

Finding Peace in a High Anxiety World

Sterling UMC
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Psalm 56

Today we're talking about anxiety, fear, worry, and stress. And we're in the midst of a series of sermons in looking for cures for the out-of-control life; recognizing that most of us live out-of-control lives in some ways. We are out-of-control in the things we've committed to, and if we're not overcommitted then we're in a hurry all the time. And if we're not in a hurry we're worrying all time. And if we're not worrying we're stressed out most of the time. And so we've set aside this month to look at what needs to change so that we can live lives knowing God's peace. So we can do as we talked about the last few weeks: we can see clearly, listen carefully, think deeply, we can savor life fully, and we can serve God effectively.

Now as we began this sermon we will be focusing on anxiety, worry and fear and stress and those are really two different ideas. There are the fear factors and then the stressors. But somehow they are intertwined. And the answer the Bible has consistently for how we address those things is the same, on either of those sets of issues. And so we're going to talk about our high anxiety lives and we're going to talk about stress and then talk about the Bible's answer.

And I've got to tell you, this is a very simple sermon. This is not complicated; it didn't require a master of divinity degree to figure out how to share this with you. This is a consistent message throughout the Bible on how we deal with fear, anxiety, worry, and stress.

Let's start with fear and Worry. Now all animals have a self-preservation instinct. We have a mechanism inside of us that's supposed to make us worried about things that we should be worried about. Right? I mean this is important, it's a way that animals know there is danger. And so, all animals, they either fight or they flee. Right? The fight or flight mechanism. And that actually is a gift from God. All fear is not bad. There are sometimes you should be afraid. When there is danger you should be afraid. You're meant through that mechanism, the splash of chemicals on your brain that then transmit messages to your muscles, you're meant to be prepared for whatever danger may lay ahead.

So like some time ago Robin and I were both in bed asleep and I heard this noise and I thought, "There's somebody in the house." It awakened me and I was listening and I find my heart begins to beat really hard. I mean I can hear it in my ears, it feels like it's going to jump out of my chest and I'm anxious, and I'm afraid. Do I call 911 or do I not? What do I do? And finally I did what most of you guys would have thought to do, I awakened Robin and said, "Honey, there's someone in the kitchen. Go see who's there." Actually I didn't really do that. I got up, quietly came downstairs and I tiptoed into the kitchen, and I was going to surprise the thief. And there I am in my pajamas and I flip on the light and who should I see but Stripy the Cat on the sink looking for something to eat.

So I had this fear mechanism that had triggered an appropriate response if there was a thief inside the kitchen. Now the challenge is, of course, is that that part of our brain that does this doesn't know when there's a real threat or not. It doesn't know if it's a thief or if it's Stripy the Cat who's in the kitchen. But the problem is sometimes this gift of God becomes distorted and it becomes hyperactive, our minds begin to imagine all kinds of things to be afraid of. When we're children it starts doing that.

So like when I was a little boy I began to imagine that there was a monster that lived under my bed. And it was really scary. And I would lay there and imagine him coming out from under my bed looking at me and coming to get me every night. I was terrified by him. Now for any children in here you need to know there are no monsters. I want you to know that they do not exist; they are a figment of our imagination. But for me at that time I was really scared.

Sometimes for us even when we grow up there are still monsters under the bed, there are things we imagine that are terrifying to us. Our minds and imaginations run wild causing some to even be paralyzed by fear. And then there's just the normal stuff that we fear. We fear being rejected. We fear failure. We fear what's going to happen to our retirement. Will it even be there by the time we need it? We fear what happens in the stock market each day. And we fear, are our children going to be okay? And so all of this stuff sometimes leaves us with that natural fear mechanism in a sort of hyperactive mode. And we're especially prone to this when we live our lives out of control. So that's the fear and worry side.

But let's talk about stress for second. I don't find myself afraid most of the time. I feel like occasionally I become worried, but most of the time I don't feel fear. But I do feel stress a lot. And if we take a definition of stress, stress is not really a bad thing. It's like fear and worry. There's legitimate fear and worry and there is over-the-top fear and worry. Same thing with stress. Stress rightly defined, I think is the demand upon our physical, spiritual and emotional or mental strength. And that's not a bad thing. In fact it is natural to have some stress. You talk about living a stress free life; it means you're not doing anything.

Dr. Paul Roche, who's the president of the American Institute of Stress, notes that "Increased stress first increases productivity, but only up to a point. After that point, things rapidly deteriorate. And that level of stress differs for each of us." Now this is an important concept. The things that stress me out may not stress you out. The things that stress you out may not stress me out. I know people would be majorly stressed out to stand in front of a group of people like this to say anything, or pray out loud. But me, I'm energized by that. So stressors are different for different people. And we have different levels of stress before we lose our optimum stress and we become stressed out. So he says, "It's much like the tension on a violin string. Not enough stress produces a dull raspy sound from the violin. But too much produces an irritating screech or snaps the string. But just the correct degree of stress creates beautiful tone." You don't want to have no stress in your life. You need stress.

