

One Eye Squinted

Isaiah 49:8-16a; Matthew 6:24-34

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, (Feb. 27) 2011

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Since Easter is so late this year, the whole lectionary has shifted. We never have an Eighth Sunday after Epiphany, usually only five or six. But it also means we are reading further into the Sermon on the Mount than ever – we’re all the way to the end of chapter six. The irony of God is that this reading couldn’t be timelier.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? (6:25).

In its annual study on the mindset of America’s college students released last month at UCLA, a team of researchers asked, “Why are college students so stressed?” The researchers surveyed more than 200,000 incoming freshmen and reported all-time lows in overall mental health and emotional stability. This news sent the media in their own high-strung spree with stories and video of harried-looking teenagers scurrying around campuses. *Time* wondered, “Why are College Students Reporting High Levels of Stress?” The *New York Times* story on the report quickly became the paper’s most-emailed story.

However, the NY Times also ran a column by Taylor Clark who attempted to answer the question of why all the stress among students. It’s not due to the horrendous job market, he said. Rather, he suggested that students are becoming more anxious because, for many years now, we’ve *all* been growing more anxious. This isn’t just a campus issue. It’s an American issue, he said.

Clark went on to say that over the last several decades, through good economic times and bad, the United States has become the worry champion of the world. Around the year 2000, anxiety passed depression as the most prominent mental health issue in America, with more than 18% of adults suffering from an anxiety disorder in any given year. Between 1997 and 2004, just seven years, Americans doubled their spending on anti-anxiety medications like Xanax and Valium, from \$900 million to \$2.1 billion. Psychologist Robert Leahy points out, “The average high school kid today has the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the early 1950’s.”

We are an anxious people living in anxious times – so the politicians and pundits tell us. From the Middle East upheaval to the price of gasoline to the bad economy caused by greedy and powerful Wall Street corporations and banks we were told that were “too big to fail,” to the budget battles in Washington and Austin and elsewhere to job layoffs to worrying over one thing or another at church to our frantic rushed lives, our family budgets, doing two jobs while being paid for one, and our health, we are anxious, fearful, and stressed and so are our kids.

I know that technically fear and anxiety are distinct from each other and are even believed to travel along different neurological circuits in the brain. Fear has an object; anxiety is free-floating, a kind of generic dread. But they are close relatives, both warning us of threats to life.

In an essay in the *Christian Century*, theologian and family systems specialist, Peter Steinke says, “Fear is a wake-up call. It arouses awareness of danger. It puts us on high alert. Yet it can do just the opposite, overwhelming us and diminishing our alertness.”

With extreme fear, concentrated adrenalin floods the body, producing “intense vigilance, riveting the brain on the object of the fear. Now the fearful person is barely able to focus on anything else. Tunnel vision occurs and fear takes over” (“Fear Factor,” *Christian Century*, 20 February 2007).

In the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus tells us to not worry, he is using a word from which we get the word “psych” and all its derivatives: psychiatry, psychology, and so on. It is a word that has to do with the heart, emotion, mind, the soul. Saint Thomas Aquinas said that when we become fearful, our hearts contract; it draws in upon itself. He said that we no longer extend ourselves or give ourselves; we turn inward in order to protect ourselves. Or as Steinke said, “Tunnel vision takes over.”

Clark, in his *New York Times* column, says that fear takes over and dominates our senses and our society partly because of our loss of community. He reminds us that human contact and kinship help alleviate anxiety. But when we migrate all over the country, living in insular suburbs where our closest friend is our plasma-screen TV, we miss out on the in-the-flesh human contact that is so essential to our well-being. And our growing reliance on digital social networking is no substitute for real human interaction. When we’re afraid, we don’t run to our Facebook profile for consolation; we run to a flesh-and-blood friend.

Additionally, we consume torrents of information in our digital world. Like sticking our face in the rushing water of a fire hydrant to get a sip, we are overwhelmed with often nerve-wracking news and marketing. Neuroscientists believe that our brains simply weren’t designed to handle this kind of volume. But to keep us watching the fear-filled stories are repeated over and over and the video footage is shown again and again.

Marketers know that not only sex sells but so does fear. Fear is a powerful motivator. Fear sells home security systems and car alarms and guns, medications, and it also keeps us tuned in to Rush Limbaugh and Glen Beck and their fear-mongering, as well teasing us to stay tuned-in to the news after the commercial break for the upcoming story that promises to tell us something we should be afraid of but probably never thought about before. “So that might be why my foot hurts at night! I might have cancer. I need to get it checked out.” Or, “So that could be that funny smell in my basement. My house is sitting on a poison gas bomb.”

If fear sells, it also motivates voters and can fill a church. Fear-filled politics easily morph into fascism, and fear-filled churches quickly become Fundamentalist. This is why I understand Robert Frost’s remark, “There’s nothing I’m afraid of like scared people.”

