

Peace in an Anxious Age

We all know what it's like to be fearful, don't we?

To put us all in touch with that basic human emotion, hear the confessions of a man named David Rensberger, admitting the acrophobia he experienced on the roof of his house. ("Thoughts from my Roof," *Weavings* XIV, no. 2, p. 7ff) The roof was only about 8 feet off the ground—soft, wood chip and ivy-covered ground at that. "I probably wouldn't get hurt if somebody *threw* me off the roof. But this isn't about rational considerations. It's about fear."

The chimney needed a cap put in place, and he had the cap in hand, so he got out the ladder and propped it against the house and began to climb. You know those warning labels near the top of ladders that say CAUTION! THIS IS NOT A STEP! DO NOT STAND ON IT! YOU MIGHT FALL! Totally unnecessary in his case. That was all he could think about. At the top of the ladder, he realized that he would have to step off the ladder and onto the roof. He was paralyzed.

But prayer helped. "God is my helper," he began repeating over and over. And so he was able to get his left foot to take that scary step off the ladder and onto the roof and walk over to the chimney. He sat down and secured himself behind the chimney, and forgot his fear for a minute or two as he installed the cap. But then came the moment of truth: facing going back down. That's scarier than going up. So instead, he sat on the roof and talked to himself about fear and faith and hope.

Sitting up on that roof, like a kitten stuck in a tree, Rensberger could see the reality of his situation. Climbing down would mean taking a step away from the chimney. . . pivoting on his left foot. . . putting his right foot on the ladder. . . and then his left foot after that. . . with a ladder than might, or might not, stay in place. At that point he thought that taking out his own appendix might be less dangerous. He was embarrassed that he needed to pray in order to get up there. Now would he need to do the same to get down? He'd rather just stay put, for as long as he stayed where he was, he felt kind of safe.

Fear is a powerful force which can protect us—or keep us from moving forward. Of course it's much easier to recognize when the fear is someone else's problem, it's easier to laugh when the fear is irrational. But few of us can deny that there are times when irrational fear holds us back, keeps us from getting on with our lives. And perhaps, keeps us from doing God's will in the world.

Fear, compounded by grief, was the number one motivator of the disciples of Jesus after their master was arrested and tortured and crucified. There were good reasons for their fear. Who wants to be whipped and tormented and killed? Fear was what locked the door of their borrowed room and made them murmur in disbelief at the stories the women told about an empty tomb and an encounter with the risen Christ. Even if it were true, what could they do about it? The authorities would certainly be opposed.

So of course Jesus, alive in a new way after being executed and entombed, knew that the first thing he needed to do to disarm their disbelief and paralysis was to challenge

and disarm their fear. He entered the room and the first thing he said was, “Peace be with you.” Just like we do every Sunday, although probably with greater intentionality. “Peace be with you.”

And still, they were afraid. Look at all the words Luke uses to make that point. They were “startled and terrified.” They “thought they were seeing a ghost.” Jesus came into their midst. Apparently they recognized him, but didn’t believe their eyes and so their minds flashed to a slightly more plausible explanation—it was a ghost! But ghosts are scary, specters of the dead in the world of the living. They were paralyzed with fear. What would come next?

“Why are you frightened?” asks Jesus. He sounds like a therapist, doesn’t he? Let’s talk about your feelings. What are the sources of your anxiety?

AHHHHH!!! If I had been in that room, I think I would have screamed. Their fear was completely rational and justifiable. They were afraid of being killed! They were in shock, and now they were seeing something they’d never seen before—a dead man looking like he was alive, walking and talking like a counselor trained in the school of “how to be a non-anxious presence.” Peace be with you? You’ve gotta be kidding!!

Yet that’s what he said. And, if you believe the story, that’s what he gave them as he invited them to touch his wounded hands and feet. Peace. He was calm and unruffled by the waves of disbelief and wonder rolling across the room. “Got anything to eat?” he asked. And then he had a snack, a piece of fish. He must have been ravenous.

