

Trinity United Methodist Church

May 3, 2020

Pastor Dan Elmore

Welcome

We're glad that you have taken this opportunity to worship with us. As I record today, there is a pretty big storm a-brewing that is coming through the area. The wind is just kicking, and rain and everything else. And storms are what we are talking about this morning, storms that we face in normal life, storms that we certainly face in the midst of this big pandemic storm that we have going on that continues to develop. And how might God speak to us through His word to encourage us in the midst of these circumstances as we worship together today? That's what we're talking about.

At the end of this transcript you will find some questions for discipleship that I hope that you will take a look at and that you will discuss as a household. Maybe get on the phone and talk with some church friends about it, maybe get on a Zoom call, FaceTime, whatever the case might be. Because we're used to coming to church and church taking care of training us as disciples, but really that responsibility is on each of us, and it especially really happens in the home. So I hope that you'll take advantage of that resource to continue to deepen in discipleship of Jesus Christ together.

Prayer

We join together in prayer. We continue to pray for all those prayer concerns that we carry on our hearts and minds, families and individuals dealing with other things besides the virus, but we also turn to another prayer that was written for the pandemic. The author is unknown, but it can be found online at Ascension Press (ascensionpress.com). Let us pray.

Most merciful and Triune God, we come to you in our weakness. We come to you in our fear. We come to you with trust, for you alone are our hope. We place before you the disease present in our world. We turn to you in our time of need. Bring wisdom to doctors. Give understanding to scientists. Endow caregivers with compassion and generosity. Bring healing to those who are ill. Protect those who are most at risk. Give comfort to those who have lost a loved one. Welcome those who have died into your eternal home. Stabilize our communities. Unite us in our compassion. Remove all fear from our hearts. Fill us with confidence in your care. For Jesus, we trust in you. And it is in your name that we pray as you taught us to pray, as we say together:

Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Scripture: Mark 4:35-41 (NIV)

35 That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." 36 Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. 37 A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. 38 Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" 39 He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. 40 He said to the disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" 41 They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. 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.

Over in Israel, in the Holy Land, they're always discovering ancient biblical artifacts. One of the most exciting discoveries came several years ago, when they discovered what they call the "Jesus boat." The Jesus boat was found at the bottom of the Sea of Galilee, and it had been revealed due to a number of factors, primarily through the use of the Sea of Galilee for a water resource by Tiberius and other towns and cities around the Sea of Galilee. Also compounded by a number of years of drought, so the water level in the lake had fallen dramatically. But then, as the story goes, after a particular storm, a number of folks out searching for such artifacts stumbled upon the edge of what ended up being a first-century boat. Archeologists were able to date this boat due to pottery and different things that it was buried with to around the first 50 years A.D.; in other words, the time of Jesus. This, indeed, could be a boat that Jesus Himself had used, that perhaps his disciples had used, certainly those in His time, and it is at least representative of the type of boat that was used in the day of Jesus. Quite an exciting discovery that you can see in a museum if you go and visit Israel.

That boat was revealed in particular, as the story goes, after a storm had come through, and erosion had revealed the edge of that artifact. We hear stories of how storms, especially along the Outer Banks, might bring in pieces of shipwrecks from centuries ago. Storms have a way of revealing things such as that. But the metaphorically-speaking storms that we face in life have a way of revealing things also, don't they? Storms that we face reveal things about us, reveal things about our society. The big storm that we're facing in this pandemic has revealed just how fragile our normal way of life truly has been, that it can come just about crashing down in just a very short amount of time.

As these storms that we face reveal things about us, these storms also raise our anxiety as well. We're in the third week of a sermon series on anxiety, the last week of this series. It was first preached by a colleague named Chad Brooks, who preached this for his church at the end of last year, and when I saw it, I thought, "Wow, I've got to borrow from that." How timely it is for normal life and all the anxieties that normal life just brings about. And so when I planned to do it for these three weeks, that was before the pandemic hit, but God has a way of working timing out well, especially in things such as this. I had to share it.

So the first week, two weeks ago, we talked generally about what anxiety is and how we might respond generally to it. That anxiety is part of our human condition. It's a part of our sinful nature, a result of our living in a sinful world. That we have to deal with such a negative influence and emotion in our life. Anxiety is part of the way we're wired as part of that fight-or-flight response that helps us to know we might be in danger, or at least, hey, our spidey-sense is going off, and we need to pay attention to something around us.

