

Psalm 93  
Acts 1:1-11

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333  
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## A NATIONAL ANXIETY

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem; in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. Acts 1:8-9

One might imagine that the time following the resurrection would have been a euphoric time for the earliest Christians. Yet the same hostilities that provoked the authorities to kill Jesus, quickly resurfaced to do away with his followers. Paul, the most influential apostle of the early church, began his career, you may recall, as a relentless persecutor of the first Christians, even holding the coats of those who stoned Stephen to death, the first Christian martyr.

After Jesus' startling farewell at his ascension, the disciples waited for the promised return of Christ's spirit while holed up in a second floor room; the same upper room where they had celebrated the last supper on the fateful night of his arrest. They were terrified of the authorities. Not until fifty days after the ascension, on the day we call Pentecost (from the Greek and Latin meaning fiftieth) did they finally venture out.

Anxiety. It creeps upon us like a thief, robs us of vitality and intellect, dulls our decision making, stresses family and work relationships, and in extreme forms shuts us down as functional people. From faith's perspective especially, anxiety is a thief. It severs bonds of trust that nullify our faith partnership with God. How? As the always sage William Barclay has pointed out, anxiety is pernicious because it is blind. It agitates over what it cannot see, be it God's providence that cares for us in the present world (we still cannot grow plants or animals, we can only plant and help cultivate), or God's promise of the next. Anxiety is dismissive of the future, in effect rejecting as useless what it cannot see. It is irreligious—it posits God as useless, replacing God with sequestered fear. It incapacitates us from meeting problems when they come. As Loren Mead has pointed out in his book, *The Once and Future Church*, anxiety often clutches at partial answers that merely look attractive, so long as they are quick and feel good. And what is true for the anxious individual is true by extension of the nation.

The world did indeed change with 9-11. I saw this with a new clarity when I visited my mother in northwest England a couple of weeks back for her 95th birthday, which was wonderful. But let me ease into why it was a fresh insight.

Our oldest daughter, Carolyn, and her husband Michael were also at her grandmothers for four days of their two week vacation. The three of us climbed mountains in the English Lake District, took blissful lakeside walks in spectacular weather, visited my old haunts, and solved all the problems of the world over a dimpled glass of English bitter—or was it two?—in a cozy eighteenth century pub in Keswick.

Back home, my mother and I talked late into the evening, with me asking all the questions that never came to mind when I was growing up; about the years during the two world wars that she and my brothers had lived through, and the Great Depression. I learned how neighborhoods and family pulled together—they knew each other far more intimately than we typically do—growing up in neighborhoods that were like extended family, sharing food,

material goods (which were always in short supply) and information, consoling one another at close quarters. During each World War every short block on any given street lost someone, or had someone come back injured or maimed (my mother's dad after WW1), or was a POW (my dad in WW2). You could tell who the enemy was in the field, back then. And the conflict was very close and real. Almost every four year old could tell the difference between a British Spitfire and a German Messerschmitt by the sound of the engine overhead. Blackouts were mandatory and most every home had a closet-like Morrison shelter in the middle of the living room or corrugated Anderson shelter in the back garden. When the air raid siren sounded the all clear they would often play Colonel Bogey's march over the loudspeaker, and people would burst into ribald song on the way home from community shelters or tube stations, or standing in the front door with the house lights still in black out and the dark satanic glow of fires in the distance or, on one occasion right across the narrow street. Everyone knew why they had gone to war, and very few people opposed it. The British knew, in that cluster of tiny nations on an island no bigger than the state of Georgia, that they were fighting for their lives. A telegram almost always meant devastating news. British casualties alone, military and civilian, killed, injured or POW, amounted to almost 5,000 a week for over 4½ years. Anxiety was ever present, but it had a focus, a sense of common purpose. And America was our salvation.

