

## Anxiety and Hope

Preached by Sharon Norton, May 21, 2023

Recently, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory calling loneliness the new public health epidemic and said social isolation poses health risks as deadly as smoking a dozen cigarettes a day. In addition, young people today are suffering at higher rates of anxiety and depression than any other generation before them. I see this in my own children who are part of this generation and their friends, and it is really real. Not all of us suffer clinical anxiety and depression, but all of us know what it's like to worry and to be anxious, because life is full of opportunities to worry. But every opportunity to worry is also an opportunity to do what Peter advises us to do in vs. 7 of this passage. Cast/throw all your anxieties on him, for he cares for you.

Now I am preaching as much to myself as I am to you today. Just this week, the cortisol and adrenaline of the worry train started down the tracks in my brain at 5:20 a.m., and my body could no longer relax and fall back asleep.

I am quite sure that if we went around the circle right now we could each recount a time in the last week or so where we have been anxious and have let the worry train start down the tracks in our brains. Many of us probably know this verse

about casting our cares on God because God cares for us and similar verses like in Luke 12 that says what is the point of worrying? You can't add a single hour to your life by worrying. In fact, we know that the results of anxiety actually subtract hours from our lives.

Someone once told me that if you know how to worry then you know how to meditate. Worrying has to do with focusing on something bad happening and just cycling around that over and over and ruminating on that without end or resolution. Meditation is also focusing on something and cycling around that over and over and ruminating on that over and over. Can we apply that same skill of focusing on something bad to focusing on something good?

This letter is full of practical good advice to the churches who were facing hostility and persecution which was causing them fear and anxiety. And full of quotable quotes. We have already talked a little bit about what we can do with anxiety and now we are going to turn to other practical matters to help us deal with some of these other issues.

One of the other quotable quotes in here is this: humble yourselves under God's power so that God may raise you up in due time. One commentary noted that this kind of humility is not just a winsome graciousness but is the humility of a tax

collector, which is repentance. Humility was not an honored virtue in Greco-Hellenistic culture but it was for Jews and now Christians who were to live in dependence on God their creator. There is no way to live in community, for people to use their gifts, for forgiveness to happen without this kind of repentant humility.

The churches addressed in this letter were living in a hostile environment.

Wouldn't better advice be, don't let yourself be taken advantage of, don't let them humiliate you, stand strong and proud and fight? But no, humble yourself and cast all your anxieties on God. It is God's care for us that assures us that we can throw off the burdens of fear and anxiety. We can cease striving to secure our lives. Isn't that how W. Brueggemann describes Sabbath—ceasing to strive and radically trusting God for your needs to be met. And that is the path out of scarcity and into abundance.

If we continue to live in fear and anxiety and have a proud spirit we invite a whole lot of physical, emotional and relational issues into our lives and everyone around us is affected. Here's the connection to social isolation and loneliness--we end up alienating people instead of inviting people to care for us when we lash out from a place of fear and anxiety, especially if it is laced with an expectation for other

people to fix it or to fix us. The only one who can fix it or fix us is God and each one of us cooperating with God's ways. God is the proper receptacle for our fear, our anxiety, our pride.

3 steps in humbling ourselves:

- Acknowledging and confessing our needs.
- Letting go of our justifications and our defended self and cease this kind of unhealthy striving.
- Letting God lift us up out of that darkness and trusting in God's time.

The next quotable quote: Your accuser the devil is on the prowl like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith. There is a true and real sense of danger for these early believers, and although our circumstances are different, we each face dangerous temptations of varying consequence. We too must be watching and also resisting. Now if you're the fighting type, this may appeal to you more. But HOW do we resist evil according to the book of 1st Peter? If "Resist Evil" is the title of the section then "standing firm in the faith" would be the subtitle. Here are 6 further details of what standing firm in the faith looks like according to 1 Peter.

- not to give in to the futile ways of their former lives—change our thinking, change our patterns of behaving, be transformed by the renewing of our minds
- To abstain from the desires of the flesh
- not to retaliate when mistreated
- Not to repay evil for evil, nor abuse for abuse
- Not to give in to fear and terror
- no longer to do what the Gentiles like to do—excessive lifestyles

In other words, or to summarize this list, I think the most powerful thing we can do each and every day is to act in the opposite spirit of whatever evil is tempting us. In whatever way you are being tempted or tested, do the opposite thing and see what happens. If you are tempted to speak ill of someone, say something kind. If you are tempted to lie awake at night and worry, meditate on the goodness of God and recall how God has cared for you. If you are tempted by greed, give generously.

First Peter is written out of an eschatological framework--that our story in the now is wrapped up in the past and in a future time when all things will culminate into an end. Peter's strong belief throughout this letter is that the culmination of all

things will be glorious for God's reign and all who have remained faithful through the trials, the testing and the persecution. He tries to give a perspective on suffering being momentary, passing, and nothing compared with the glory yet to come. This hope motivates us and we develop resiliency as we humble ourselves, cast our anxieties on God, remain alert, and resist evil.