Mark Yaconelli, who knows more about youth ministry than about anyone I know says that a very good rule of thumb when thinking about church is to ask, is it a fear-based church or ministry or a love-based church or ministry? The fear-based can be the old-fashioned fear of hell, yelling preachers, and tear-filled gospel songs designed to get you down the aisle and into heaven. But fear-filled churches can also be much more sophisticated, either conservative or liberal, with fears based on institutional survival, or whether or not our children and youth will be saved or be Christian, whether our standard of living as we know it will survive, or fending off the latest scapegoat, and so on. Fear-based ministry tends to look for gurus and experts, wants the latest product or fad, wants lots of activities and events, seeks answers, and is obsessed with control. Love-based ministry is more interested in community and relationship building processes, asks questions, brings

out creativity, and spends a lot of time being present with God and with one another.

Good Night and Good Luck, the movie about the broadcast career of Edward R. Murrow, was set in a time in our history when the nation was very much caught in the grip of fear. Senator Joseph McCarthy had convinced many people that there were Communists everywhere: in the universities, churches, the entertainment industry, the government, and even the military. Careers and lives were ruined: Constitutional liberties were threatened. Anyone who questioned or dissented was suspect. A few courageous voices were raised in opposition. One of them was Edward R. Murrow, who said in 1954 at the height of the fear and frenzy, “We will not walk in fear. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason, if we dig deep in our history and remember that we are not descended from fearful men, not from men who feared to write, to associate, and to defend causes that were, for the moment, unpopular.”

Rabbi Abraham Heschel claimed that the role of the prophet is “to cast out fear.” And we are told in the New Testament, “Perfect love casts out all fear.” In the Bible, the phrase, “Fear not” is used over 300 times.

I once attended a lecture Walter Brueggemann was delivering. Brueggemann is one of the preeminent Christian thinkers of our time. I sat back with pen and pad in hand, expecting a scholarly dissertation on some arduous topic. Instead he began by asking every one of us to put down our pens and recall a time when, as a young child, we were frightened, lying in bed at night, sure that the shadows on the bedroom wall were of a burglar at the window, or a monster, and the bumps and creaks on the stairway surely a warning of something horrible about to happen. And we called out to our mother or father out of the darkness, in our fear, who

appeared and took us in his or her arms and said, “It’s OK. Everything is all right, I’m here. Don’t be afraid.”

That, Brueggemann said, is the fundamental, primary, and consistent message of the Bible: “I’m here. Don’t be afraid.”

Jesus tells us to “consider the birds of the air and the flowers of the field.” He is reminding us of who we are and the company we keep. God cares for us more than these, but still, that’s the company we keep. We belong among all the other frail, mortal things. We are limited creatures and everything is not up to us. We don’t have to save the world. We are part of something much larger than we are and God is working and caring in ways we know nothing about.

When we place ourselves in God’s kingdom, God’s Way, and recover our sense of God working through the interdependence of all of us and all creation, our tunnel vision begins to broaden and widen. We can see hope that we could not see before. We can begin to relax and our breathing slows down.

The church is to be that community that lives out of God’s economy, God’s Way instead of the Economy of Mammon, which is the way of acquisition and the drive for security. Together, like Flannery O’Connor wrote, we learn to look with one eye squinted, so we can better see how God cares for us and each other and this world. We build neighborly economies and neighborly communities.

Take a look at that list I asked you to write. How significant are all of those on a grand scale? How will that list sound to you a year from now? What can you do about them, and what’s keeping you from doing it? And, is anything on that list too big for God to handle?

The Christian and Jewish mystics speak of “detachment” – called “non-attachment” in Eastern religions – as a means of overcoming anxiety-based living. Modern twelve step groups call it “detaching from outcomes.” To us over-responsible anxious types with control needs far exceeding what we can possibly control, detachment sounds like indifference, passivity, even apathy. But that’s not what it is. Detachment means you still care, you still act, you do everything you can do. But you don’t try to do what you can’t do, or take responsibility for what you can’t control, and you leave the outcome to God. That’s what “let go and let God” means. After you have done your part, you trust God to know best with the rest. It’s all in God’s hands anyway.

Look at your list again. Ask two questions about each thing. First, ask, “What’s the worst thing that can happen?” Then learn to ask a second, very important question, “And what would happen then?” It’s this second question that’s the God question. The answer is not in our hands; it’s in God’s.

So write beside each thing on your list the word “and.” “And” means the statement is not over, the story is not over. “And” helps us re-narrate our lives so we begin to live and think with God as the author and finisher and not ourselves. The first question helps us face our fears and the second helps us know that even when faced with what we most fear, God still has another word to say.

The gospel is about the revolutionary power of God’s Way and the community of God who can face our worst fears and say, “And...?” When faced with the overwhelming fear of Pharaoh’s army bearing down on them and with their backs up to the Red Sea, the people of Israel said, “And...?” And... the Red Sea parted.

When Jesus faced death, even death on a cross, he could do so because he believed in “And...?” He believed that death was not the end of God’s story; God would have the last word. Therefore, death was a prelude to “And... God resurrected him.”

The gospel is God is with us. Fear not!

Amen and amen.