

Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz  
“Out of Sight is Not Out of Mind”  
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood  
Sunday, February 28, 2021

*Psalm 22:1-8*

*To the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David.*

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

*Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?*

*O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;  
and by night, but find no rest.*

*Yet you are holy,  
enthroned on the praises of Israel.*

*In you our ancestors trusted;  
they trusted, and you delivered them.*

*To you they cried, and were saved;  
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.*

*But I am a worm, and not human;  
scorned by others, and despised by the people.*

*All who see me mock at me;  
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;  
‘Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—  
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!’*

*Mark 8:31-38*

*Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’*

*He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’*

We continue today with the series that I will be preaching on my Sundays in Lent on anxiety, *Lent as a Mirror of Our Anxiety*. For it is my belief that Lent is always a bit of an anxious time for the church and we who follow after Jesus as disciples. The first disciples who responded to Jesus' call and followed after him, were day laborers and fisher people and craftspeople from the backwoods of Israel. They could not afford time away from work that provided daily bread for them and their families. They were not educated or sophisticated city types. They were not polished speakers. They probably were not comfortable being in front of or maybe even a part of a large crowd. Despite all these fears, they were attached to Jesus--fiercely attached to Jesus. And they had given him so much-- and they had given up so much to follow him, and they felt so secure in his presence that when Jesus said they all needed to go up to Jerusalem for Passover, the disciples swallowed their concerns and their discomfort and their fears and promised to follow where Jesus led them.

Some of their time along the road on the way to Jerusalem was simply amazing, like the conversation that is described in the verses of Mark 8, right before our lesson begins today. In these verses, as they were traveling along, Jesus turns to his disciples and says, "You've been watching and listening. What are people saying about me? Who do they say that I am?" And then enjoying a moment of church gossip, the disciples blurt out what they have heard, "John the Baptist, Elijah, a prophet like one from of old." Then Jesus, pushing the conversation a little farther, wants to know who they, the disciples, think he is.

And it is Peter, Peter who always seems to speak and act first and think second, it is Peter who blurts out, "You are the Messiah." Jesus is pleased with this answer. His actions of compassion and grace are proclaiming that he is sent, that he is empowered by God to love God's people toward renewal and transformation. But this joyous moment of recognition passes quickly, and a suddenly serious and scowling Jesus says to the disciples, "You're right, but don't tell anyone." Imagine how the disciples' spirits must have soared in that moment. They were in the presence of the long-awaited Messiah. They were accompanying him on his way to Jerusalem. But then while the disciples were still caught up in this joyous moment of recognition, Jesus starts telling them that the Messiah must suffer and be rejected and ultimately be killed. Jesus does say something about rising again after three days but the disciples stopped listening when the word *killed* is uttered. Peter, dear, sweet Peter, who is high strung and anxious even on the calm days, goes ballistic in hearing all this, yelling at Jesus to stop saying such horrible things, yelling at Jesus for shattering the comforting image He has just created for the disciples. The image of Jesus as Messiah in charge in Jerusalem with His helper disciples playing a big role in the new ordering of things. Peter reacting to his deepest fear that Jesus is going to abandon him and the others, Peter takes Jesus aside and just dumps all his emotions on Jesus. Peter no longer feels safe as a disciple of Jesus and the anxiety he lives with all the time, the anxiety he feels in traveling to Jerusalem, the anxiety that overwhelms him as the reality of Jesus' true identity sinks in. All of Peter's anxieties tighten upon him like a giant vise and quickly morph into anger. And Peter's unbridled anxiety unleashes, in turn, Jesus' own anxiety.

For we cannot forget. We cannot forget that in His humanness, Jesus is very much like the disciples He leads. Very much like us. Susceptible to fears and uncertainties of His own. Peter's rebuke brings all of Jesus' anxieties rushing to the surface and He, in turn, explodes with great intensity. "Get behind me, Satan," He yells at Peter. And in an instant, that holy moment of identity and recognition of God's Messiah being revealed, that moment is shattered in an accumulation of anxious, illogical fears. This is what anxiety does, isn't it? Anxiety takes our

words and our actions and our best intentions and twists them into responses and reactions that surprise us, that cause hurt, that sow uncertainty that breaks relationships apart. When anxiety causes anger to rise up within us or within a system of which we are a part, like our family, like our congregation. When this happens, we often end up reacting to the anger and to each other with feelings of hurt and betrayal. And like the disciples, we completely miss the underlying anxiety and fear which drive the anger in ourselves, and within everyone else. Our anxiety is out of sight. But it is definitely not out of our minds.

