

March 17, 2013 -- Lent 5C

“The Power of Presence” © -- Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 43:16-21; John 12:1-8

Last week, we had a wonderful celebration of this church’s 175 years in the community. We had memorabilia and lectures about the past and reflected on all the good things this church has done in Rockland and the surrounding area. We celebrated what God has done for and with us in all that time. The Prophet Isaiah does the same thing when he says:

Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior (Is 43:16-17a)

Isaiah is here reflecting on the Exodus and God’s great power in that great work in the past. But then, the minister gets up in front of the gathered people and says,

All that celebration about what we have done and who we have been? God says, Forget them. I am doing a new thing now. Don’t you see it? (paraphrase, Is 43:18-19).

God is constantly pushing us into the future and therefore into the unknown. In doing so, in asking us to forget the past, to no longer consider the things of old, we must step out in faith that God will be present with us. And this is the challenge of being faithful, is it not? Trusting God will be there?

In fact, I think it has been true forever that such an act - stepping out into the unknown future - creates a lot of anxiety. Change for many of us means anxiety. I have been thinking about anxiety all week, in part because of a conversation I had with a friend of mine. His son is a minister on the West Coast and is a very good preacher, by all accounts of his congregation. My friend was also a minister and has a very close relationship with his son. One day a few months ago, the son called my friend and said, *Dad, something strange happened today when I got up to preach. I had an anxiety attack. At first, I thought I was getting sick. My stomach was all messed up. I got dizzy and I began sweating. Then I realized what was going on. I was so nervous about what I had to say, which was not so different than any other Sunday, it triggered an anxiety attack.*

The reason this story triggered a lot of thinking for me is because this is not an uncommon experience for me as well. I used to think I was getting sick, which of course creates more anxiety, but a while ago I realized the primary issue was anxiety about the service, what I was going to say. Then I began looking back through my life and saw other instances of anxiety issues. I was a pretty shy kid and had what some of the psychological literature calls a ‘high-reactive’ personality. Once, I was at a Spanish language camp in northern Minnesota. It was a two week camp and after I got there, I got incredibly homesick. At night, I would lie in bed and hyperventilate and couldn’t relax, so the camp counselor would have to figure out ways to make me relax. It helped a bit, but what the real problem was was a raging case of bronchitis which triggered asthma attacks, none of which I knew about then. Asthma is, of course, very anxiety producing, and as a kind of great cosmic joke, the more you try to control the reaction, the worse it gets. It is a horrible feeling.

Anxiety is often considered to be the malaise and condition of the modern human. Freud called its most active condition “free-floating anxiety”, meaning one’s anxiety has no focus. But let’s define terms for a moment: what is anxiety? There are all kinds of medical and psychological definitions, but I will define it according to my personal experience. Anxiety, it seems to me, is misplaced and undifferentiated longing. I am not in the right place;

I have been separated from my true home; I have become unmoored and untethered to something that I can call my foundation. And this generates fear - fear of the unknown, fear of the future. And that longing and that fear begin to form a kind of spiritual cloud. The cloud defines the color of my sky and creates all kinds of visions of the future which may or may not be true. All I remember when the anxious mind and soul have ahold of me are the other times I was anxious and fearful.

For some people, this freezes them. They cannot move. The future becomes an impenetrable wall which cannot be crossed. This is not the condition which allows for faith to express itself. It is not a state of being which allows Christ to reach over the bow of the boat and invite you onto the waters of life moving always beneath our feet. This is why faith is an act of trust and complete giving over to God. We give up trying to determine the outcomes of our future and allow God instead to guide us into the unknown.

Scripture knows this. One way I read Scripture is as a testament from start to finish of homesickness and longing. How do we get home again? Or, better, how do we understand that God will always lead us to our true home, even if we no longer know the way? How do we know God's presence in the unknown?

Psalm 126 speaks to this longing. It is one of my very favorites. It is very short and very evocative. Psalm 126 was written while the Hebrew people were enslaved, most likely. Let me just read it to you. Listen to the longing and what God does with the anxiety of being uprooted.

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
We were like those who dream.
Then, our mouth was filled with laughter,
And our tongue with shouts of joy;
Then it was said among the nations,
“the Lord has done great things for them.”
The Lord has done great things for us and we rejoiced.
Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourse in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
Shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.*

Where you and I fill the unknown with anxiety and fear, where you and I fill our uprootedness with constant attempts to create a home where we do not belong, God restores fortunes, God creates a harvest of joy.

Our anxiety is our need to fill the absence of God, the absence of meaning, the absence of self with all we substitute for God, with where we think we are supposed to be, who we think we are supposed to be. And, of course, we never match up. Our anxiety increases rather than decreases because home is not quite where it is meant to be, who we are is not quite what we are supposed to be, what we have done is never quite enough. Most often, we fill that absence, that emptiness, with things to do.