Now things feel very different. We suffer a national angst by a strange sort of dislocation from the world, especially from former nation friends, as anyone who has traveled abroad in the last year or so can attest. We also feel a dislocation as a nation, even from community with each other. Many struggle to understand our nation's purpose and its legitimate role, most fret intermittently about the insidious threat of silent infiltration both at home and abroad. Police carry menacing automatic weapons on streets and subways. A war is waged almost globally with ever shifting, unchartable battle lines, and unarmed, innocent civilians are far more often targets and victims than the military. Little makes sense. It becomes harder and harder to answer our children's questions. And especially in the suburbs, where vast numbers of us live, community is at its most tenuous level ever. Even our children's 'play' is organized with martial precision that lacks real spontaneity and intimacy. Millions have become disembedded from all the institutions that once created community and formed us as public citizens and neighbors. We get our information electronically and increasingly privately. We have virtually no public forums or places for casual conversation and debate. And when we do have such opportunities to talk and listen, they feel like a breath of fresh air. We all seem to feel this creeping angst, most often in the spirit of Congress. And I wonder, with no small tremor in my own soul, what mix of quandaries, political, economic, environmental and social we are leaving for our children and grandchildren to fix. Why, for instance, is there so much poverty in a land so rich? The poor are anxious. The rich are anxious. Just 10 percent of the people own, control, and consume 70 percent of our nation's wealth. The other 90 percent of the people who produce most of that wealth survive on the remaining 30 percent. And the gap between the two is widening.

Sir Alex Fraser Tytler, a Scottish jurist and Professor of Universal History at Edinburgh University, wrote:

A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the voters discover that they can vote themselves largesse from the public treasury.

From that moment on, the majority always votes for the candidate promising the most benefits from the public treasury, with the result that a democracy always collapses over loose fiscal policy, and is always followed by a dictatorship.

The average of the world's great civilizations has been 200 years. These nations have progressed through this sequence: from bondage to spiritual faith; from spiritual faith to great courage; from courage to

liberty; from liberty to abundance; from abundance to selfishness; from selfishness to complacency; from complacency to apathy; from apathy to dependency; from dependency back again to bondage.

He wrote this in 1801.

Earlier in this message we pointed out that anxiety severs the bonds of trust and nullifies our faith partnership with God. In 1994 Robert Wuthnow of Princeton, the leading sociologist of religion in America, after surveying 2,000 participants and making almost 200 in-depth interviews, pointed to what he called the domestication of the spiritual in America. In his book, *God and Mammon in America*, he showed how we were “stripping the sacred of moral authority and allowing it to break through only occasionally for good purposes, such as helping us out of a jam or salving our conscience....” Spirituality functions therapeutically, he says, but has little power to address our daily lives and our lifestyle choices prophetically, because we do not allow the one to inform the other. Wuthnow uses one word to describe the dominant relationship between religious faith and daily life, “compartmentalization.” Is it any wonder that individual anxiety leads to national malaise and confusion in our times. Many of us, it seems, go through the motions of putting on a bold face, but underneath, if medical and pharmacology reports are anything to go on, we are deeply anxious. The situation reminds me of George Steven’s classic Western movie “Shane” from 1953. Jack Palance won an Oscar nomination for his role as hired gun-slinger Jack Wilson. Of particular note were the expression of grim determination which settled upon his face whenever he mounted or dismounted his horse and the dramatic scene in which he walked his horse into town.

Ironically, his performance was greatly enhanced by his anxiety around horses. When Palance, who had great trouble mounting or dismounting, finally succeeded in making a perfect dismount, Stevens used it for every dismounting scene in the film. Then, run in reverse, he used it again to show Palance mounting! As to the walking scene? Palance was so unable even to canter into town (let alone gallop, as Stevens wanted), that the director eventually told him to simply “walk” the horse. The scene was an instant classic.

All this said, there is, nonetheless, a right kind of anxiety, a fruitful and productive caring of the sort that took place during WW2 in communities on both sides of the Atlantic. Interestingly, the verb used in the Greek for anxiety, *merimnan*, does not change, only its focus does—it becomes “to care for.” It begins by taking thought for each other, I to you in your need, you to me in mine, and all benefit mutually. We have all experienced how the best way of dealing with our own anxiety can be in taking thought for, even helping to shoulder someone else’s burden. As Paul puts it, in the analogy of the church as the body of Christ, “that the members of the body may have the same care for each other. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Corinthians 12:25-26). The same is true for the larger community, even the world at large. When I refocus my anxiety away from myself toward the child in a Baghdad hospital, or my neighbor’s child, or an Indonesian earthquake victim, I transform my negative anxiety into caring. When I listen to my hostile neighbor’s anxiety, or when my nation does to those who harbor massive resentment, I build bridges toward dialogue and greater trust. I take the higher road. The same is also true for the church. Few people failed to come away from our fireside chats a couple of months ago unmoved or unmotivated by refocusing from problem solving to focusing on our strengths and prospects by telling their stories. In all these things, when the heart is outwardly rather than inwardly focused, God is miraculously more accessible and intimate. And we are more whole. Amen.