

May 28, 2017, 7th Sunday of Easter

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Focus: Jesus cares for us and takes on our anxiety.

This is the last week that we will be working our way through 1 Peter together. As we've discussed before, the letter of 1 Peter is written to a Christian community that is experiencing suffering. Scholars debate how much of it was active violence. It probably wasn't like a Christian was being killed every day, but it was more like the threat: the threat of being a small religious minority. Christians were considered a small sect or even a cult, and that always meant that there was the threat that some of that discrimination could turn into outright persecution. What we can say is that in this time, Christians in their day-to-day lives experienced a lot of **anxiety**.

Nowadays it may seem different. Probably none of you is going to face persecution because you're a Christian. Probably none of you is going to lose a job because you're a Lutheran. Or not be invited to the family Memorial Day picnic because you were seen at church the previous day. And even as we mourn our Christian brothers and sisters in Egypt, probably none of us here will ever have our lives taken because of our Christian belief. That being said, I don't think we're entirely strangers to this passage. In many ways, people today and we ourselves experience as much day-to-day anxiety as ever.

Maybe we stress over the smaller things. After my recent vacation, sitting in traffic or leaving my cell phone behind at a gas station comes to mind. Maybe it's when we're late or on the other hand when people make us wait. For our students out there, I'm sure the last week has been anxious for all of you with exams. And when you get older, it doesn't really get any easier, does it? Because then you can get anxiety in the workplace, too. Whether you've done enough, or maybe your business is laying people off, or toeing the party line with the people in charge. We have anxiety about relationships: stress and fights with family, friends, spouses, and significant others. There's anxiety about being able to provide for the family and pay the bills—or for me paying back student loans or making the car payment. And if we turn on the news, and we see the latest bombing in Manchester, or North Korea's latest missile test, or worry about our healthcare, we may have anxiety that everything just seems to be going to pieces. And that's just over things that are still ahead. Let's not forget anxiety about things that have already happened, those tapes that play over and over in our heads: did I do the right thing? Why did I say that to that person? Am I really good enough?

Anxiety can be terrible. Even for those of us who don't have generalized anxiety disorder, we still live in a world that bombards us with reasons for anxiety. Unlike Christians in 1 Peter's time, today live only a phone call or a text message or a letter from the IRS or a strongly worded e-mail away from bad news. It seems like we can never escape the unending anxiety.

I read a book a few years back by Gavin de Becker called *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals*. In it, de Becker writes that fear is actually a good and useful biological thing. All animals have fear. If your home is on fire, you should be afraid because you need to know to run. Anxiety, on the other hand, is very big with humans. And it's really not helpful. Anxiety doesn't respond to

an immediate need. Anxiety just lurks in the background, constantly staying with you and robbing you of the joy and peace of day-to-day existence.

1 Peter says “like a roaring lion, your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.”

Now no one here is saying that the devil is only anxiety. Certainly the devil is temptation, certainly the devil is war, famine, disease, bloodshed, certainly the devil is destruction, certainly the devil is a liar, certainly the devil is sin. But if you stop and think about it, anxiety really is demonic. It certainly does prowl around. Anxiety can keep us up at night. Anxiety can fill our own thoughts when someone else is trying to have a conversation with us. Anxiety can make our heart beat a little faster and make our breaths a little shallower. Anxiety can make us afraid to be who we are. When we are in a state of constant worry, anxiety truly can devour us.

So what’s the answer then? Don’t be anxious? Singing don’t worry about a thing because every little thing gonna be alright? That’s not the advice that 1 Peter gives, actually.

Instead, it’s “cast all your anxieties on [Christ].” One of my favorite examples of this is called the “Palms Down, Palms Up” prayer that I read about in Richard Foster’s book *Celebration of Discipline*. He gives 3 steps for the prayer:

1. “Begin by placing your palms down as a symbolic indication of your desire to turn over any concerns you may have to God. Inwardly you may pray, ‘Lord, I give to you my anger toward John. I release my fear of my dentist appointment this morning. I surrender my anxiety over not having enough money to pay the bills this month. I release my frustration over trying to find a baby-sitter for tonight.’ Whatever it is that weighs on your mind or is a concern to you... release it. You may even feel a certain sense of release in your hands.”
2. “After several moments of surrender, turn you palms up as a symbol of your desire to receive from the Lord. Perhaps you will pray silently, ‘Lord, I would like to receive your divine love for John, your peace about my dentist appointment, your patience, your joy’.
3. “Having centered down, spend the remaining moments in complete silence. Do not ask for anything. Allow the Lord to commune with you, to love you.”

Now, you may say to yourself, this seems silly. Why would I bother Christ with my anxiety over my electric bill or over not finding a baby-sitter or over being angry at John or over the dentist? Who would care about that? Christ. Christ cares for you. It’s the entire reason we can come before him with all our anxieties great and small. Because he cares for us.

This is so hard to believe because so often in our anxious world, everyone has problems of their own. Everyone else has so much to be anxious about that they may not even have time for you or what they think are your small problems. But Christ always has time for your anxieties. Imagine a small child who has a “booboo” or a scrape to the knee. No matter how small or insignificant it seems or even really is, the mother will not stop until she has kissed the child. Why? Because she cares for the child. As loving and as caring as that mother is, Christ cares even more about us.

Christ redeemed us from our sin, from death, and from that roaring lion the devil not because he was under any compulsion, not because the problems were so big, or because we were so

deserving, but simply because he cares that much for us. He cares for us so much that he cast his entire life not before a prowling lion, but on the cruel wood of the cross.

Christ did not die for us so that we can live in constant anxiety. But he died for us so that we could live abundant life. He cares about our anxieties because he cares about us. He loves us and wants us to be the people he has called us to be: people who are so firm and certain in the eternal glory prepared for us no matter what happens that we take real risks of love for our neighbors. When we cast our anxieties on him, we finally can breathe easy, not because everything is suddenly fixed but because we can trust that come what may we rest in his powerful embrace. With that trust, we are cast back out into the world in which we live, a world where lions still prowl and where there are still booboos to heal and yes where there is still suffering, but we carry his message of hope and of love. A message that tells others that their lives and their anxieties small and great matter to the savior who died for them and who cares for each and every one of his children. **Amen.**