that we experience as human beings. He redeems it by fully trusting in the Father, by fully trusting in God, to full obedience to the plan.

So the question, of course, is how do we respond to anxiety, especially as followers of Jesus? First, let’s explore just a little bit more anxiety from a Biblical perspective. Chad Brooks, who is a colleague in the United Methodist Church, who wrote a sermon series on anxiety from which I’m borrowing a good bit of material and adding my own, said that anxiety is created by the gulf in our relationship with God that sin creates. In Genesis chapter 1 and 2, before sin entered into the picture, there was perfect union and perfect trust, especially between humanity and God. But sin entered into the picture and sin created this gulf, this expanse, this empty space between us and God. And Satan, since that point, has filled that empty space with so much that would seek to draw us away from God. And so much of that are all these “what-ifs.” That was the basic temptation of the serpent to Eve. “What if you took just one bite? Couldn’t hurt.” These what-ifs, though, are so often things that we cannot begin to know. They’re many things that we’re not meant to know, because we are not God.

In the scripture lesson from Luke, Jesus wrestles with these what-ifs. *What if this cup could pass? What if this could be done another way? What if someone else could do this instead of me?*

How do we wrestle with the what-ifs in life, especially today? *What if I lose my job? What if they don’t get well? What if we’re never allowed outside of our houses ever again?* (Might be a little extreme, but I bet that’s crossed some of our minds.) How do we respond to that empty space between what we know and what we don’t? And especially, how do we respond emotionally? How do we respond to the fear that that creates?

Look at Jesus, who prayed, “I need you to strengthen me, Father. I need you to get me through this.” Because, you see, even Jesus Himself could not find His own way out of this. Instead, He prays for the Father to strengthen Him and give Him the clarity of what God is willing to happen.

It's from what Chad describes as the deepest, most human moment ever that we learn that we can approach fear and anxiety in the same way that Jesus did, especially in prayer. For ourselves to pray, "God, show me the way, and strengthen me, because I don't want to, and more importantly, I *can't* do this on my own."

There's a theologian who wrote a book called *The Christian and Anxiety*. His last name is Balthasar. He says, and I love this, that "anxiety loves to find the gaps in our wholeness and exploit that space." Think about that. *Anxiety loves to find the gaps where we are not whole and exploit that space*. Maybe it's doubts about ourselves because of things that have been said to us about ourselves along our life's journey. Whatever it is that has been formed in us, places in which we are not whole in body, mind, and spirit, anxiety loves to find those gaps and exploit that space.

And yet at the same time, he points out that these moments of anxiety are new opportunities to release where we have always tried to control things ourselves and instead to realize that we are not in control, and at that point to give it to God and to trust that empty space to God. He points out that anxiety in a Christian is a process. It's a passage from darkness to light, from brokenness to wholeness, from death to life. And we haven't the foggiest idea of how to navigate that process ourselves. It requires help.

We find really, really good help, especially when it comes to any matters of mental health, and especially even anxiety. Even just a little bit. We find great help through trained professional counselors. We find great help through modern medicine. Sometimes there is something biological, something chemical going on inside our brains that is no fault of our own whatsoever. It's just that we live in a fallen world and our bodies are subject to that. And sometimes we need that little bit of help to help us navigate through. Through counselors, through medicine, through whatever it takes to be healthy and whole in body, mind, and spirit.

I want to take a moment to point out that I am not a trained counselor. I have some rudimentary training in counseling techniques. Ultimately, I am trained in helping you see how God is working in your life. And part of that might be to help you realize that you need to get your rear-end in some professional counseling. And sometimes the barrier to that is financial. So please know that I am more than willing—I hold it all confidentially—to help make it happen for you to get the help that you need.

But also, I will pray and do my best to work against the stigma of seeking help when it comes to mental health matters. Just like there is no shame in going to the doctor if we're experiencing some chest pain that we don't know what it is and we're afraid it might be our heart—well, guess what? There is no shame in going to a trained counselor when we have pain in our emotional heart and to get help there as well.

You might say, “Well, no one is going to let me come with all this virus stuff floating around. No one’s going to let me come sit on their couch and talk.” Well, just like our regular doctors, many counselors are offering virtual, online appointments as well. They’re virtually secure, and you can still get the help that you might need. I myself have greatly benefitted from counseling throughout my adult years, and it’s my belief that everybody should have a counselor, whether it be somebody that we pay to help us through these matters, or whether it be a really good friend—not a friend who’s going to blow smoke at you and tell you that you’re all great all the time, but somebody who is able to speak the truth in love to you, even when it might hurt. We all need help.