There is so much to do. The reason there is so much to do is because there is so much emptiness to fill and, if I am doing all those things to fill the emptiness, I might not feel all the anxiety I feel all the time - at least when I am doing stuff. Notice what God does throughout Scripture, though. God does not fill our emptiness and quell our anxiety with more things to do. God quiets our anxiety and fills our hearts with the power of God's presence. In doing so, the longing and the homesickness may still be present, but the anxiety is no longer there. Now, our longing and homesickness become tinged with the hue of holiness. They become filled with the power

of presence. God becomes what is called in seminaries a ‘non-anxious presence’.

Back in 2010, performance artist Marina Abramovic did a show at the Museum of Modern Art called *The Artist is Present*. For 2 and a half months, Marina would show up every day and sit in a chair. In front of her was an empty chair. The point of the show was to experience what happened when you sat in the chair across from Marina. The goal Marina set for herself in the project was to be a ‘non-anxious presence’. She would look into the eyes of the person across from her and simply watch and listen. A picture was taken of the person sitting across from Marina as soon as they sat down and then just before they stood up. For many, by the time they stood up they were in tears. Here, in the MoMA, was someone who would simply listen, who would simply watch, who would not judge, who would not force attitudes or decisions upon them. For some, it was their first experience of ... what would you call this?

I would call it the incarnation of Christ in our being, the living into the non-anxious presence of God, but I am open to other phrases for it. Regardless, this is what Jesus is doing today at the dinner with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. He is the non-anxious presence in the midst of Martha’s busy-ness in the kitchen, in the swirling concerns that must occupy Lazarus in his new life, in the presence of Judas’ future betrayal, and most surprisingly, in the constant, unending presence of the poor and needy. These things will never end - there are always things to be done in the house. The conditions of one’s life radically change in a moment and now we have to figure out what life means in the face of disease and death. Betrayal by friends and family is always a possibility since we are only human. And no matter where we go, we will always have the poor with us. Jesus tells everyone present to leave Mary alone, since she is preparing Jesus for burial. She is inhabiting her longing and her homesickness, but rather than being overcome by anxiety, she attends to Jesus Christ. She attends to the non-anxious presence of the Lord.

Some of us, myself included, just don’t have a lot of control over our anxieties. I am grateful that I have some self-awareness to know what to do when I feel it, but I have never been able to stop it. Fortunately for you and for myself, I can stop the reaction so I don’t pass out in front of a crowd, but the anxiety itself is almost always there. Sometimes, I remember the non-anxious presence of the Lord. Sometimes, I cannot at all. That is when I need to be like Mary and simply attend to the presence of Christ among us.

As I said at the beginning, anxiety is the misidentification of our longing and our lost true home. It is a marker that we have lost touch with the source of our longing and the guide to our true home, Jesus Christ. When we attend to our anxiety, fear is its best friend. But God calls us into an unknown future. God tells us in Isaiah that he is the one guiding the future. Relying on the past means we miss the new thing the Lord is doing with and for us. We do not get to participate in the harvest of joy unless we are willing to step out in trust and, like the enslaved Jews returning home, participate in the harvest of joy in our true home. We do not return home by returning to what has gone before. It is the future which stands before us and that is where God calls us. Between the present and the future God has in store for us, Jesus is the ‘non-anxious presence’ who calms the wayward heart. 1 Peter 2 says:

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten;

But he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. (1 Pet 2:23)

Entrusting ourselves to the justness and rightness of God is the key to the non-anxious presence, the way we face the world on Christ’s terms, not our unmoored, anxiety driven terms. It is the power of Christ’s presence with us

which allows us to attend to the presence of Christ in others around us, without the cloud of anxiety over us all the time.

This is what is meant when Scripture speaks of '*being in Christ*'. Ephesians says,

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (Eph 2:13).

When we are in Christ we begin to find our way home. In Christ, our longing draws us nearer to serving and attending to the Lord in small and gentle ways. Worry, anxiety, fear, no longer have a room to inhabit in the soul. Remember, '*there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear...*' (1 Jn 4:18). In Christ, there is no anxiety, because in Christ's love there can be no fear, no misplaced longing or homesickness. By just being present with Jesus in our prayer lives, in our worship, in our relationships and, especially, in silence, we can begin to be the non-anxious presence of the Lord for others in this anxiety-ridden world. The power of God's presence becomes known simply by attending, like Mary, to the presence of Christ in our midst, right here, right now. And by attending to Christ's presence, we can trust the future the Lord has in store for us.
Amen.