

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“LIVING IN A COVID-19 WORLD”

2. Living with Anxiety

(1 Peter 5:1-7)

Pastor John Hart

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So many of you have commented to Becky and me, since the pandemic broke out, how this must be so much like being pastors during 9-11. It's a comment that has caught us off guard. Because, in so many ways, they are completely different disasters.

9-11 was an instant surprise of immense grief. Within an hour, 3,000 New Yorkers died as the twin towers were attacked and collapsed. Yeah, we knew there was terrorism in the world, but it had never been so close, and it had never been so deadly.

Our hearts were crushed – everyone knew somebody who worked there, everybody knew someone who had died. And we were scared to death – really jumpy – that something else was going to explode around us: we jumped when a car backfired; we winced when a plane flew too low.

I remember that November, two months after 9/11, I was driving into Manhattan to visit my sister, and I did a mental calculation I had never done before – should I take the Lincoln Tunnel, and risk drowning to death if a terrorist bomb exploded in the Tunnel? Or should I take the George Washington Bridge, and risk having an airplane plow into the span. I chose the bridge for reasons that completely escape me now but made sense in that walking-on-edge world.

But in the midst of the overwhelming grief and ever-present fear of 9/11, everyone came together. Our church held a prayer service that very evening, and again on Thursday evening. We left the sanctuary open all day for several weeks to allow members and neighbors to come and pray. We joined together in packed sanctuaries to pay our respects and give witness to our faith through the series of funerals.

And although for a long time it was scary gathering in a crowd or boarding an airplane or even in very random moments, the overwhelming feeling of 9/11 was immense sadness about a terrible event that had happened and was over.

So, this COVID-19 pandemic feels like a very different kind of disaster.

- It didn't catch us by surprise – we were aware of it before we were afraid of it.

- Though it arrived in America quickly, the image of a “wave” has dominated – it’s coming, fairly predictably, and it will rise, peak, and wane.
- Unlike 9/11, this pandemic is not isolated to one spot – we can’t just point to a Ground Zero.
- Unlike 9/11, we can’t repeatedly watch a video of the disaster – now death is happening behind closed doors in hundreds of hospitals and homes all over the country.
- This disaster is astonishingly more lethal – 46,000 American deaths already, 175,000 around the world.

And unlike 9/11 – when we were able to come together to support each other through it – in this pandemic we’ve had to adopt all kinds of strange behavior: social distancing, face masks, remote work and schooling. We’ve had to learn how to negotiate normal medical care when the entire medical community is focused on only this one thing. We’ve had to give up all the group events that feed our social needs – sports, restaurants, parties, worshipping together.

And it’s not at all clear what’s still to come. Will there be a second wave? Will it really take a year for a vaccine to be developed, much less mass-produced and administered?

And beyond the terrible death toll – how badly will the economy suffer as we shut down, and how long will it take to recover? How secure will my financial situation be in a month, in October, next year?

But even with all the differences between experiencing 9/11 nineteen years ago and now living in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is certainly something fundamental they share in common. And that is the anxiety – all the time, right under the surface, like a car alarm that won’t shut off. When will life return to normal? Will life return to normal? How do we, as Christians, live in a time of high-level anxiety?

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Well, it shouldn’t surprise you that it was very easy to find Scripture passages that speak to people like us, people living in a COVID-19 world. Because there is a lot of material in the New Testament written to believers who are also living under threat – not the threat of pandemic, but threats of persecution, threats of imprisonment, threats of death.

For example, the Church in what is modern-day Turkey was experiencing sporadic but intensifying persecution in the early 60’s AD. And Peter – the chief apostle, himself soon to be martyred in Rome – writes these churches to encourage them to

be strong in their faith and to find strength from their faith as they experience suffering. Listen to God’s Word from the final chapter of *First Peter*:

And now, a word to you who are elders in the churches. I, too, am an elder and a witness to the sufferings of Christ. And I, too, will share in his glory when he is revealed to the whole world. As a fellow elder, I appeal to you: Care for the flock that God has entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly — not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God. Don’t lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example. And when the Great Shepherd appears, you will receive a crown of never-ending glory and honor.

Peter begins the passage by addressing the leadership of the churches in Turkey. And his message is that church leaders should care about the people in the church, being examples of humility to them, being careful not to “lord” church power over them. (It’s a poignant reminder that, if we weren’t living in a COVID-19 world, today we would be ordaining our new elders and deacons, and Peter’s words here would be very *apropos*). Then Peter addresses everyone in the church:

*All of you, dress yourselves in humility as you relate to one another, for
“God opposes the proud
but gives grace to the humble.”*

So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor. Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.