Anxiety also runs quite the gamut, from anxiety that we might normally feel before something momentous like a job interview or an important test, from that end of the spectrum all the way to where anxiety is just crippling and does things to us like keeps us in bed all day or, on the flip side of that, makes us unable to sleep at night. There's a theologian whose last name is Balthasar. The first week we pointed out how he said that anxiety loves to find the gaps in our wholeness and exploit that space. Anxiety loves to find the gaps within us, in which we are not whole as we should be in the image of God, and to exploit that space, that empty space between us and God. Between us and our true selves, who God would have us to be.

Last week we looked at one of the chief causes of anxiety, and that is worry. And Chad points out that when we worry, we're actually worshipping our problems. That attention, that amount of focus that we give to our worries so often instead should be given primarily to God. But instead, when we focus so much on our worries, we're basically worshipping our problems.

And that ducktails with today's topic, where we talk about that other cause of anxiety, living in a "what-if" world, where we get caught up in asking and worrying about the "what-ifs." *What if* this happens? *What if* that doesn't happen? And so forth and so on. All of us live, or have lived, in that world from time to time. Again, it's a natural human response to do so. But what happens is, when we get an idea in our head, whether it is true or not, whether it is healthy or not—and most of the time it's not—and we let that idea dictate our behavior. When we have more extreme anxiety, what happens is that the unknown becomes more devastating than the known. Let me say that again: The more we struggle with anxiety, the more the unknown is more devastating to us than the known. Another way of saying that is that what *might be*, what we think *might* happen, becomes more devastating to us than what *actually* happens.

For instance, think of a time when you needed to have a difficult conversation with someone. Or maybe that you were walking into a meeting that you knew would be contentious and that tempers might flare, etc. (That never happens in church life, does it?) And so our anxiety goes up. We rehearse those conversations in our head and how they *might* go and how they *might* derail, and what we're going to say to whatever that other person *might* say or do. At least that's what goes on within me; I don't know about you. But then have you ever come out of those conversations or meetings or situations, whatever the case might be for you, and you go, "Huh. That wasn't as bad as I thought it would be." The unknown was more devastating than the known.

Another example happened in 2008. If you remember, that was the year of the great recession. Gas prices had been high ever since Hurricane Katrina had hit. And I remember sitting on the couch watching the TV and the news or whatever it was saying that "gas is going to rise to \$10 a gallon and there's going to be food and medicine shortages," and my anxiety shot up. Especially in terms of medicine shortages, because there's a medicine that I pretty much depend on to live, called insulin. And I thought to myself, "Oh no. *What if* I'm not able to get my insulin?" My anxiety went up. But those of us who have lived through that time, we know that it didn't get as bad as many said it would be. The unknown turned out to be more devastating than the known. *What might have been* turned out to be more devastating than what actually happened. And that's a key trick of anxiety.

Chad points out that when we let our minds create worlds that are untrue, our soul then has to live in that false world. I'll say that again: *When we let our minds create worlds that are untrue, then our soul has to live in that false world.* And I would add to that, if our soul has to live in that false world, that's why it's torture. That's why we're never at peace. We continue rolling along on rough seas, at best, and at worst, we're getting battered by the storm. We feel like we're about to drown. And anxiety just builds and builds with every wave that crashes across our bow.

So as we turn to scripture this morning and we read about a storm in the Gospels, let's back up for a minute to see that storms are actually quite thematic throughout the Bible. All the way back to Genesis chapter 1: "In the beginning God was there; God hovered over the surface of the deep." And all interpretations of that are that it was stormy. It was dark, it was menacing. It was everything we think of, the worst storm imaginable could be.

We continue on to Noah and the ark, where it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. Talk about a killer storm! On to the Israelites crossing through the Red Sea. Where was the storm there? It was the wind that pushed the waters back so that they could walk through on dry land. Yes, even in one of the greatest scenes of God's deliverance for His people, there was a storm swirling around them.

There were times storms became in scripture a metaphor for rebellion against God or God's punishment for rebellion. You see this in Jonah chapter 1, where God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, and Jonah instead decided to hightail it the other direction to Tarshish. And the result was that he boarded a boat and God sent a storm upon that boat to punish Jonah for disobeying. The storm did not abate until Jonah convinced his shipmates to throw him overboard, where he ended up in the belly of the fish, and so forth.

