

Facing Anxiety: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly.
Psalm 25 Tim Dickau July 11, 2010

A few years back, Rob des Cotes did a workshop with us where he talked about a discovery he made during a prolonged absence from his work. He realized that he was living with all sorts of anxieties. He told us that he wasn't even aware of his anxieties or how they were affecting his behaviour until he those months away from his regular routines.

Rob's not unusual or alone in his anxiety. According to Statistics Canada, anxiety is the most common mental health problem in Canada. The Statistics Canada Community Health Survey of Mental Health revealed that hundreds of thousands of Canadians suffer from anxiety disorders.

One more severe form that anxiety can take are panic attacks. Those of you who have had a panic attack, know that they are not fun. Sufferers of panic attacks often report a fear or sense of dying, "going crazy," a numb sensation throughout the body, heavy breathing (and almost always) hyperventilation or losing control of themselves. These feelings may provoke a strong urge to escape or flee the place where the attack began. I know some of you struggle just to be present with a group of people without feeling a bit panicky.

Again, panic attacks are not unusual. Twelve percent of Canadians have had a panic attack at some point in their life. If you have regular panic attacks, there are a variety of ways of treating these, and many people have found relief from them but I know that they can be debilitating.

I was thinking about anxiety this week for two reasons: talking to a number of people who are feeling anxious, and reading this Psalm – the 25th Psalm in the collection of poems and prayers we find halfway through the Old Testament in the Bible. As I was reading through this Psalm the last few weeks, I began to notice this underlying anxiety in this poem/prayer. Consider some of the signs of the writer's anxiety in those verses we heard read.: “Don't let me be put to shame. Don't let my enemies triumph over me. Don't remember the sins of my youth.” Towards the end of the psalm, the anxiety, partially held in check until this point, seems to spray out of the psalmist's mouth like the water from the fountain out there on Trout Lake. “I am lonely and afflicted. The troubles of my heart have multiplied; free me from my anguish. Look upon my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins. See how my enemies have increased and how fiercely they hate me! Guard my life and rescue me; let me not be put to shame. Redeem Israel, O God, from all her troubles.”

The tone gets progressively more desperate, not more peaceful. Isn't prayer supposed to help your mental health? In this prayer, the author's anxiety seems to get worse.

I want to talk about anxiety for a moment tonight. Unlike Rob des Cotes, you may not have a couple months off to step back from your regular routines and work to discover if you are anxious or not, but we do have a little time of peace and quiet here tonight so we can at least take a little examination of ourselves. As you listen tonight, I'm inviting you to reflect on this question: “what if anything, am I anxious about?”

Anxiety as a Pointer to What's Wrong

Usually we think anxiety is bad. But the first thing I want to say about is that anxiety is often an indicator that things are not the way they should be. In this sense, anxiety is not bad. It just is. Your anxiety may be first of all an acknowledgement that something is wrong with the way things are in your life or in the world. If you are standing at the front of a sanctuary with 200 people as witnesses making vows to live the rest of your life with one other person like Steve Moss and Jeanette McKay did yesterday and you are you are whistling Dixie, peaceful as a lark, we'd think there is something slightly out of whack with you. I can testify that Moss was doing some serious sweating.

It seems that the Psalm writer has reasons to be anxious more than Steve did yesterday. “Don't let my enemies triumph over me... my enemies have increased... how fiercely they hate me”. His life is at risk. His anxiety is a sign that things are not as they should be. Living with violence is not how we were intended to live.

Yet, the reality of our world is that so many people live in fear of violence – whether it is fear of domestic violence, fear of subtle abuse at work, or fear of outright conflict as I heard testimony of when I was in Kenya last month. Besides outright violence, so many live in anxiety that decisions made behind closed doors by those with power will leave them bereft – perhaps bereft of social benefits or bereft of employment. Maybe you live with one of these anxieties. This is not the intention of the creator. The Bible envisions a world where we won't need to live in fear of violence or rejection; the last chapter of the Bible presents a vision of a city with no need of gates or fences.

Or consider the writers' anxiety about his past. “Don't remember the sins of my youth.” How often do our past actions keep a hold on us? Past wrongs can leave us with an anxiety couched in regret, or anxiety about ongoing consequences. Yet, the Bible envisions a way through the past, a way of mercy, repentance, reconciliation. We weren't meant to live with perpetual anxiety about past wrongs. “Fear not,” the prophet Isaiah wrote, “for I have redeemed you.”

So anxiety can be a sign that there is a gap between the way things actually are and the way life was intended by God. In that sense, anxiety is not bad; it's an acknowledgement of what is. BUT, to **continually live with anxiety** can also lead further troubles – like a hidden or lonely life; perpetual anxiety can shrink our lives down like a hot dryer shrinks a new cotton shirt so it just doesn't fit anymore. As a pastor, I see these shrinking effects of anxiety up close. What's sobering is that I think most of us live with an underlying sense of anxiety much of the time.

