

Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz

“Beyond Awareness but Very Much in Control

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, February 21, 2021

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

Thanks be to God. Amen. So here we are at the beginning of another season of Lent, that 40-day period of time when we Christians traditionally join with Jesus on pilgrimage, going with him, following after him as he heads for Jerusalem and all that awaits him there. One of the realities of Jesus-Jerusalem journey is that it made his disciples and his other followers very anxious, for along the way, Jesus kept talking about dying and not being with them anymore and those who had committed their lives to Jesus' cause. Those who had given up work and family to be part of the Jesus community, when they heard Jesus talk about dying and not being around, they were beside themselves. They were apoplectic. They freaked out and had a little meltdown.

This overwhelming anxiousness felt by Jesus' followers was not the anxiousness we can feel when our schedule grows too full or when there is a big project to do at school or work. No, the anxiousness that was chewing up Jesus and chewing up Jesus' disciples was the deep, deep fear that without Jesus around, their purpose for living would be gone, and their lives would be in jeopardy. Jesus' followers had existential anxiety. Without Jesus, they knew that they would cease to exist. To be fair, I think we also need to acknowledge that Jesus' road to Jerusalem had him pretty anxious as well.

His very existence is on the line. More people than not seem to be angry with him, and he won't know a thing about Easter resurrection until death has already claimed him. Jesus has a lot to be anxious about. Oh, and we should also acknowledge the anxiety of the religious and political leaders that surrounded Jesus, for as he wound his way to Jerusalem, Jesus never stopped talking about God overthrowing those in control and revamping the way Judaism was practiced.

So Roman leaders and temple leaders were also beside themselves and were also apoplectic and were also freaking out and melting down. When all the players involved are anxious, players in our biblical story, players in any kind of setting, when all the players are anxious, fearful for their very existence, and in the case of the Roman

and pharisaical leaders, fearful for the institutions they control, when anxiety is this high, this thick something or someone or maybe both is going to snap. And the results, the results are never pretty. Lent is a complex time of the church year for all the main characters of the church's Lenten story are anxiously dealing with their very existence, Lent is a life or death journey, a passage of time and physical distance and spiritual evolution that literally changes everything for those involved. And as we present-day pilgrims stare down the Lenten road before us and all the anxieties this road stirs up, we need to pause and acknowledge not just the biblical anxiety of the Lenten journey, but also the deep anxiety that we've been swimming in for nearly a year now. COVID has changed everything, and we have to acknowledge that and be honest about that, cost us those we love, damaged health, kept us isolated, filled us with uncertainty, train-wrecked the economy, reminded us that we are not in control, made it impossible for us to enter into those things that make life meaningful. We've been doing COVID anxiety for so long and so intensely that we are worn out. We don't have additional capacity right now to take on more anxiety, to deal with Lenten anxiety. And someday I can imagine us wondering why we would want to go along on the Lenten journey, why we would want to willingly enter in o something that's simply going to produce more anxiety in our lives. Why would we want to risk our lives and everything we know and everyone we love and the faith which generally brings us comfort just to join Jesus on his way to Jerusalem? Maybe it's better, maybe it's more self-preserving just to sit this Lent out.

Yet before we say no, before we say no to additional anxiety, before we abandon our Lenten pilgrimage and try to ignore these 40 days and any potential meaning they might hold for us, before we choose this extreme response, I want us to pause and take a deep breath and consider the possibility that all of the anxiousness, all the existential fear of the Lenten journey may possibly, just possibly, be useful to us. Useful to us if we can embrace these weeks of Lent as a time to try and understand a bit better what makes us anxious as individuals and anxious all together as a community and anxious as a culture, a useful time where we can try to learn ways to limit and control and maybe even lessen our anxiety, as well to try and embrace and practice emotional skill-building that helps us function through and beyond our anxiety, that helps us function as the people God has created us to be, that God intends us to be. and why you say what might we want to use these days of Lent for emotional skill-building? Well, besides our obvious need to deal with all the ramifications of COVID and the reality that joining Jesus on his Jerusalem journey is an essential aspect of our discipleship, besides these important things, we also need to note that First Presbyterian Church is in interim time, a time of uncertainty about the future into which God is calling our church. Uncertainty that feeds individual and collective anxiety, causing us to feel that our personal existence and even the existence of this church is possibly threatened, endangered. And because anxiety and fear usually run together as a team and can easily lead to freak-outs and meltdowns - behaviors that are not what we want for our lives and certainly not what we want for our church - maybe it behooves us to use the Lenten mirror of our anxiety to use it to explore how we can live, and act, and serve, and love together in a new, less anxious ways going forward so that we can be vital, emotionally healthy, faithfully vibrant disciples of Jesus, and so that this congregation we love can be the same vital, emotionally healthy, faithfully vibrant.

