**Faith in the Age of Anxiety**

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**Scripture: Psalm 27, Mark 4:35-41, 1 John 4:16-21**

I’m sure I’m not the only one who gets anxious when I watch the evening news. We live in a world that is profoundly marked by uncertainty. Whether it’s political and economic uncertainty; the growing gap between the rich and the poor; war, violence, and famine; or the looming threat of climate change, there’s plenty of “bad news” to be anxious about. Add to this the fast pace of change in our society, as technology has dramatically altered our lifestyles, our work, and our relationships, all within a generation or so. While there is much to be celebrated about the broad access to information and long-distance connections which technology has allowed, there is also, as Betty Pries pointed out when she led our Mennonite Church Saskatchewan pastors’ gathering a few months ago, a shadow side.[[1]](#footnote-1) Social media in particular tend to increase our anxiety, as we compare perfectly “edited” or “curated” versions of people we know with our flawed selves, thinking everyone else must have a better career, relationship with their parents, children, marriage, circle of friends, home – or just a better life than we do!

Some of these different anxieties are, of course, generational. So-called “millennials” – my generation and a bit younger – are often accused by other generations of being overly sensitive and overly anxious, unable to “make it” in the “real world.” But a recent article in *The New York Times* talks about how today’s young adults grew up in the midst of “wars on terror,” economic recessions, the digital revolution, and climate change – all of which have forged a whole different way of life. This is a whole new “normal,” in which this generation grapples with “quarter-life crises” (rather than mid-life crises) and the reality that we’ve “inherited an apocalypse.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Things like parenting are also more complicated today than in the past, as parents try to sift through often competing pressures on how to raise their children. One parent and blogger, Bunmi Laditan, tried to put a humorous spin on it:



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Or rather, this is why we’re so anxious.

Of course, there have been major anxieties in past generations, too. Fifty years ago, it was the threat of nuclear annihilation that kept many people awake at night. Before that, it was the trauma of the World Wars in Europe. But this morning I want to ask, what does faith have to do with it? Can faith help calm our anxieties?

In first century Palestine, there was plenty to be anxious about as well, with the Roman occupation making life difficult for the Jewish people, especially as the gap between rich and poor yawned wider and wider. In our Gospel story for this morning, however, Jesus is far from anxious. In fact, he’s so calm he’s able to drift off to sleep on a boat, of all places. But it was evening, and Jesus had had a long, exhausting day of teaching – he’s told at least four parables and explained twice how parables work, if the earlier part of the chapter is right. So, to get away from the crowds that followed him wherever he went in Galilee, he said to his disciples, “‘Let us go across to the other side.’ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was” (Mark 4:35-36). So Jesus drifts off to sleep in the drifting boat, as night falls on the lake and the stars come out above the water. Everything is peaceful. But it doesn’t remain that way. “A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so the boat was already being swamped. But [Jesus] was in the stern, asleep on the cushion” (v. 37-38). How is it possible that Jesus sleeps through this crashing storm?! The disciples, fearing for their very lives, are astounded that Jesus has not awoken from the howling wind or the ferocious waves that fill their little boat with water. (In the painting behind me, you can see how the boat is almost capsizing, and the panic of the disciples, as Jesus sleeps on his little cushion near the top of the painting.) They shake Jesus awake, and say, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” And Jesus wakes up and doesn’t seem to be alarmed. Mark says, “He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still.’” And, amazingly, Jesus’ words immediately stop the storm! “Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm” (v. 38-39). Jesus says to the disciples, “‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’” (v. 40-41).

Who is this, the one who has no fear of the overwhelming power of the natural world? Who is this, who can sleep calmly through a storm, who scolds the disciples for even being afraid of the near-drowning they just experienced? Isn’t this guy asking just a bit too much of us, we mere mortals who tend to lose sleep at night over our fears and anxieties? Does faith really mean that we are never anxious or afraid? Theologian Dorothee Soelle writes, “Jesus is able to sleep not because he is naïve or indifferent but because his life is rooted in a feeling that we can describe with the word, ‘faith.’ This does not mean, however, that he was without fear. We know from the Gospels that he sweated blood and wept tears. The early church felt both these features to be offensive, and some of the scribes who copied the Bible left them out because they did not conform to the ideal image of Jesus that these people wanted. They wanted a strong Jesus, not one who wept or sweated out of fear.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Interestingly, this same mixture of faith and fear is at work in the Psalm we read together this morning, Psalm 27. Sure, the psalmist starts out strong and seemingly fearless, declaring with confidence, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh – my adversaries and foes – they shall stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident” (Psalm 27:1-3). The Psalmist goes on to speak of him or herself as sheltered in the sanctuary of God’s temple, safely singing hymns of praise and joy.