And so we take all that in context, and we place this storm that we read about in Mark chapter 4 in the midst of that theme throughout scripture. This wasn't just any storm. This storm meant something. The Sea of Galilee was known to be tumultuous. Many of the disciples in the boat on that evening or whenever this took place were fishermen. They were used to the storms that would pop up quickly because of the terrain and geography in and around the Sea of Galilee. It could go from a very bright, sunny afternoon, in a very quick matter of time, to a storm that was battering the boat. So these fishermen knew these types of storms. They wouldn't have been freaked out by the storms. But in this account, they are. Something about this particular storm freaked them out. They were thinking, "This one is bad. We might not make it." And where is Jesus? Jesus is in the back of the boat, asleep with his head on a cushion.

Now, as we've been going through the Bible study in the Gospel of Mark, there were some details I learned in preparing this today that I didn't know some of them and I didn't think to mention some of them as we went through Mark chapter 4. But one of the things from the Gospel of Mark Bible study—Mark is so sparse with his words that when we get little details that seem like minutiae, particularly for Mark's gospel; he's more of a high-level view kind of a guy—when we see these details, not just that Jesus was asleep, but that he was asleep on a cushion in the back of the boat, that really means something. Because the average person going out on the Sea of Galilee would not be taking their cushion. It was certainly not for pleasure. It was to go out and to fish and to get a job done. The only one with a cushion would be the one in the back of the boat,

and what is in the back of the boat? It's the rudder by which the boat is steered. So basically what we're told is that by Jesus' position in the back of the boat, on the cushion, these seasoned fishermen, at some point along the way, had decided it was a good idea to let Jesus steer. Well, yes, it *is* a good idea to give Jesus the helm, right? Of course. But in the midst of bailing water, in the midst of rowing against the waves, in the midst of fighting for their lives, they look back and think, "Hopefully someone's at least got the helm and steering us in the right direction." And the one they entrusted is asleep. And so they cry out, "Don't you care?" That's what we cry out as well. "Don't you care about us? Don't you care that we're about to drown? Don't you care that we might not make it? Don't you care about *me*?" It's that natural cry that we give to God when we are lost in the world of our own storms, of our swirling anxiety, especially when it appears to us like God is asleep at the helm, or the wheel, in the midst of it all.

And so they wake up Jesus. Jesus stands and he says these great words, "Silence! Be still." And there's two other times in Mark's gospel where he uses that same exact phrase, and it's when he does exorcisms. And so this has led many commentators to point out that maybe this storm is more than just a natural occurrence. Maybe this storm is something bigger. Maybe this storm is supernatural. Because here we have Jesus showing power and command and force over it all.

So think again about the storms that we face in our lives. Again, of course, the big storm of COVID-19 and especially the storm that it's turning into of all political sides using it for their own advantage and things like that. But think about the storms we face more every day, when life is normal. Other health struggles, financial struggles, relational storms. All these storms reveal something about us and maybe something about God. These storms can reveal lies that we've come to believe about ourselves. Things like maybe we're worthless, that we're not worthy of love. Things of that nature that we believe about ourselves because of something that was said or done to us, especially in our formative years as children and youth and young adults.

Storms can reveal the things that we can't see. Storms reveal that we can't see them, that we're not as sure as we thought we were. Storms reveal that maybe there are some things we're not *meant* to see, the things that worry us still. Storms can reveal our fears. And storms can reveal how our fears and how they control us are really supernatural and spiritual issues.

But also, storms reveal something about God, as well. Especially as we look back on storms in our lives, maybe we're able to see how God delivered us through them. We're able to see that God still cares about us and God cares about our fears. And that through all of our storms, we don't face these natural battles only, but we face pretty intense spiritual battles as well.

Even so, it's still so easy to get caught up in the world of "what-ifs," isn't it? What-ifs, though, are so often bigger than what-ifs. What-ifs are about how I can't see this, but I want to.

