

Sermon Combat Anxiety With Help From The Holy Spirit
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 6.8.25

Happy Pentecost Sunday! I'd like to talk to you about anxiety and how the presence of the Holy Spirit will help us with it. But first, I need talk about Pentecost Sunday first.

This day, back in the year 32 (or so), the apostles gathered ten days after Jesus's ascension into heaven, for the Jewish celebration of Pentecost (50 days after the great Passover). At the celebration, it is remembered how Moses received Torah; and, in particular, how the stone tablets of the ten commandments are God's presence with us today. When the apostles and people from all over the region began the celebration, the Holy Spirit came upon them in three forms – the sound of a rushing (violent) wind, a fire (that does not consume) on their heads, and the ability to understand one another even though they are speaking different languages.

You might wonder what this has to do with combating anxiety. The answer lies in both what happened – the Holy Spirit's presence on the apostles – and what happened before that event. The apostles were worried about what to do in the future now that Jesus has ascended into heaven. They had anxiety and then the Holy Spirit showed up.

The first lesson today from Genesis is about the tower of Babel. The story (which is most likely a fable about why people speak different languages) highlights the people's following concerns: they are becoming numerous and need to make a name for themselves, they need to keep everyone together, and they are worried about how to "get to the heavens". Their response to their anxiety is to build a tower to the heavens which will make a name for themselves and will keep everyone together. God saw it and said we need to destroy the temple and scatter the people. And so it was, the people were scattered all over the world and now speak different languages. If not for anxiety, the tower never would have been attempted.

The Gospel lesson is also about anxiety. The disciples (before they became apostles) are gathered with Jesus at the Last Supper. They are worried. Jesus is telling them that he is going. Philip speaks up and says, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied." Jesus, sounding hurt, said, "If you know me you know the Father. We are one – me in him and him in me." He went on to say that he is sending the Paraclete, the Advocate, the Holy Spirit to be with them and to guide them. The Gospel lesson concludes with Jesus saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled; do not be afraid."

Back to the Pentecost lesson from Acts, the apostles were all gathered and the Holy Spirit came upon them. It seems as if they did not have anything to worry about after all.

Here's the thing about anxiety. I subscribe to the belief that if our bodies are in a constant fight-or-flight mode it has a detrimental effect on our physical body as well as our mental and spiritual health. Our bodies are really good at operating during times of stress. For instance, this weekend, the Rays were playing the Marlins. The recap I saw at the gym showed the Rays were down by one run (it was 3 to 2). The Rays batter stepped to the plate. The fate of the game was resting on his shoulders. His body was completely in fight-or-flight mode. His digestive system had stopped, his heartbeat had increased, and he had tunnel vision – just him, the pitcher and the ball.

As it turns out he drove in two runs and won the game 4 to 3. His body then rewarded him with all sorts of endorphins for the win and for surviving.

Our bodies do really well with moments of high anxiety. But, here's the problem: our mind can wander into the future and worry about things – rising cost of insurance, hurricane season, what type of world are we giving our grandkids; you know, things like that which we have no control over. When our mind wanders into anxiety about the future, it affects our physical bodies in the here now. Some call it chronic anxiety, or constant fight-or-flight, but whatever it is called it's real.

You see, our bodies only live in the present. They don't live in the past or the uncertain future. Our mind can travel to the past and remember things, often negative, that send our present-state body into anxiety mode. Our digestive system slows down, our blood pressure rises, and we get tunnel vision. The kicker is that if you remember something from the past, it's still in the past; you can't change it, or avoid it, but your body, in the present moment, thinks it can. Or, our bodies are programmed to respond to the threat, but the threat is in the past with no opportunity to fight or for flight. Likewise, letting our minds wander into the future and worry about things that may or may not happen have a negative effect on our bodies. Our brain might take it as an academic exercise, but our bodies feel it as an actual experience, here and now.

When we worry about the future, we are having an out of body experience but it has a cost to our present physical state as well as our mental and spiritual being.

How do we combat anxiety about the future?

The Book of Psalms in the Bible are largely written for people who have anxiety about the future and are looking for rest. Today's psalm is portions of 104 which was written 500 to 600 years before the birth of Jesus. And yes, people back then had the same anxiety about the future as we have. Their brains and bodies were wired just like ours which means their minds could also travel into the unknown future and create anxiety in the bodies in the present moment. There are two stanzas I would like to focus on. The first one is verse 32,

May the glory of the Lord endure for ever, may the Lord rejoice in all his works.

Although our minds can think about the future, the Lord is already in the future. God is there. And the glory of the Lord is already there, in the future. Let the Lord rejoice in all of his works! Let us do what we do and not worry about the future because God's glory is already there.

The second stanza is verse 34,

I will sing to the Lord as long as I live, I will praise my God while I have my being.

This is the key to combating anxiety about the future – sing. Sing now, sing always; sing as long as you live. One cannot worry about the future and sing at the same time. It's impossible. Singing brings us into our bodies right now, in the present. Singing the opposite of that out-of-body-experience where our mind wanders into the future with anxiety and our body reacts to it in the

present. When we sing, we breathe, we think about the words we are singing, and we create something that can be felt – heard, understood – in the present moment.

One side note about singing, in the Hebrew speaking community, singing is not making a noise that sounds as good as Barbara Streisand. Go to any synagogue and you will hear singing that is not something one would want to record and sell. The point is, our bodies were made for singing to God, to give God praise. It doesn't have to sound good because the sound we make is not for ourselves but for the one who created us. Just like how parents don't care if their child is singing on pitch with perfect tone, the parent just delights that the child is singing. It's the same way with God. The Lord wants to hear us sing and to the Lord, it's all beautiful and meaningful.

If you are having trouble with anxiety about the future, just try singing. It will center you back into your own body. From experience, I can tell you that if you are having a case of the three-ams (where you wake up at 3 a.m. and start worrying about the future), yet if you started singing you would wake everyone in the house up, here is what works for me: I put on headphones, listen to someone singing and then imagine I am singing with them. I breathe when they breathe and I think that I am right there with them.

I had a parishioner who told me a story of meeting with her oncologist. She was alone, widowed, and her kids live out of town. She went into the meeting all by herself. The VA oncologist, in her words looked like he had just turned 18 years old, started telling her about the cancer, what could happen without treatment and then what the treatment would be. She was getting overwhelmed with the fight-or-flight response as she started to worry about the future. It was at that moment that she asked the MD to stop talking. She looked down and started singing a reflection hymn from church. It goes as follows:

*Peace before us,
Peace behind us,
Peace under our feet.
Peace within us,
Peace over us,
Let all around us be peace.*

When she was done singing, she felt much better. She felt in control of her life and that the presence of the Lord was with her. She looked up and her poor oncologist was teary eyed. He thanked her and said, "That was exactly what I needed to hear." She said, "That's good but I wasn't singing it for you. I was singing for the glory of the Lord to be made known. Now, tell me again about what treatment you are going to offer me today and I'll let the Lord figure out how he's going to make his glory shine in the future."

*I will sing to the Lord as long as I live, I will praise my God while I have my being.
May the glory of the Lord endure for ever, may the Lord rejoice in all his works.*

It is natural for us to worry about the future. But, with the Holy Spirit, who brought the worrying apostles back into their bodies by giving them a sound, showing them the fire of God's love, and having them understand one another in the present moment, we too can sing and praise God

while we have our being. And when we do, the presence of the Holy Spirit will be with us to remind our minds that the glory of the Lord will be shown in the future and that we are to praise God this day and let God work out how God's glory will look in the unknown future.