Destructive Responses to Anxiety

How can we find our way through anxiety then? One way of dealing with anxiety that doesn't work very well is trying to anaesthetize it, do something to dull it. We blessed to have two great guys who are part of our church, Gus and Bobby, who anaesthetize people for money. What a gig they have. Gus and Bobby's work makes some intrusive medical operations possible and bearable. I was very glad for anaesthesia when they stuck a two foot probe down my throat into my stomach a few years back. In the same way, finding some rest or new focus for our lives can initially distract us from our anxieties and eventually help us overcome them. For an operation or re-focusing, anaesthesia can be helpful; as an ongoing strategy for dealing with anxiety, it's pretty limited. It doesn't get to the root of the problem.

There are many ways we as humans seek to anaesthetize ourselves. How do we anaesthetize ourselves from anxiety? (There are the usual suspects: alcohol, drugs, sex without any commitment. And then there are the more socially acceptable ways – spinning a cocoon of financial security, plunging in and out of relationships, spending endless hours on trivial pursuits)

The philosopher Pascal, a keen observer of human behaviour, called them diversions. “The only thing that consoles us for our miseries or anxieties is diversion, and yet this is the greatest of our miseries. For it is this which principally hinders us from reflecting upon ourselves, and which makes us insensibly ruin ourselves.”

Finding a Different Way

1. Teach Us To Pray

This passage from the Psalms calls us to a different response. I want to notice two responses that the psalm invites us to make to our anxieties. What is significant about these two responses is that they have the potential to expand our lives, our humanity. Instead of shrinking our lives, these responses to anxiety can expand them. Listen again to the beginning of this psalm.

I To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul; 2 in you I trust, O my God.

Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me

In praying this psalm, we immediately moves the focus from us, from me, from our anxiety to God.

“To you, O Lord, I lift up my Soul; in You I trust, O my God.”

Walter Brueggemann talks about his verb translated as “trust” as a verb that recurs often in the Psalms. It speaks of this basic trust that we are called to develop as humans in order to move deeper into relationships. He compares it to the trust that psychologist Eric Erikson identifies in the child who learns that though mommy is absent from his sight, she has not abandoned him. He can trust she will return. If parents don't return, these children may have a hard time developing trusting relationships later in life.

In praying psalms like this one, we not only name our anxieties, we hear and rehearse the testimony of the psalmist about the character of the God, the testimony of an entire people whose story and whose history us stretches back far into the past. *“No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame...good and upright is the Lord...he guides the humble in what is right and guides them in his way.....all the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful.”* Though our anxiety may make us feel like the universe is cracking apart, the prayer calls us back to another reality. The reality of the God who, through all the twists and turns of the Bible's narrative, proves faithful to his covenant. We pray the words of testimony, testimony that God “guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. all the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant” and we pray them as part of this community at whose table we gather around, the table of the one who was loving and faithful to the deadly end of his life, the one who defeated the power of oppression and evil that leave us anxious. To pray to this God is to pray to the parent who always returns, even when we don't see him. Just in this psalm alone, you can see why if you want to learn to pray, praying the psalms is a place to start.

Awareness of our anxieties presents each of us with a vitally important choice: will you seek to cover-up, run from or anaesthetize these anxieties? Will you shrink your life as a result of these anxieties? OR will you make that simple but expanding move to bring them before one who is greater than our anxieties? Learn to make this movement repeatedly and it will expand your life.

Catherine of Sienna, a person who learned to make this movement with regularity, describes how prayer to this God expands her life. “O eternal Trinity! O Godhead! You are a deep sea, into which the deeper I enter the more I find, and the more I find, the more I seek”.

If you are new to the practice of worship here tonight, let me tell you part of what we do here and why worship is important to living well. Part of what we do as we bring our lives, our world before God is to name our anxieties – in the presence of the divine. We gather to orient ourselves towards the One who will not let us be put to shame, the one who keeps returning to us, the Saviour. It doesn't do away with our anxieties but it certainly places them into a larger perspective. In the face of anxiety, prayer to this God expands rather than shrink our lives. Are you bringing your anxieties to this God?

One of the challenges of being is to keep trusting that God hears, that God continues to act, even when those actions are hidden to us. I was reading this week about a couple who went to Moscow to adopt two one-year old boys from an orphanage in Moscow. When they first arrived at the orphanage, they noticed something eerie about it. At first they thought it might be the stench and smell of this severely underfunded and resourced orphanage. But they realized that what was really eerie is that it was silent. The children had didn't cry. When no one responds to your cry, after awhile even babies just stop crying.

Have you stopped praying 'cause you think that God isn't listening? The psalm invites you to try again. It challenges us not to give up. “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul...guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.”

I want to invite you tonight to bring your anxieties. I want to challenge you not to give up on learning to pray. You can do that as we gather round the table of the crucified and risen Lord and share in the communion meal. You can do that by praying with others tonight in a moment.