I find Lent to be a journey, a time of traveling that is filled with hope--great hope. Time and again along the way through Lent, we are reminded by disciple and follower, Roman occupier, and aloof Pharisee. We are reminded that God is never done with us. That God grabs us in our deepest brokenness and makes us whole again, and that death is the only thing that should have existential worries in these Lenten days. Indeed, we are people who live in hope.

One of the things I've learned over the years about anxiety is that its roots, whether that anxiety is personal, whether it's mine, or whether it's systemic - it belongs to all of us - that the causes of our anxiety usually often exist beyond our awareness, but are, nevertheless, very much in control of our personal and corporate behavior.

When I was about 11 months old, my mother became very ill, requiring surgery, and a long period of recuperation in the hospital. I'm told that overnight, I went from spending most of my time with mom to spending my time with grandmothers, and neighbors, and family, friends, and occasionally a very stressed-out father. I was well into adulthood when a counselor helped me understand why trusting others was so hard for me based on what had happened when I was 11 months old today, 60 years after mom became ill, I continue to feel anxiety around matters of trust. Each and every day, I have to work at that anxiety. Long has this anxiety been alive within me, causing me challenges, all things beyond my awareness. The congregation I served in Racine, Wisconsin, years ago was the product of a merger between a Welsh Presbyterian church and a Hungarian United Church of Christ. A merger that had happened some 20 years before I arrived on the scene as pastor. The Welsh congregation had been the dominant partner in this merger, retaining their building, retaining majority control on the leadership boards. And this dominance had lasted until just as I came on the scene, when shrinking Welsh numbers of members led to leadership boards that were suddenly dominated by the Hungarians or by people who had joined the church following the merger and weren't part of either camp. The Welsh members of the church grew very anxious over this transition and reacted to just about everything around the congregation with fear and anger and all sorts of illogical behavior. Everything was suddenly a fight for them. It took a couple of years for all of us to begin to figure out where all this anxiety was coming from, and then a bit more time to change our reactions, to change our behaviors. Our anxiety does exist beyond our awareness, but nevertheless is very much in control of our personal and corporate behavior. And we all need to pay attention to these realities in our lives, in our church. I've never given Jesus' post baptismal time in the wilderness much thought, and from the brevity of his account in our gospel lesson, Mark doesn't give it much thought either. In fact, all the gospel accounts of Jesus' Holy Spirit-forced extended camping trip show Jesus having a calm and collected response to what must have been a rather harsh experience. I imagine 40 days in the wilderness was a very anxious time for Jesus, for if we take seriously the human side of Jesus, and that in his humanness, Jesus most likely reacts like we do when we feel threatened, then I'm guessing that Jesus was anything but calm, and that he was perhaps even questioning this whole plan that God had in store for him. We can imagine Jesus saying, "What the heck was I doing getting baptized in the first place?" And yet this experience of anxiety in the wilderness may have been the perfect preparation for what Jesus was walking back into at the end of this time, which was the arrest of John the Baptist and all the anxiety in the community that had gathered around John Throughout scripture, the wilderness is repeatedly described as the place where God and God's people can reconnect and reconcile the place where God's people reaffirm their complete reliance on God. 40 days of reconnecting with God gave Jesus a lot of resources for dealing with his own internal anxiety as well as the anxiety of those he encountered when he returned. Perhaps Lent offers us a similar possibility here at First Presbyterian, for the season of COVID has and continues to be an anxious time. And interim time, in-between time, has its share of anxious questions as well. And we who populate this place have for a whole variety of reasons, our own personal reasons, been pretty anxious ourselves. Lent can heighten all these anxieties, and Lent can also help us be and become more aware of our own personal anxieties and of the anxieties within our church system. And such awareness is the starting point, the starting point that allows there to

be a different, less anxious future for First Presbyterian and a different, less anxious future for all of us as well.

Jesus in Lent offers an amazing example of how one less anxious person can bring calm to the waters of anxiety that surround us. Remember, Lent is a season of hope, and we are people who live in hope, and Jesus shows us the way. So, what do we say? Instead of avoiding this anxious season of Lent saying we're just going to sit this year out, instead of that, I say we go along with Jesus' learning from him and learning together to be the vital, emotionally healthy, faithfully vibrant disciples and community we want to be, and that Jesus wants us to be. For our spiritual homework this week tied to anxiety and learning how to deal with it more fully, for our spiritual homework, let us begin with ourselves. In the week ahead, let's really think hard about our opinions and behaviors and what is driving them. Could our reactions to events in our life and the world around us and our reactions to events here at church, could they be related to anxiety that has bubbled long within us and below our awareness? If we're not sure about that, or if we think that this could be the case, what might we do? What might we do differently? How might we work at being and becoming vital, emotionally healthy, faithfully vibrant? 40 days gives us a good start.

Pray with me. Loving God, 40 days and 40 nights are a gift. Maybe not the kind of gift we're looking for right now, but a gift still the same. Help us to take these days and nights and use them well. Help us to follow Jesus faithfully and fully into and beyond anxiety. We pray in his name. Amen.