Lent is a journey that explores in part the effects of anxiety on the disciples, and Jesus, and on the community of faith. Allowing us through their experiences to consider the past and the present, and the future effects of anxiety on us and on our Church. I'm guessing that this Lenten exploring of anxiety will be difficult for some of us individually, and possibly for all of us together. Because some of what we observe among Jesus and his disciples as they travel together may make us uncomfortable. Especially if it hits close to home for us. Some of what we experience and observe as we travel the road of Lent may surface anxieties and deep-seated fears that we would prefer to keep hidden. Locked away. Ignored. By its very nature, the intimate quality of Lenten travel exposes our fears and anxieties just as it did for those first disciples so long ago.

But hear me say that I hope, I really hope, that our Lenten journey is hard in this way. I really hope our experience of Lent does make us uncomfortable. Does make us ask hard questions of ourselves. and hard questions about our commitment to Jesus, and our commitment to each other in this community. I don't wish this hard journey upon is just to be a jerk. I say this because I believe that we don't learn anything new. That we don't think, or act, or feel differently. That we don't attempt to practice any different behaviors in our individual or communal lives unless we are forced to. And Lent offers such a shove to us.

Our Gospel lesson from Mark concludes with Jesus talking to the inhabitants of the next village that they walk into along the way. I imagine that the time following Jesus' explosion at Peter was filled with a great deal of awkward silence among the disciples and Jesus, and even some physical distancing. For Mark says that as Jesus calls the villagers to him, he also calls the disciples to gather back around. Jesus then talks about the hard work of building God's kingdom. God's loved community. He describes all the personal commitment and sacrifice that will have to be made to use more contemporary language. I believe Jesus is talking to his disciples about the importance of their being as less anxious as possible. Jesus is telling his disciples, including us today, that we need to be able to faithfully operate on our own despite our anxiousness, operate on our own because we're going to spend our lives without his physical presence. And we must be able to carry and share God's good news of compassion and love without Jesus being there every moment along the way to tell us how to do that. And so, we need to keep our individual and our communal anxiety in check so that together, we can be the people, and we can do the work that Jesus expects us to do.

Now, I find these words of Jesus hard to hear and tough to follow. You may feel the same way. But I also hear in Jesus' words that the gospel message is one of ultimate hope. Jesus makes clear to all that God will never abandon us to our anxiety. Instead, God reminds us through Jesus that God's presence is always with us and that new possibilities forever exist beyond Lent-- forever exist beyond our anxiety, forever exist beyond any anxiety like the mess our families can sometimes be and the anxiety that sometimes reflects in messy ways in our church

community, and anxiety that is that heart-rending mess we are experiencing together in these COVID days.

And we are reminded that the new possibilities of God are always known, forever will be known in and through compassion and love, the compassion and love we offer to others, the compassion and love we receive from others. The season of Lent serves as a reminder to us, a reminder that there is no straight line from anxiety to resurrection. But instead, there is always a journey, a journey through which we have the opportunity for new learning, for personal growth, for growth as a congregation, the opportunity for the death of bad habits, and the end to destructive patterns of behavior, the opportunity to receive afresh, God's overwhelming gift of love, the gift which we are forever invited to embrace in new ways of living and acting and believing, all to the glory of God.

I think our spiritual homework for the week ahead should be our answering the question that Jesus put to his disciples in our gospel lesson, for it is a question whose answer moves us beyond personal anxiety and moves us towards the purposes God intends for us. Who do we say that Jesus is?

Pray with me. O God, help us today and in all the days and nights to come to ask ourselves hard questions and to expect our honest answers. Help us to be people who mirror your love and compassion for each other and indeed for all others. And we pray in the name of the one who teaches us these ways, Jesus. Amen.