Soren Kierkegaard, who is a philosopher that lived some time ago, said, "the most painful state a human can have is remembering the future, particularly the one you can't have." I'll say that again. "*The most painful state a human can have is remembering the future, particularly one that you can't have.*"

Think about all that we have lost in this current storm of coronavirus. We've lost *baseball*. Yeah, hockey too, whatever. We've lost baseball. We've lost concerts. We've lost going to the beach and potentially going to the pool. We've lost haircuts. But more importantly, we've lost the ability to shake the hand of a new acquaintance or neighbor. We've lost being able to hug a friend or a loved one. And here's the thing: The more that we dwell on those things and the more that we remember what we *can't* have, at least for right now, the more painful this is. And the more painful this is, the less we can see the reality of what's around us.

I love the Facebook meme that has circled about many times. It says, "It's not being *stuck* at home; it's being *safe* at home." But *what if...*

Again, our what-ifs are usually much bigger than just simply what-if. Because when it boils down to it, it's really about a spiritual battle for peacefulness in our souls.

The purpose of the miracle that we read about in Mark chapter 4, Jesus calming the wind and the waves—the purpose of all the miracles in the Gospel of Mark and the other gospels—the purpose of it all is for the disciples, for all those who were around, or us who read about it today to know that Jesus has all the power to handle it. Jesus has total control of all of our unknowns. Jesus can take care of our "what-ifs."

So here's a "what-if" for you. *What if* we allowed our anxieties to build our prayer list? *What if* we allowed our anxieties to reveal the things that we need to yield, to give over, to God? It's what the psalmist gets at in Psalm 139 when he says, "Test me and know my anxious thoughts."

Now, to be sure, there's a difference between worrying about the future, getting anxious about the unknowns in the future, and having goals and having dreams and aspirations and planning for those. And the truth of it is that many of us tell ourselves when we get worked up about the future, "Well, I just like to be prepared." Let's get real. Sometimes we just default to freaking out about a future that is not going to happen. Our worries create a false future that we hope never happens. The what-ifs create that false future that we hope never happens. And so we end up wasting time avoiding something that will probably never occur.

Balthasar says that we become fearful in the face of all this, because we think that we have to stand on our own. Somehow we've convinced ourselves that acknowledging anxiety, that acknowledging struggles with mental health, that acknowledging that we might need some professional help, that we might need some medication, that we might need a trained counselor—we've convinced ourselves that admitting those things is somehow sinful, when nothing could be further from the truth. Leaning into Jesus during anxiousness is not sin. Naming it before God and before Christian brothers and sisters is not sinful. It is not weak, but indeed God's grace is sufficient in our weakness. Paul says, "Therefore when we are weak, we are actually strong by relying on Jesus and each other." Clinging to Jesus, relying on Jesus, is what He desires most for us to do.

Chad points out that our anxiety will decrease the more that we're able to claim and live into the freedom and truthfulness of Christ.

At the end of this scripture reading for today, Jesus looks at his disciples and he asked them, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" I'll admit there are some times when I'm reading through this passage and I hear that as Jesus sort of being a little angry, especially when you see how many times the "duh-disciples" don't get it in the Gospel of Mark. Sometimes I picture Jesus just rolling his eyes at them because they just don't get it. But especially in light of everything we're facing today, I hear Jesus asking this in the most caring way, in a way that makes him genuinely sad for us. "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" And that gentle rebuke is a reminder to trust in God no matter what, even, and probably especially, when it seems to us like God might be asleep.

Psalms 121—I recorded this a couple of weeks ago in the first sermon on anxiety—"I lift my eyes to the mountains. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip. He who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." You might say, "Well, why, then, was Jesus asleep?" Because he's also fully human, and God knows, we full humans need our sleep, right? But God in His fullness, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, never slumbers nor sleeps.

And think about it this way, all of the times, all of the things that Jesus did, that he declared before the Resurrection as fully God and fully human, all these things when he was present and real and active in the lives of his disciples before his death and resurrection—how much more so now, after? That just as he was so present with them even in the midst of the storm, he is even more so present with us now through the power of the Holy Spirit, whenever we face the storms in our lives.

So what do we do with these empty spaces in our lives, the places where we're a little broken, the places where anxiety loves to creep in and exploit? What do we do with those spaces?

Remember the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane that we looked at a couple of weeks ago, where Jesus says, “Father, either take this cup from me or make me stronger.” Chad admits, and I admit with him, that so often we stop at the first of those options and we just pray, “God, please take this from me.” We forget to pray the second part of that. “Lord, make me stronger.” And sometimes God will take it, but seems more often than not, he seeks to make us stronger.