Here we have, I believe, inspired words on how to live faithfully in a COVID-19 world. Peter shares with us a hard word and a good word, but both are true words.

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The hard word that Peter says to us is this: the first way to deal with our anxiety in a threatening time is to re-discover the gift of humility.

It doesn’t strike an immediate connection, the connection between anxiety and humility. But it’s fundamental to this whole coronavirus outbreak.

You see, we’re not used to having our health threatened in this kind of way. I mean, we live in the 21st century, with over a hundred years behind us of mind-boggling scientific advances that have completely transformed human health.

- Just like me, when you were an infant, you got the MMR vaccine – and so we’ve never had any thought of catching the measles, mumps, or rubella.
- Just like me, as an infant, you got the polio vaccine – now, miraculously, an irrelevant medical concern.
- And even if you had chicken pox as a kid, you’ve gotten the shingles vaccine so it doesn’t flare up again when you’re an older adult.

- And you line up each fall to get a flu shot.

Over the past century, medicine has developed vaccines and pills and treatments and cures for a vast host of natural pathogens, such that we don't even think about them anymore.

It's a point of great pride. It's something the human race *should* be proud of. But, from time to time, we're reminded that we are still, after all, humans, flesh, creatures living in a material world who, even with our amazing science, are still weak and fragile and threatened with death. When this virus appeared – a terrifyingly contagious virus that we have no cure for – it's been humbling.

Peter shares this hard word with us by quoting Psalm 138 – “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” – to remind us creatures that even with our outstanding medical technology, even with our incredible wealth, God is God, and we are not. That God is Lord of this world, and we are not. And if we want to be in sync with the will of the Lord of this world, we need the kind of faith that humbles us into realizing that we can trust ourselves to God not only when things are good and safe, but that we can trust Him even more when things are bad and threatening. Because Peter's faith rests in the conviction that “He's got the whole world in His mighty hands.”

Now, this isn't fatalism: “It doesn't matter what we do.” This isn't resignation: “Que sera sera.” This isn't denial: “If I trust in God, nothing bad will ever happen to me.” No - this is practical theism. This is letting our belief in the God *who is God* replace our anxiety with the wisdom of humility. Because God is a “mighty fortress”, He is “the Rock of Ages”, He is “our help in ages past, our hope for years to come.”

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And then Peter shares with us a good word: “Give all your worries and cares to God, because he cares about you.” If we've learned nothing else from Good Friday and Easter Sunday, it should be that this God who holds the whole world in His hands is

- the God who has put His life on the line for us
- the God who has sacrificed everything for us,
- the God who has poured out his grace on us – the very people who resist him and oppose him.

And that God's love isn't some beautiful but fragile idea – this love is a victorious power, a love that triumphed on Easter Sunday over sin and death and fear and hell and all the powers that do their bidding.

What do we do with anxiety? Peter says throw it away. Or better, he says throw it on God. Whatever you're afraid of, whatever you're anxious about, whatever worries you have about the present or about the future – give it to God. Because not only can God handle your anxiety – He cares about you. He has proven Himself to be for you wholly and unconditionally and eternally in Jesus Christ. If you're struggling under your load of anxiety – and there's plenty of anxiety in a COVID-19 world – let God carry the load for you.

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The great theologian, Karl Barth, says this about the biblical command – and it is a command – “Don't be anxious”:

The New Testament command “Don't be anxious!” is misunderstood if it is regarded merely as advice, which one can take or leave. No! The axe is now laid at the root of the tree. A most radical conversion is now demanded. In the face of “Don't be anxious!”, the only possibility is either obedience or disobedience. ...

If we disobey God's command here, if we persist in being anxious, we have failed to see that God is for us, and therefore no one and nothing can be against us, and therefore we should not be anxious, but we should cast our care upon Him, because He cares for us.¹

For over a month now, and for many months to come, we are living in a COVID-19 world. It's scary. It's anxiety-provoking. And the question is – How do we live with the anxiety that accompanies a pandemic?

Friends, I believe we can hear the word of God in Peter's words.

Peter gives us a hard word: that we as individuals and we as a nation will discover blessing in humility, that to live acknowledging the true order of the universe – that God is God and we are not – will keep us in the path of God's will.

And Peter gives us a comforting word: that we can let go of the fear we are carrying around and place it – freely, trustingly – into the hands of the One who holds us and who holds the whole world family firmly and graciously in His hands.

And that is good news. AMEN

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LIBERTY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
7080 Olentangy River Road
Delaware, OH 43015
(740) 548-6075 / info@libertybarnchurch.com

¹ *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, translated by G.W. Bromiley et.al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), pp. 599-600.