And then he taught them, again, about what this all meant for their lives. If you read those few verses, the whole gospel is summed up in them. **Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the scriptures, the chosen messenger of God whose role it was to suffer and be killed and rise from the dead so that repentance and forgiveness could be proclaimed for all people everywhere by those who see and experience his new life.** That’s Luke’s elevator testimony—the summation of his belief he could give to a stranger in the time it took between the closing of the elevator door and its reopening at the next floor. **Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the scriptures, the chosen messenger of God whose role it was to suffer and be killed and rise from the dead so that repentance and forgiveness could be proclaimed for all people everywhere by those who see and experience his new life.** It was a teachable moment, at last, for these disciples. This is a hope-filled message, an anxiety-free message, a liberating statement of faith for a fearful world. God is love, and we are God’s children NOW! That’s how the epistle of John puts it in simple terms. The gospel of Jesus Christ trumps fear and anxiety, and gives hope and courage.

My friends, hope and courage to do God’s will are what we need most today. We live in anxious times, times when fear motivates far too many of our actions and inactions. Our anxiety has some real causes, of course. We are anxious about our national security in a dangerous world, about our children and grandchildren, about drugs and violence. We are anxious about gas leaks and explosions, the high cost of college, and that nagging cough that I really should see a doctor about but I’m afraid of all those medical tests. We are anxious about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and wherever in the world the next problem is going to crop up. And in these last seven or eight months, we have collectively

become more anxious about the economy and its effect on our lives than anything else. Will I have a job? Will I have a home? Will I have retirement savings? Which side of the soup line will my family be standing on? We live in anxious times.

There are many good reasons to be cautious when negotiating a path through anxious times. It's like walking on a roof, and sometimes the roof can be high and the ground below hard. But irrational fear can be paralyzing, and can keep us from doing God's will and being the people God made us to be in the world. Beloved, we are God's children now. Jesus is raised from the dead. We are people of hope, not fear. Peace be with you, says our risen Lord.

That was Jesus' word to his friends who were frightened and immobilized by their fear. By the power of his Spirit, he mobilized them for action. And that is still Jesus' word for those who are troubled by anxieties. Peace be with you. God is our helper, God is on our side, God is with us. Death could not hold Jesus down. He lives, and his power of love and justice is stronger than all the scary forces which seem to be ruling the world, if your faith is in the bad news which drives the media industry.

So our response to this frightening world all depends on where you put your faith, doesn't it? Here's a question to ask ourselves as we figure out our way in the world—is my response rooted in my anxiety, or my faith? Here's a question to help us discern the path of this church in times which call for change—is our response rooted in our anxiety, or our faith? Here's a question for Christian people in every time and place—are we ready to move away from places of comfort and security into the unknown of God's future? Are we ready to risk our very lives for the gospel? For the church and the Christian life are not about building a secure and successful worldly kingdom, but about joining Jesus in the mission of God!

A comfortable life, security and success. . . . Jesus doesn't promise these to his disciples. He doesn't promise these to his church, either. But what he does give is his peace. His peace does not take away our problems. He does not promise that. But his peace quiets anxieties, calms the soul, and gives courage. For we know that he has lived the life we live, suffered as we suffer, and died as we will die. But that wasn't the end of his story, and it isn't the end of ours, either. Often what our anxieties and fears need is a bigger picture, a broader perspective. Where are we going? Who is really in charge here?

The answer is--the one whose really is in charge is the same one who dares to bring peace to an anxious world. Jesus is Savior and Lord. He is risen from the dead, and he is with us now. Tell that to the economy, to family finances, to personal health issues, to whatever it is that is making you anxious. Jesus is risen from the dead and he is here with us now! Do you believe this?

The peace of Christ be with you.

Lord of all, you know the anxieties that are troubling our lives, worrying our souls, keeping us from being witnesses to your love and power in the world. Still our fears; help us to accept your peace; and show us where you want us to go, how you want us to live, and who you want us to be as the friends and followers of Jesus Christ our Lord. We trust in him. Amen.