Learning to pray is not only an invitation for tonight but it is the invitation I believe that God is giving us this summer. Last week, David Nacho began our summer series with the request of Jesus' disciples: "Teach us to pray". I want to suggest that this is the invitation we are being given this summer but by God. While bringing our anxieties to God is only of many rooms in the house of prayer, it's the one where we often start. I hope we will receive it. I hope that you will. This summer, we want to learn to bring our lives and our world before God as we read these Psalms, these real life prayers, together as a church.

You can live without learning to pray. But chances are pretty good that if you do, you will end up perpetuating the illusion that has dominated the last 500 years of Western history, the illusion that you don't need God; the illusion that we are in control, the illusion that continually perpetuates the many forms of control and violence that have dominated history when people are 100% sure they don't need God or are acting for God. As the psalm says, "God guides the humble in what is right". Prayer reminds us that God is God and we are not. Even Douglas Coupland, Vancouver's trendy gen x author, comes to the conclusion that he does in fact, need God. You can live without learning to pray. But your chances of living WELL, your chances of living WITHOUT perpetual anxiety, are, I think, pretty slim.

2. The Move beyond Our Own Anxieties to the World's Suffering

The Psalm orient us towards God. Praying it compels us to bring our own anxieties to God. But there is one line at the end of this Psalm that I want to notice because it points to the second response I want to invite us towards tonight. Up to this point, the psalm alternates back and forth between this crescendo of personal anxieties interspersed with a rehearsing of the God to whom he is bearing his soul. Again, it's this alternating between plea and testimony which is one reason the psalm is such a potent prayer. But at the very end of the psalm, the author moves from his personal anxieties to the anxiety for the whole people. "Redeem Israel, O God, from all of her troubles. Redeem Israel, O God, from all of her troubles." That is a significant move. From focusing only his own personal situation and anxieties, the author moves to concern for the whole people. "Redeem Israel, O God, from all of her troubles." That move highlights one of the dangers of much of our prayer that I want to mention briefly. It is this: if we ONLY bring the anxieties that arise from our personal lives, if I only bring my anxieties about MY life, prayer can itself shrink back into ONLY being a coping mechanism for my own preoccupations.

True prayer, however makes the move this Psalm makes. It moves us from our personal concerns, our personal anxieties, to a concern for the world, for the whole people. So when we gather, as a community, we often make this move ourselves in our prayers – from the personal to the corporate. As a community, we try to learn about and bring before God the problems in our city such as homelessness, poverty, unsustainable living, an economic system that too often spits out people and wastes resources. By praying together about these concerns, prayer widens our gaze towards the other.

Listen to Jesus' words about anxiety. Certainly Jesus life and teaching challenge the frivolous anxieties that occupy our energy. But he goes a step further still to speak about personal anxiety period. Listen: "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Like the drum circle we have joined in tonight, we gather as a community to pray for the concerns of our world. We don't just come to play our own beat, we join the beat of others, we submit

the desire to our own beat to play along with the rhythms that Curtis takes us on. In the same way, we join our prayers with others for the city, the world. As we do, God not only releases us from self-preoccupation but reshapes, rekindles our desire to seek first the kingdom of God, this different looking world of justice and compassion that Jesus came to establish among us.

Martin Luther King reminds us of the necessity of making this move: “There are two equally important dimensions to the Christian faith. One is that it acts as a stabilizing influence in our world. The other is that it sounds a prophetic trumpet and, as such, acts as the great change agent.”

I see it happen again and again. We gather to pray for ourselves and the world – and people go out again, as mixed up as our lives can become, find grace to serve others, to work for justice in the world, to welcome others. This is what God does when we pray. Isaac of Syria sees the challenge to enter this expanding movement of prayer from the personal to the corporate to action as what makes prayer complete: “Do not reduce your prayers to words, but rather make the totality of your life a prayer to God.” If praying doesn't move us to act for the good of the world, for the kingdom of God, our prayer is incomplete.

Back to the adoption story. This American couple stayed two weeks in Moscow visiting the orphanage and the boys they hoped to adopt every day. They read stories to them, in a language they did not understand. They smiled at them and slowly the boys started to smile back. They held them and comforted them. The boys began to rest in their arms. But still they did not cry or make sounds at all. On the day they were leaving however, that changed. As they put the boys down after hugging them for a long time, the couple began to walk away when one of the boys let out a yell, a shrieking yell, a guttural yell from deep in his being.

“To you O Lord, I lift my soul. In you I trust, O my God... No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame.”

Living with perpetual anxiety can have the effect of shrinking our lives. But if God is indeed “Good and upright, loving and faithful,” as the psalm testifies, then we not only have reason to bring our anxieties for ourselves and for the world to God, to yell them out from deep in our being, we may find that our lives larger, our humanity expanded, as a result. Will you learn to pray? Will you try again?

In response tonight, I want to invite you first to bring your anxieties for yourself and for the world to this table, the table of Jesus. Here we meet the One who on the night before his death...

Here we come to the One who did not fear the powers of this world but gave his life to overcome and restore them. He is the one in whom our anxieties are not only taken up but re-shaped into concern for the world.

And after you take bread and dip it in the cup, I invite you to join those standing who would be glad to pray with or for you about the anxieties that you are carrying.

So come.