

Isaiah 35:4-7a 9.5.24 Bill Uetracht 16 Pentecost

After World War Two, W.H. Auden wrote a poem titled “The Age of Anxiety” in which he dealt with anxiety before the tranquilizer revolution. Since then, many folks have wondered if that title doesn’t aptly describe the era that many of us live in now. We’re an anxious people. WWII made us realize that human beings could blow up portions of the world or maybe even the entire planet with a push of a button. COVID made us realize that disease could take over the whole world. Psychologists and scientists have made us realize the extent of anxiety as they have given us terms and diagnoses that make it clear that for some people anxiety is a physiological condition that can take over their lives and bodies. “Age of anxiety” may indeed be an appropriate label for our time.

Today we celebrate our 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which means that our ministry, as we have pointed out many times before, had its origins during the Civil War of this nation. I suspect that we have every right to think that we live in the age of anxiety, but wow! Can you imagine the anxiety that existed during that era? We were killing one another. Yet a faithful group of Norwegian immigrants courageously formed a faith community called the Scandinavian Lutheran church, because Muskegon needed a Lutheran witness to the gospel, which ultimately is about addressing the anxiety that plagues all of us.

Whoever wrote the portion of Isaiah that is our first reading for today must have known all about anxiety as well. Some people think that this text was written to address the anxiety caused by the Babylonians, when in 587 B.C.E. they flattened Jerusalem and the temple. Other folks think that maybe this text from Isaiah was composed at a later time when the exiles of Israel were being invited to come back home, only to discover an ugly, devastated Jerusalem.

Who knows for sure? But what is for sure is that Isaiah is addressing a time of great anxiety.

Today we hear, in words addressed, I think, to the prophet himself: “Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear.’” Literally, the text says, “Say to those with *racing* hearts.” Speak to those for whom adrenaline is pouring through their bloodstream. Address those whose muscles are stimulated, whose blood is flowing, whose pulse is elevated, whose thoughts are sprinting, whose metabolism is in high gear. Speak to those for whom fight or flight seems to be the only way.

In case you haven’t figured it out, a lot of angry people, a lot of fighters are anxious people. They look and act mad, but truthfully, they are anxious. Fighting is the way they know how to handle their anxiety. On the other hand, flight is how some people deal with anxiety. They run away. By the way, sometimes you need to run away. Flight is sometimes a necessary coping mechanism. But sometimes flight is simple avoidance. “I’m just going to take my toys and go someplace else.” I’m going to hide. I’m going to disappear. Anxiety causes us to run.

To those who are running away, those who are fighting, those whose hearts are racing, the prophet speaks a word from God: “Be strong! Do not fear!” Why? Because your God is here. Here.is.your. God! For 160 years we have been proclaiming that. For 160 years we have been claiming that God is the truly interesting thing.

The most interesting thing, the most reliable thing is the God who made the heavens and the earth, the God who is forever. It is this God who says, “Fear not.” It is this God who speaks to those with racing hearts, those tyrannized by anxiety. To this God belongs the real power of life.

It is interesting to me how the Hebrew scriptures deal with this God of power. Often, and we see this in our first reading and the Psalm today, the God of power becomes the God of vulnerability and justice very quickly. Right after the “here-is-your-God” promise comes a picture of a transformed world, a world made right, a world where the eyes of the blind are open, the ears of the deaf are unstopped, the lame are leaping like deer. The God of power who is worthy of our trust is the God who stoops low to embrace the fragile of the world. To this God, those with disabilities truly are significant. This God keeps his eyes on those who are often overlooked by the culture.

The Psalm writer says something similar. After warning us not to be too preoccupied with people in positions of power, he speaks of God executing justice for the oppressed, God lifting up those who are bowed down, God watching over the stranger, and God upholding the orphan and the widow. God has a special place in God’s heart for the neglected, those for whom the anxiety that comes from living such difficult lives and from being left out in the culture is especially poignant. God who created it all, we are being told, is vulnerable, near to those who suffer, near to those who often are forgotten, those kept at a distance.

One kept at a distance shows up in Jesus’ world today. A woman. A Gentile. A Syrophoenician, that is, a foreigner, a member of one of the great enemies of Israel. This woman doesn’t appear to have any disabilities, as does the deaf man we also encounter in our gospel reading for today. But she is deeply anxious because she has a sick, demon-possessed daughter. And you know what mothers are like when their kids are suffering? They are like dogs with a bone. They are not going to give up until they get what they want. And what

she wants is healing for her daughter. And Jesus doesn't seem to care.

I think it is amazing that Mark allowed this story to be included in his gospel. Honestly, Jesus doesn't look good today. He doesn't seem particularly compassionate. He uses an ethnic slur, "dogs" to describe the Gentiles of which she is a part. Come on, Jesus, you can do better than this! We Christians say that you reveal to us who God is. Your prejudice doesn't look good on God.

But you do seem willing to learn and from a foreign woman. A foreign woman is teaching you today. Listen to what Jesus says today: "For saying that, for speaking words of persistence, for teaching me, you may go. Your daughter is well." Jesus learns from a woman whose heart is racing. Maybe the goal in life is not to know it all. Maybe the goal is to be vulnerable enough to know that you need to learn. Even Jesus has something to learn. He can see more clearly now because a foreigner with a racing heart dared to take him to the deeper places, dared to remind him what his whole life was about anyway.

And what is his life about? The love of God that breaks down all barriers, crosses all boundaries, welcomes and unites all people. Jesus' life and ministry are now going to be changed because a Gentile woman, a representative of the enemies of his people wouldn't allow her racing heart to be calmed until she got what she wanted. And what she wanted is what Jesus wanted all along, what his life was fundamentally about, what will take him to the cross, what will raise him from the dead: the love of God that knows no limits.

Is your heart racing? Well, if you are living in the age and land of anxiety it probably is. And if you are like me, you are probably pretty good at adding to the anxiety that already exists because, you know,

it's all about you; you've got so much to do; the expectations are so high; the kids won't get everything that they are supposed to if you don't make it happen. Anxiety heaped upon anxiety.

We have a special word to those in anxiety. Listen again to Isaiah: "Say to those with racing hearts: 'Be strong. Do not fear. Here is your God, a strong God, who is so strong that he can be remarkably vulnerable. Here is your God. A vulnerable God. A God of love. A God with a heart for the hurting and the suffering. A God whose love will look like a cross. A God who is busy not tearing people apart but bringing them together.

Those of you with racing hearts, take a deep breath. First Lutheran, take a deep breath. All the anxiety--is it really necessary? It certainly doesn't make us better. It actually can make us sicker.

Here is your God! Here is your God of vulnerable love. This is the vision, this is the message that began our congregation in 1864. And it is this vision and the message that we need to boldly trust as we move into the future. Happy anniversary, First Lutheran. Here is the God of love.