So stress is not necessarily a bad thing but the problem is that when we live an out of control life, when we neglect to take a Sabbath, when are overloaded and over committed and continue to say, "Yes and Yes and yes," our level of stress increases and pretty soon it builds and builds and before you know it you become stressed out.

Just out of curiosity, let's take a little poll. How many of you have felt stressed out to some point in the course of the last week? Would you just raise your hand? There are a lot of people in this room who are stressed out. I know that and that's really what precipitated the sermon series.

Over the course of the last two weeks we talked about some strategies to deal with this. We talked about the importance of Sabbath, taking the time to rest, renew, recharge and remember. And then last week so we talked about thinning out, or starting to take out of the box some of things in our lives that we don't need to be doing, saying "No" sometimes so we can say a greater "yes", and remembering that in the end you don't take yourself that seriously.

But underneath all that there is one final answer, and it's the answer that we also find for the people who are worried, afraid, and filled with anxiety. I told you this is a very simple sermon. There are lots of things you can do to address these issues of fear and worry and anxiety and stress. Let me just mention right up front, some of those things you need to avail yourself of. If you struggle with chronic anxiety you may need to talk to a doctor, you may need to be on medication for a while to help you to be able to move beyond that. If you're struggling with stress all the time you may need a life coach somebody that's going to help you deal with managing your stress. Many of you shared some of your methods with me this week in response to my Facebook posting. Those things can be very important. There is a host of other things you can do.

But I want to share with you the one biblical answer that is underneath all those. You see in biblical times, David didn't have access to medicine. Jesus didn't have a life coach that was helping him in the garden of Gethsemane when he was preparing for his own death. So starting from the very beginning of the Bible all the way to the book of Revelation there is one common answer that is given and I want to share it with you. You already know it, and I want to encourage us to figure out how we live into it. It's not the only answer but it's the foundational answer.

And that answer is captured in the Scriptures. Let me just remind you the biblical authors at least 100 times give the same commandment. Throughout the entire Bible, over 100 times we hear God saying, "Do not be afraid". Right? That's what we need. That's what we need to know.

Now hear this. Eight times, Jesus makes reference to the great Commandments. You remember what they are, "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbor as you love yourself." Right? Eight times Jesus refers to those two great commandments. Do you know how many times he tells his disciples not to be afraid? 25 times. Eight times for the great Commandments, 25 times he says, "Do not be afraid". But the question is, "That's great! Tell me not to be afraid, but give me a reason why I shouldn't be afraid. It's not enough for you just tell me not to be afraid. Why?" And actually in almost every case God gives us the why.

In Isaiah 41:10, a passage many of you have memorized. God speaks through Isaiah the prophet to the children of Israel and he says this, "Do not fear (why?) For I am with you. Do not be afraid for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." Don't be afraid, because I am with you. This is the common refrain of the Bible. God says I will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid because I am walking by your side. I'm as near as the air that you breathe. The promise isn't that God says, "Don't worry about it just pray and I'm going to make it all better just like that. I'll just take care of it." God doesn't say that. He says, "I'm going to be with you. I'm going to help you." Later in same book of Isaiah, God says, "When you walk through the fires don't be afraid for I will be with you." He doesn't say, "I'm going to keep you from going through the fire". He says when you walk through them I will be with you. He doesn't say IF you go through the floods. He says, "WHEN you go through the floods I will be with you. Do not be afraid." He says, "I will in some way guide you, help you, carry you, and in the end I will redeem everything that you walk through. Trust me." It's not a promise that nothing bad is going to happen in your life. It's not a promise that nothing bad will happen to your children.

Every single day I entrust my children to God. Robbie who lives in Norfolk. Ricky and Ryan who still live with us, "God please, I give my children to you. I trust them to you." What I don't

think that means is that they're never going to be in a car accident. It doesn't mean that Robbie's going to get a job within a couple of days of graduating from college. It doesn't mean that they're always going to get straight A's. It doesn't mean they're going to be the captain of the team. It doesn't mean they will earn a music scholarship. What I believe it means is that no matter what happens in their life God will not let them go. He will hold their hands like I did when they were little boys so that they wouldn't be afraid. It's that he's going to walk with them so that somehow He's going to take even the difficult and tough things in life and is going to redeem them and bring something good from them. I'm entrusting them to God and I'm counting on the fact that even if the worst thing should happen that He's still got a hold of them and he will not let them go. And that's what God is promising in the Scriptures for every one of us.

So David finds this to be a great source of comfort. He writes many of the Psalms in times of high anxiety and great stress for himself. But then he says things like this in Psalm 55:22, he says, "Cast your burden upon the Lord and he will sustain you." You say, "Yeah that's great David could say that. He's the king of Israel; things always went well for him." And you don't know his story if you think that. Psalm 55 where he tells us to cast our burden upon the Lord begins with these words, "My heart is in anguish within me. The terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling are upon me and horror overwhelms me." But by the time he gets to the end of the Psalm, after he's prayed and praised God and laid before God his concerns he can say, "Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you."