And lastly, Balthasar says that anxiety can have the purpose of opening ourselves up to God in a cry of mercy. Oftentimes anxiety might be described as that “coming to the end of our own rope,” “hitting rock bottom,” and we don’t know where else to turn. That’s when we turn to God. Hopefully before then, and that’s part of what counseling helps us do, is to help us recognize those signs before we hit rock bottom again. But our struggle with anxiety, he says, can become a banner of the graciousness of God that unfurls upon us. I’ll say that again. *Our struggle with anxiety can become a banner of the graciousness of God unfurled upon us. Wow.*

Paul recognized what that was like. In 2 Corinthians chapter 12, he writes about his “thorn in the flesh.” We’re not ever told what that thorn in the flesh is. There’s plenty of speculation; it’s all speculation. We’re not told what it is. But what Paul does tell us about it is that, in verse 8 of chapter 12, “three times I begged the Lord to take it away, and each time He said, ‘My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.’” Paul says, “So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” He never says that it’s a quick process, even though that’s what we always want, especially in our modern world. We’re always after that quick fix.

Instead, we need to really re-learn, especially in this particular season in which we find ourselves. We need to re-learn the language and concept of “lament.” The laments in the Psalms, which ask questions like, “How long, O Lord?” It’s different from a mere complaint, though. It’s a petition to God. And it affirms faith in God. Psalms like Psalm 4, verse 1. This is the Revised Standard Version. “Answer me when I call, O God of my right! Thou hast given me room when I was in distress.” *“Thou hast given me room when I was in distress.”* Anxiety can be often described as feeling like the walls are closing in on you. And the antidote to that is God giving room when we are in distress. You see, by giving these spaces and places to God that produce anxiety in us through prayer, we invite God to show up and to be God in our lives.

And maybe through all this it's not *you* that is struggling with anxiety, but it's someone you love or someone you know, and you wonder how you can best help them. Friends, let me be clear. Please don't offer any platitudes. Please don't offer any clichés. I can't tell you how many times I've seen on Facebook with all of this quarantine stuff that we're under, "Oh, this too will pass." Some people find that encouraging. But let me tell you, when you're down in the depths of it, those kinds of things are pretty meaningless. You don't even have to offer advice. Just give them the gift of your presence. Just sit with them. Give them space, and help them to create the space to experience the presence of God. Maybe it might be offering to read some scripture with them. It might be offering to have a prayer with them, or to tell them, "I'll be praying for you," and then to make sure that you do it. Maybe it's simply to go for a walk with them through the woods, or to watch their children or aging parents while they can escape for a moment and have some time to themselves.

It's important that together we work to create that space, not just in the low times when we feel that we need it the most, but in the high times as well, so that it puts the brakes on a bit when we go into these skids. It's so helpful to establish these regular rhythms through our spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, scripture reading, journaling, regular worship.

I was sharing with a friend the other day that you've heard it said, possibly, that you can tell what a preacher struggles with the most personally by what they mention in their sermons or preach about most regularly. And if there's something that I probably sound like a broken record to you on, it's spiritual disciplines. Because I know the great importance that our spiritual disciplines play for us, just as important as physical disciplines of getting exercise and eating healthy. But they're also the things which I am the most horrible at sticking with them.

That is what leads to my own burnout. A number of years ago I crashed and burned so completely, I was burned to a crisp. I was even asking myself, "Do I even believe this Jesus *stuff* anymore?" I was that burned out. It was one of the worst times in my life. It's what some of the early church writers call a "dark night of the soul." And it's this really strange time to be in. When you pray and you feel deadness, you feel nothing. More than just the, "okay, maybe I'm not fully awake this morning, I'm not really feeling it today," but a real *season* of just feeling *nothing*. Hearing nothing from God. But yet, I promise you, God also never felt closer than He did during that time. You see, it's in our lowest times that God can usually do the most for us.

So let's help ourselves and each other, especially during these anxious times, to name that. That yeah, we're struggling. Some of us are *driving* the struggle bus. And we need God, because we need *help*.

Two of my favorite scriptures that encourage me during times like these that I've traveled through in my life are both in the Psalms. The first is Psalm 62, verse 2: "When my heart is faint, lead me to the Rock that is higher than I." *When my heart is faint, lead me to the Rock that is higher than I.* And then also, in Psalm 56, verse 3: "When I am afraid, I will put my trust in you." Grab a piece of paper; open up the Notes app on your phone. Write that down. Psalm 56, verse 3, and put it somewhere where you're going to remember it. Work on memorizing it as a family together. ***When I am afraid, I will put my trust in you.*** It's so profound, and it's so simple, but yet we make it so complicated, don't we? Because we want that control and that empty space for ourselves. But again, in the words of Dr. Phil: How's that working for you? Let's let it go. Let's give it to God, and let's put our trust in Him.

Thanks be to God. Amen.