We have to invite the presence of God into our lives. I love the New Living Translation of Philippians chapter 4, starting in verse 6. Paul says, “Don’t worry about anything. Instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God’s peace which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.”

Friends, we have to rebuild our mental patterns through scripture, through prayer. Romans chapter 12, verse 2, says, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is, His good, pleasing and perfect will.” We’ve got to rebuild this mental pattern where God is at the very center of our lives each and every moment.

There is a way of praying called The Examine, where you look back over a period of time in your life; it might be a 24-hour period, it might be longer. And you look for, how did I reflect Christ? What are the sins that I struggled with? How well did I do at struggling with them? What could I have done better? What could I have done differently to overcome those temptations so that when they arise next time, I’ve learned a lesson to apply to the next time? Questions such as that. And one of those questions typically is, “was God my first thought upon waking and my last upon going to sleep?” *Was God my first thought upon waking and my last upon going to sleep?*

It’s kind of an older Christian song now, but the Christian group Casting Crowns has a great song called *Voice of Truth*. The song talks about all the lies that this world will tell us to worry us, to raise our anxiety, to make us doubt ourselves. The song says, “But instead, I will listen to the voice of truth.” It’s a great song; look it up.

And again, it comes down to the spiritual disciplines, but the thing that I thought of with all of this is an analogy I’ve used before of dipping a tea bag into a hot cup of water. And if all you do is just dip it and take it right back out, you’re basically still going to have hot water. You’re not really going to taste the tea at all. Leave it in for just a little bit, you’re going to have some really weak tea. If you want that good strong cup of hot tea, you leave that tea bag in there for several minutes, for a long time. And you let that water soak through those tea leaves and you let the essence of those tea leaves permeate throughout all of that liquid.

I thought of it this way: When it comes to faith, we need a crock pot kind of faith, not a microwave dinner kind of faith. You know the difference between the two? Have

you ever had the quick microwave dinner? Some of them are okay, but let's face it, most microwave dinners leave a whole lot to be desired. But have you ever really had anything bad out of a crock pot? Maybe you have. But a good recipe, a nice pot roast maybe, a good stew or something like that? The difference is in the crock pot, it's a lot longer of a process. It's not instantaneous. But in that process, all those flavors marinate together. And have you ever noticed that you re-heat a microwave meal for later and it's even nastier than it was the first time? But you re-heat the crock pot leftovers and usually they're even better the second time, because those flavors have continued to marinate together. You hungry yet? I love it when I do this to you. You get those flavors marinating together, that's the way our faith should be. Not where we just hope that we can do something quick and be fully nourished, but where we spend time in God's word. We spend time in prayer. And the more that we spend time in our spiritual disciplines, the more we marinate our souls with God's spirit. And the more those flavors marinate together, the more they become one. That's the kind of faith that we need, especially to weather whatever storms we face. Such that His thoughts become our thoughts. That God's ways become our ways.

The thing about it is, that's messy, isn't it? It's all mixed in there together. But it's messy in life, as well. To the point that what I find is that most people are not willing to do this type of interior work. Most people are not willing to take that kind of interior journey, because it's hard. It's scary when we try to do it ourselves, on our own power. It's long. It's a process. But guess what was also messy? The cross. Jesus' burial. And even the empty tomb.

You see, friends, Jesus wants to transform our what-ifs so that we can have testimonies to the truth of his power. Let me say that again: *Jesus wants to transform our anxiety so that we can have testimonies to the truth of his power.* And so, in a world that is so full of anxiety, especially now, how about we live lives where we're so full of the truth of Christ that we might be for the world the truth of Christ as well?

I'll leave you with these words of Paul from 2 Corinthians chapter 4, starting in verse 6: "For God, who said, 'Let there be light in the darkness,' has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves. We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but we are not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but we are never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but friends, we are *not* destroyed."

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Questions for Discipleship

1. We've defined anxiety a couple of different ways. How would you define anxiety?
2. What insights have been revealed to you during this series?
3. What scriptures are a source of comfort for you during anxious times? Work on memorizing these.
4. What is producing the most anxiety within you? How can you give that to God?