Doing the right thing in the face of temptation and when evil surrounds us is hard. Sometimes we grit our teeth and our sheer determination to stay on the right path gets us through. This works when we have built up that muscle of faith, and seen that perseverance in righteousness does yield good results—we do take on the character of Jesus and there are certain rewards in this life for good, righteous living.

But sometimes we're tired, we're hurt and we don't see the point. Many of the Psalms show the author crying out that life isn't fair! Why am I trying so hard to be obedient to God when scoffers and sinners and the proud are living the high life?

Peter gives us more reasons than just what we see in the Now. What Peter says that God will do for us in the culmination of all things, is pretty amazing according to 5:10. God will personally and powerfully restore, empower, strengthen and

establish you. And you get to share in the eternal glory of God in Christ Jesus! This is what it means when it says that God lifts you up in time. This starts now and will someday be fulfilled and completed in God's time. This is Good News!

I wanted to add the Ephesians scripture into this message today for a reason.

Whereas 1<sup>st</sup> Peter is very practical as a help for people to stay faithful and steadfast despite hardship and persecution, Ephesians is very big picture, big scope, cosmic reality. Peter also gives us glimpses of that but Ephesians maximizes that. Where I want to make a specific connection today is between hope, empowerment, and the vocation of the church.

Eph. 1:18 is part of Paul's prayer for the Ephesians where he prays that God will make Godself known to them. And that the eyes of their hearts will have enough light to see what is the hope of God's call which is the richness of God's glorious inheritance among believers. Chapter 3 spells out this cosmic vocation of the church and we're not going to get into that today, but just to say that hope is a necessary element for living out our vocation. And I think that is what 1st Peter was also trying to do in addition to giving very practical advice, in those last few verses about the coming glory. It was to give people hope.

I think it's really interesting this idea of *enough* light to see hope. May we all have enough light to see hope. In those times of anxiety and needing to resist evil and needing to humble ourselves, we need hope. Hope that what we see right now is not all that there will ever be to see. Hope that God's power at work in us is enough to overcome. Hope that there will someday be vindication for those who have suffered injustices, as we read in many of the Psalms. We need this living hope in order to get through our individual lives and as a Body to live up to the big vocation of the church.

Ephesians is really kind of over the top in its language. If 1st Peter and Ephesians could be compared to buildings, I would say first Peter is a very practical, functional, down-to-earth space with some modest decorations, kind of like The Shire in the Lord of the Rings whereas the language of Ephesians is more like Rivendell: flowery, ornate, extravagant.

In Ephesians, we see these extravagant expressions about God's grace that saves us through Jesus' death and resurrection, about God's glory, and God's power and empowerment of us. And how God has chosen his church, the body of Christ, to be the preferred instrument to overcome the powers of evil, hostility, division, so that parties can be reconciled and all things, *ta panta* in Greek, gathered up in



Christ in the fullness of time. That is what God is doing in the world—restoring, establishing, empowering, and strengthening. What 1 Peter talks about on an individual level, in Ephesians it's on a cosmic level. We need this in our individual lives so that we can partner with God in this cosmic restoration project. There is something much bigger going on than ourselves. And also, it starts with each one of us.

What gives us hope in times of struggle and despair according to Ephesians, is just like it says in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter-- meditating on the goodness and the glory and grace and the love of God shown in Jesus Christ so that we can live up to the glorious calling that we, the church, have received. It is easy to get so focused on our personal lives and experiences in our human reality and in our struggles with one another and lose the motivation that we need to keep running the good race set before us.

Ephesians reminds us that despite our weakness and our brokenness we are part of something magnificent and something that cannot be domesticated and controlled. This lavish grace and abundant love-- it's all around us. And it is not just for feeling good and happy and lighthearted, as nice as those feelings are.

In Ephesians, the point is to empower believers to be the church that reflects Jesus Christ, who is our peace (2:14) and to battle against all that comes against it.

This massive amount of grace and power is available to us for a reason: God has stuff for us to do. God has chosen not a bunch of individuals doing their own thing in his name, but the CHURCH to be God's messenger, the vehicle by which the world is restored. We can't fulfill the calling to be the church when we are stuck in low self-esteem, pride, hostility or avoidance or power struggles of any kind. When we get stuck, 1 Peter and Ephesians admonishes us to remember Jesus, remember all that God has given us through Jesus and that we are his body and that we have an assignment from on high.

In Ephesians, we have this high Christology, and this high calling of the Church and enough empowerment through Jesus to get the job done. This God raised Jesus from the dead and God is conferring this same energy onto his church.

Christ is our peace. He took these factions—Jews and Gentiles—the people who had been God's chosen for a long time and the ones who were the newcomers, and united them.

All of this so that we can join together and do the good works that God has prepared for us to do. To be the church that God has designed. May the eyes of our heart as FOH have enough light to see the hope of God's call and the richness of God's glorious inheritance among us and give us power to resist evil by

standing strong in the faith so that all may be restored, empowered,  
strengthened and established. To the glory of God, forever. Amen

hope that what we see today isn't all there is to see.