

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Antidotes to Anxiety"
Dr. J. Dent

May 25, 2008

(The Season After Pentecost)

Anxiety remains one of the defining features of today's society. Witness the multi-billion dollar anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medication industry. Anxiety is not only increasing in the general population, but the professional group in charge of dealing with it is also expanding its definitions of it. I even heard recently on CBC radio that the DSM, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association was including public speaking anxiety amongst its categories of mental disorders. Anxiety is widespread, to say the least. Many of us have to deal with the fight, flight or freezing reality of anxiety. It comes up as we sense danger, or are frightened for any real or perceived threat.

Many of us worry a great deal because we rightly feel that we cannot control our lives to the degree that we think we should. Many of us fear the unexpected. On top of this, the level and amount of change that we face daily seems to constantly increase.

Some of us turn to food when we are anxious to calm our nerves. Some of us turn to alcohol, some to television, some to work, some to illicit activities, only you know where you go in your mind to deal with your anxiety.

And no matter what our perceived level of worry or anxiety, whether higher or lower, we can all benefit from what the LORD says about antidotes for anxiety. He addresses two areas of our lives. This, after he mentions that you will be a slave to something or someone in this life, but you have to choose whom you will serve. You can spend your whole life building your kingdom, your reputation, your resources. Or you can live your life in such a way that God's kingdom gets built. It's your choice. It's not about whether you have a lot of money or not, it is the emphasis of where your resources are focused. And where does the praise go for the accomplishments through your life? Do you choose to reflect the honor of what you have accomplished back to the One who gave you life, or not?

Jesus says that you tend to build only a certain kind of kingdom (kingdom is just a word to talk about your sphere of influence) through your life and

people will see what it is, whether you do or not. He wants us to have the best kind of life, but knows this involves our choice.

Worry never seems to be a choice. It just seems to flood in on us when we least expect it. But when the worry and the anxiety pounce on us, then we have choice. Jesus gives us two case studies.

The first is when we worry that we are not stylish enough, and don't have the right kinds of clothes. Maybe we've put on some weight. Maybe we've stained our favorite top or jacket or pants. Maybe our shoes or our glasses make us look like we haven't shopped in this decade. Before we decide to make the pilgrimage to the mall, Jesus suggests we do something first.

Go bird watching. Birders know a thing or two about what's going on in life. They know when the weather is changing. They know when there's plenty for the wildlife to eat. They know when certain colorful tourists have arrived in town, but not by ferry or by plane. They see what the university calls "nature" at work. Jesus simply calls this mysterious person or force his Father. The birders know that the birds have better clothes than we do. They are more stylish, more alive in some ways. We all know that the birds don't have to worry about storage, or trends such as longer feathers being "in" this season. They don't even have to think about planting crops in a time when if you didn't plant crops, you would probably starve.

Jesus was calling us back to think about the things that are important in life. Very few of them cost money. But they do cost our lives, and give us pause to think to what end are we spending our lives? So if you find yourself worrying, look out the window at the birds and remember Jesus telling you that God takes care of them, feeds them, and He will take care of you, feed you, clothe you.

The second case study that Jesus raises has to do with gardening. Now I know the Spring is a bad time to bring up gardening in Newfoundland. It's too cold, too rainy and foggy, and you shouldn't really put much in the ground until mid-June, right? Now I'm not talking about glass houses, I'm talking about outside. Is that right? Jesus talks about lilies.

I think it was lily season when he talked about them. I imagine him turning to the side of the path he was on looking at the lilies, growing wild all over the countryside. He guided the attention of his followers to the lilies. He

says, "Look at them. Just look at them." For us you can picture the beautiful tulip and hyacinth patch popping on the front of the church building, or your favorite spring image of color. Just look at them.

My father used to say that there are no atheists in the garden. How can a little rotten piece of bulb, a tiny speck of nothing seed produce a beautiful flower or a wonderful vegetable or fruit? When you see that transformation you have to believe in something, in someone. That's what Dad said.

Jesus guides our attention to the bulbs and the lilies to say that not even the most powerful world leader has any wardrobe like that. Not even Solomon, not any oil rich Arabian type person. Nobody, ever. And Jesus uses hyperbole, saying, and that's just a flower, here today gone tomorrow. You get a week of color, if you're lucky. It's as ephemeral as a blade of grass. Aren't you worth much more to the Lord?

In the end, the Lord wants us to know that God indeed knows our needs. No matter what the depth of our needs, no matter how complicated our life seems to be right now, He knows. I wish I could show you the amazing testimony of a young man in his early twenties, handsome, well-spoken, completed a business and finance degree at university, loves to swim, loves to tell people how much God provides for him, unusually optimistic and bright. You see, this young man named Nick from Australia has no arms and no legs, and no medical reason why he was born with these defects. He has a brother and sister who are perfectly fine. But what he does have is a heart that praises the Lord, and a courage and trust in God that warmed my life yesterday. I wish I could show you the 13 minute video right there on the wall. You'd probably get more out of this young man's trust in God, than me today. And if you'd like me to forward it to you, I can.

I only mention this to reinforce the point of Jesus saying that God knows our needs. He really does. He also knows that we need to get our relationship with Him right. And when we do, and we put first what God says will make our relationships and our investments and our intellectual and emotional and spiritual desires come into the best place, then everything is ours. When we have in mind what God has in mind for the best for our city, for our country, for our world, then we have the very resources of God available to us, and God's own truth behind us. That's fulfillment, the fullness of life. And it also happens to be the opposite of worry. Even time itself gets on our side when we get God's priorities, God's righteousness. Tomorrow takes care of

itself when we are in good relationship with the One who knows no tomorrow or yesterday, but the eternal now.

Besides, everyday has enough trouble of its own. Don't be like those who think they have to keep winning God's attention and love, like an absent or addicted parent who is never quite there. You already have God's attention, and if you're listening right now, He has yours.

Besides birding and gardening, God says put your energies into Jesus' kingdom, into Jesus' sphere of influence, and I will make sure that as you concentrate on loving me and doing Jesus' will, you won't have any time or desire to worry. Your relationship to God becomes the ultimate context for every important area of life. Where is God irrelevant?

Henry Blackaby, a Canadian Baptist minister put it a different way. In his bestselling book (in fact, it has sold 7 million copies and has been translated in 45 languages), entitled *Experiencing God*, he noted that a different way to figure out what you could be doing for the kingdom of God is to ask, "Where do you see God at work today?" Then prayerfully consider joining God in the work you see God is already doing. This is wonderfully simple but it can call you to the deepest depths of ministry.

Let me just end on his suggestions for experiencing God anew:

God is always at work around you.

God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal.

God invites you to become involved with Him in His work.

God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes, and His ways.

God's invitation for you to work with Him always leads you to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action.

You must make major adjustments in your life to join God in what He is doing.

You come to know God by experience as you obey Him and He accomplishes His work through you. (see www.swcbc.com/exp_god/)

To sum up: Jesus suggests bird watching and gardening if you are worrying, so that you will see how God takes care of "nature" and you. Then Jesus suggests experiencing God first hand by agreeing to help build God's kingdom, ways and will. Let us pray.