But then there is an abrupt shift, at verse 7, and we realize that everything the psalmist has been talking about so far – victory, safety, joy – has not yet happened. Deliverance remains a hope at this point, and there are no guarantees. And so the psalmist feels a pang of fear, and begins to beg God for this vision to become reality: “Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! ‘Come,’ my heart says, ‘seek [God’s] face!’ Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!” (vv. 7-9). These words come from a place of profound anxiety, of a real crisis of confidence. And this something I love about the Psalms – they’re the opposite of edited, sanitized, and touched-up social media. They’re raw and vulnerable, and they name in prayer everything the psalmist is feeling, from violent rage to utter joy and gratitude, to – yes, even profound fear. Because all of these things can be brought to God, who loves us even – especially – when we are anxious and afraid.

And naming these fears seems to restore hope to the psalmist. Yes, the threat is real, and, as with the disciples in the sinking boat, the fear is legitimate. But the psalmist nevertheless declares in the end that God’s love is also real: “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord, be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” (v. 13-14).

So we see that in this Psalm and many others, faith and fear are not opposites. And we know from the Gospels that Jesus felt fear as well – and surely he was a person of faith! So if even Jesus was sometimes afraid, why was he so harshly rebuking the disciples for their quite legitimate fear, and accusing them of having no faith whatsoever? “Have you still no faith?” he says to them. Maybe Jesus’ feelings are hurt – he could feel that the disciples didn’t trust him, even though he was right there with them in the boat! Or maybe the issue isn’t that they felt afraid, but how they responded to or acted upon their fear, closing themselves off from Jesus’ love and care. And we do this too. Fear can cause us to shut ourselves off from other people, and our relationships suffer, or are even destroyed. Dorothee Soelle writes that most people “avoid fear; they do not admit they feel it; they pretend to be strong, for the ideal that many people try to achieve is that of the strong individual who harbors no doubts and strides through life with a firm tread and an authoritative voice. . . If this image of strength, of always being in charge, is our ideal, then any show of fear becomes a sign of weakness we cannot permit ourselves.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In other words, fear prevents us from risking vulnerability with God and with one another. But vulnerability is at the heart of something we cannot live without – namely, love.

This is what we read in 1 John 4:16-17: “So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us.” And then, there’s this crucial reminder: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (v.18). And it goes on to say that this is the type of love with which we’re not only connected to God, but also with each other, our brothers and sisters in God’s vast family.

Now throughout its history, the church has sometimes forgotten these words from 1 John. In fact, the church has sometimes contributed to our fears and anxieties rather than reassured us that God loves us. The Bible talks sometimes about “the fear of the Lord” which has been interpreted to mean that God is harsh and judgmental, that God demands perfection from us and will punish us if we fall short. This suggests that our fears and anxieties are nothing compared to God, which is the one we should really be afraid of! This comes through in the New International Version of Mark 4, where instead of ending with the disciples being in “awe” of Jesus, it says they were “terrified” of Jesus. So the disciples remain caught in their fear, but they’re now afraid of their teacher, Jesus. This theology does nothing to resolve our fears; it simply replaces one kind of fear with another.

At other times, those who live with mental illness – including depression and extreme anxiety – have heard similarly unhelpful words from the church. Rather than offering support – including professional and medical support – for those with mental health struggles, the church has accused those individuals of lacking faith. We as the church, as brothers and sisters, can surely do better than to promote these harmful views. 1 John puts it really bluntly, “Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers and sisters are liars… The commandment we have from him is this; those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (4:20-21).

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (v.18). How can we live this out as a community of faith in an anxious age? We know we can’t simply switch off our fears, or repress them, or replace them with other fears. Following Angela Davis, Dorothee Soelle suggests that the church needs to be a place where we can “speak freely” – where we can name our fears to one another and thereby begin to “transform” them.[[5]](#footnote-5) And I agree that at its best, this is what the church can be – a place of vulnerability and authenticity, where we can name our weaknesses and fears within a beloved community of brothers and sisters. So how are we doing as a church with this calling? Is church a place where we can be real with one another? Where we can be vulnerable and name our fears and anxieties? Or is it, like social media, another place where we try to put a veneer of success over everything, for fear that others will judge us or think badly of us? I suspect our church, like many others, has its good days and bad days of living out our calling to be a loving community. So as we continue to be the church in this age of anxiety, let’s remember to be a community where fears can be named, where we can walk with one another no matter what storms come our way, where we can encourage one another like the psalmist, to “take courage, and wait for God.” And of course, let us continue to reassure one another, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” AMEN

1. http://www.canadianmennonite.org/stories/being-church-age-anxiety [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/10/style/anxiety-is-the-new-depression-xanax.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dorothee Soelle, “Blessed Are Those Who Feel Fear” in *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 148-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Soelle, *The Strength of the Weak*, 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Soelle, *The Strength of the Weak*, 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)