

High Anxiety

Genesis 37:1-4,12-28

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 14:22-33

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Pentecost 9A

Way back in 1978, Mel Brooks directed a movie called High Anxiety. It was a spoof of Alfred Hitchcock's psychological suspense thrillers. The film was funny, but the most intriguing thing to me was the title, and so I borrowed it for today's sermon. High Anxiety. Being very, very nervous. It's a fact of life, a reality we face. But before I go on, remember there's a difference between fear and anxiety. Fear is a direct response to a direct threat—headlights coming down the road in our lane; someone waving a gun. Fear triggers a flight or fight response—we run away, get out of the way, face the challenge, or go berserk ourselves. Anxiety, on the other hand, is indirect. It's not focused. It fills us with feelings of dread, of being threatened, but without a specific threat, or maybe out of proportion to the threats there might be. Our fears are generic and unfocused, so we look for something to focus them on.

Anxiety acts to the soul like too much caffeine does to the body. We get jittery, we jump when we're startled, we can't sleep, our minds race with fears real and imagined. Examples of anxiety? Worrying for our children when they go to their first day of school, or a new school, or when they're older, out on a date. Speculating up and down the range of medical conditions about why we're not feeling so hot. Wondering if the fact that we locked our keys in the car was caused by distractions or the onset of Alzheimer's.

Down at my neighborhood drug store, you can buy a tee shirt or button that says, "Too Blessed to be Stressed." And while it's true that remembering your blessings, and especially remembering God, who is the

source of your blessings, can help you deal with stress, life can still get pretty overwhelming sometimes. It's easy to fall into the trap of feeling guilty when we experience stress—"If only I were a better Christian, had more faith, prayed more, I wouldn't be so anxious." Again, being a Christian, being faithful, praying, are all wonderful resources to help us deal with the anxieties and stresses of life, but they're not magic pills. And they're not expectations. The Bible is filled with stressed-out, anxious people, and they are very honest about their feelings.

Here's an example, from Psalm 42. "Why, I ask myself, are you so depressed? Why are you so upset inside?" That question is asked again and again in the Psalm. Once I was happy, once I was successful, once I enjoyed God's presence. Now I'm sad, feeling threatened, and I wonder where God might be. "Why, I ask myself, are you so depressed? Why are you so upset inside?" Why am I discouraged? Why am I restless? The Psalmist has to face the question honestly before moving onto an answer. And that answer is to hang onto hope, not just generic hope, but hope in God. Or, as Psalm 42 vs. 11 ends, "Hope in God! Because I will again give him thanks, my saving presence and my God.."

Anxiety can happen to all of us, even people in the Bible, even in the face of the evidence that a loving God cares for us and protects us. We become frightened of life's possibilities, and turn away from the life of love and grace that God offers. Sometimes we want to die, other times, we just let parts of us die—our courage, our compassion, our love. Or we go to battle stations, we raise our shields, even when there is no enemy around. Anxiety begets anger. I don't know how many times I've seen two good people get angry with one another,

assume the worst possible motives for each other, and then stop speaking for fear they would end up shouting. Why did they get angry? Because they were clutching their partial truth, holding onto it tight to justify themselves. They were afraid and unwilling to let go and see things from a broader perspective. That's what causes a lot of church fights. Perhaps you recall, in this church or another, some difficult times when anxiety led to anger or defensiveness, which led to conflict, and taking sides. Other times anxiety can cause a church to retreat from a real problem, denying that it exists, ignoring it in hoping that it will go away, saying, "don't rock the boat." When a church can move beyond its anxiety to deal honestly and lovingly with its differences, then the church can learn something from the troubles and can become a more mature congregation.

Think about our Gospel story, the one with Christ coming to the disciples in the little fishing boat. First of all, remember that this story comes right after the feeding of the 5000. Wasn't that a warm and fuzzy story? Jesus took what little resources the disciples had and somehow managed to feed the crowd. Remember how everyone was grinning as they passed along the food?

But then the tough side of Jesus comes out. The story said that he *made* the disciples get in the boat. It wasn't a request—they had to do it. They were to go to the other side of the lake while he dismissed the crowds. The Sea of Galilee is roughly diamond-shaped, twelve miles long and eight miles across at the widest point. So they got into the boat and pushed off while their friend and master said his goodbyes. Was he checking on the people that he had healed? We don't know. Then he went up onto the mountain to spend alone time with God. He prayed. He was still grieving over the death of

his friend. He had turned himself over to God's grace and power to do a wonderful thing with the feeding of the crowd. Maybe he wondered what would come next. "Evening came and he was alone."

Meanwhile, out on the shallow lake, a raging storm is battering the boat and the disciples are terrified. They're not just anxious, they're afraid for their very lives. Some of them were professional fishermen, and they knew the lake, and they knew the waves that the wind coming down off of the hills could raise. Maybe they remembered friends or relatives who hadn't come back from storms such as this. Or maybe they were too busy bailing water to think about anything else. For sure, they knew that they were alone, without Jesus to protect them. Maybe you remember the old fisherman's prayer "O Lord, thy sea is so big and my boat is so small."

Then, in the early morning light, after hours of rocking through the waves, they saw a shape through the rain; was it the shape of a man? Was it an evil spirit? The Jews felt that large bodies of water were the realm of chaos, filled with fearful things. "It's a ghost!" They screamed.

And Jesus, out there on the water, said, "Have courage. It's me. Don't be afraid." Remember the feeling of relief that you had when you escaped a scary situation? Perhaps you swerved just in time to miss an oncoming driver in the wrong lane. Perhaps you'd regained control of your car after a long skid. Perhaps the doctor came to see you in the surgical waiting room and said that your loved one survived and would be okay. Whew. Thank God. It was that kind of moment.

Peter called out, "If it's you, Lord, order me to come to you on the water!" "Come," Jesus said. And Peter stood there as the boat rocked beside him. And he

took a step away from the safety of the boat, like a toddler releasing her grip from a coffee table. Another step. Another. But the wind came up again, and fear took over for faith. Remember in Star Wars when Han Solo said, "I have a bad feeling about this?" Peter not only had a bad feeling, he had a sinking feeling. And he was sinking. "Lord, rescue me!" he cried, and Jesus' hand grasped Peter's, just like the symbol above our baptistry. Jesus rebuked Peter for letting doubt take over, as they got into the boat. And the disciples worshiped Jesus and said, "You must be God's son." Faith isn't just a matter of having the right beliefs. It's trust that Christ is there with us.

That's something to hold onto in life's storms. In the noise of the storms of arguing, in the noise of fear in a hospital room, in your fear over your job security, remember that Christ shares your boat. Listen to hear him say, "Peace, be still." It's like Elijah's still small voice—God offers us peace, if we only pay attention, if only we listen.

We'll have bad moments, we'll have bad times. But we have the Gospel of Christ, the assurance that God cares for us and loves us. We can find strength and hope. Then again, we can say with the Psalmist, "Hope in God! Because I will again give him thanks, my saving presence and my God." Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

