

Thanksgiving Sunday 2015

Joel 2:21-27

Matthew 6:25-33

Freedom from Anxiety

Today we have Jesus' familiar words from the Sermon on the Mount, and the less familiar but hauntingly appropriate oracle from Joel – I find it powerful because one of the greatest concerns of this generation is the environment.

Do not fear, O soil;

be glad and rejoice,

for the LORD has done great things!

²² Do not fear, you animals of the field,

for the pastures of the wilderness are green;

the tree bears its fruit,

the fig tree and vine give their full yield.

Monday evening someone handed me John Ortberg's book **If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat.**

So the environment, the idea of anxiety (or fear), and God's faithfulness have been in my mind all week.

Ortberg tells us that one of God's most repeated phrases is "Fear not!" - most likely because we are afraid of true encounter with God – we are often afraid of doing the thing that God calls us to do.

Ortberg also tells us that when fear becomes habitual rather than that immediate impulse to fight, freeze or flee – it becomes "worry" which is also known as "anxiety". Worry, too, causes us to fight with people over foolish things, it can paralyse us, or send us flying down a path of avoidance – eating, shopping, gaming – we have lots of ways to avoid doing the thing that makes us feel most anxious.

Jesus tells us that worrying is useless. He points out that anxiety demonstrates our lack of trust in God's faithfulness – People who do not have a relationship with God worry, Jesus says as he bears witness to God's concern not only for God's people but also for all creation. Why else would God clothe the flowers with such beauty? Or as we are told in another passage: Why else would God know when each sparrow falls?

Make no mistake, Jesus knows what fear is. Sometimes there are valid reasons to be afraid. Fear is the awareness that we are in danger. The difficulty comes when the fear becomes distorted. But before you get upset with yourself if you do worry, Ortberg also mentions a study which showed that some people have a genetic predisposition to worry because they have gene *slc6a4* on chromosome 17q12. So whether we are afraid for good reasons, or if we are just chronically fearful, we need a strategy – we need to practice trusting God.

There are three exercises I would like to share with you – exercises that can help us own and release our anxiety, and remind us of God's faithfulness.

The first is perhaps the most simple.

You lie on your back, on your bed, arms outstretched and pretend that you are floating in the sea of God's love and faithfulness. Even if you are unable to float in water, you **will** be able to "float" on your bed. All that is required is imagination and trust. Gratefully acknowledge that you are floating in God's love. If a thought comes to you, saying "Ah, but what about this" And you are reminded of a time you felt God disappointed you – tell God about it, say, "I was really disappointed about this ... but I will trust that you will make it clear to me someday, right now I am grateful that I can rest and float in your love."

See if you can let go of anxiety if only for two minutes. That is a beginning. Perhaps you will find a way to let go of anxiety for an additional two minutes another time ...

The second exercise comes to us from the Contemplatives.

Whenever you have an unpleasant emotion, You can ask God for the grace to hold it for the love of Jesus. You may recall that Jesus once held all our sorrow and sin within himself while he was on the cross. This asking to hold something unpleasant / uncomfortable for his sake can mysteriously become a blessing. For as we pray to hold our fear, our anger, our sorrow for the sake of Jesus – we discover over time that God graciously transforms us ...

These exercises have their power in our attempting to trust God's grace. We don't try to understand "how" they work, we simply imagine floating in God's love, or imagine holding an uncomfortable emotion for the love of Jesus. God does the rest.

The third exercise is a little more complicated, simply because it has more steps – I would like to have some volunteers assist us as we "walk" through the exercise. You are to be our scribes – writing down what we say... so it's helpful if you can write large letters.

I want us to do this together because it suddenly came to me that the way to connect anxiety to Thanksgiving was to write a lament, so we are going to write a lament together.

First **we address God by name**, (*what names shall we use?*)

We speak of those things that burden us – **we complain, we speak of our fear**, (*and at this harvest time, I would suggest that we speak of the fear people have about the future of this planet*)

We tell God **what we need to feel reassured**,

We **recall times when God has been faithful to our ancestors and to us**, (*we might use a line from Joel or Matthew*)

We speak of our **anger toward an injustice**,

(*and finally having worked it through, we find in ourselves the freedom to praise God*)

We offer our thanksgiving.

God invites us to participate fully in a mutual relationship, in an on-going partnership. It is scary to work for God because God calls us into the uncertain places, places that are or feel dangerous, but Jesus promises to be with us always – God grants us the grace to accomplish what needs to be done as we participate in the healing of creation.

And even before we can see the results of our combined efforts we can praise and thank God because we can always trust in God's loving intention for us and our world. Amen