In our Scripture passage today from Psalm 56, another psalm of David, we find that the Psalm begins with these couple of verses. David says, "Be gracious to me O God for people trample on me. All day long foes press against me. My enemies trample on me all day long, for many fight against me." Now when he wrote this psalm, David had fled for his life from King Saul. David is not the king yet. He is a warrior and King Saul was jealous and threatened by David, so he seeks to kill him. There's no place that's safe for David to go. Not even to his hometown, because the king wants to kill him. He's done nothing wrong and yet the king still wants to kill him. That has to be a terrifying thing. David has a price on his head. And so he has to flee. You talk about stress and fear and anxiety. But this is what he goes on to say in our Scripture today he says, "O Most High when I am afraid I put my trust in you. In God whose word I praise, in God I trust. I am not afraid. What can flesh do to me? This I know, that God is for me. And God who I praise, in the Lord whose word I praise, in God I trust. I am not afraid what can a mere mortal do to me? "

There are many things that we can do to help to reduce our stress. There are many things we need to look at in dealing with anxiety and worry and fear, but underneath all of those, the biblical answer is God is with you. God will sustain you. Cast your burden on him. He is going to walk with you. He is able to take even the tragedies and the difficulties and the painful things and the things you're terrified of and use them and somehow redeem them. And he will not let you go.

We hear that of course when Jesus is in the garden of Gethsemane. This is the night he will be put to death on the cross. He's about to be arrested and he goes to the garden. Talk about anguish and fear at the same time. He goes to the garden and in the Gospels it says he throws himself to the ground. One of the Gospels says he sweats drops of blood. And he cries out to God and he says, "God please! Father, take this cup from me. I don't want to have to walk through this. Take this cup from me." Yet he knows that simply trusting in God and praying to God doesn't mean that his prayers going to be answered in the way he asked. Jesus himself wasn't delivered in the way he prayed, but the end of his prayer captures that ultimate trust in

God: "Yet not my will, but thy will be done." He knew that God would sustain him and walk with him. He would take even the tragedy, even the thing he didn't want to have to walk through; God would take it and use it for some redemptive purpose. In this case for the salvation of the world.

The apostle Paul says this. He's writing from a prison cell in Rome awaiting news of whether he will be executed or set free. I want you to imagine that. He's on death row and is not certain what's going to happen. And in the context of that he writes this from Philippians 4, "The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

I love the fact that he first of all reminds them that God is near. That's why you don't have to worry, that's why you don't need to fear, because God is near. Cast your burdens on the Lord and he will sustain you. In essence that's what he's saying, he's saying what the psalmist had already taught. And he says when you do that, do that with Thanksgiving. I love that line because when we give thanks to God in the midst of our adversity and our fear, our mind, our eyes are taken off of the things that we're afraid of and they focus on the things that we're grateful for, and when we have laid all of this in God's hands we find his peace that sustains us.

And that is the message of Scripture again and again. It comes to us and its message is, "Do not be afraid I am with you. I will sustain you." It's not a silver bullet. It's not complicated. It doesn't take a master's degree to figure this out. It just takes practicing the things that allow you to experience his peace and to know his presence and then trusting that with all your heart.

That leads me to one last thing that I do when I'm anxious. When I am stressed out I sometimes just sing songs of praise. Sometimes I just sing hymns. And I don't remember the words all the time, so sometimes I just make up my own words to them. I remember the tunes and I began singing them and I get some of the words right and some of them wrong and some of it I just make up, but I trust that God doesn't mind, and I just sing. And one of the songs that I like to sing is a song that was written in the 1700s. It was first published in a hymnal in London in 1787, but it was known as a great American hymn before that. And it's a hymn that's unusual. The first line is singing about the promises of God, but every stanza, every line after that is not the singer singing to God, but God singing to the singer. It's unusual God speaking and singing His promise of hope that comes from the prophet Isaiah and elsewhere in the Scripture as you sing it. And you know it; *How Firm a Foundation*, we sang it earlier in our service. As you begin to sing it you feel God's spirit speaking to you.

It's interesting that troops marched into battle singing this hymn even as they faced death, that presidents sang this hymn as they were facing overwhelming odds and great uncertainty and adversity. Two presidents asked that this hymn be sung at their funeral, Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. The words go like this:

Fear not I am with the O be not dismayed
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid
I'll strengthen and help thee and cause thee to stand
Upheld by my righteous omnipotent hand

When through the deep waters I called thee to go
The rivers of woe shall not thee overflow
For I will be with thee thy troubles to bless

And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall fly
My grace all sufficient shall be thy supply
The flames shall not hurt thee I only design
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine

And then there's the last verse the most powerful of all:

The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose
I will not, I will not desert to its foes
That soul though all hell should endeavor to shake
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.

This is God's word to us. From the book of Genesis to the book of Revelation, that I will walk with you. I will never leave you nor forsake you. I will sustain you. And so we trusting that, and so David could say, "O Most High when I am afraid I put my trust in you."

Would you pray with me?

With all your heads bowed and your eyes are closed, I'd like to invite you to make this your prayer. Just quietly pray this under your breath or silently offer this after me:

God I trust in you. Help me not to be afraid. I trust that you are with me. I trust that you will sustain me. I trust that you will bring good from evil. I trust you with my family. I trust you with my health. I trust you with my future. I trust you with my life. Help me not to be afraid. In your holy name. Amen.