You are God’s Personal Concern

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. David S. Jordan-Haas
Philippians 4:6-7

July 1, 2018
DERECHO (de-re-cho). A derecho is a fast-moving, very intense, dangerous weather pattern. It often unleashes damaging winds and sky-splitting thunderstorms. For most of us, the derecho comes and goes—we take precautions, we hold tight. It can be a little unnerving, even frightening, but soon the derecho is over and we get on with the tasks at hand. For most of us, this is how anxiety happens in our day-to-day lives. It comes and goes; there’ll be an event or circumstance that prompts some anxious moments, but we “weather” it; it soon passes by—it’s gone.

But there are those around us, even right here next to us this morning—you, me, a loved one, a co-worker, a friend—there are those around us where the anxiety, when it hits, is felt far more intensely. The anxiety is very “stormy,” even paralyzing for some of us. Last month, early evening on Monday, May 14th, a derecho whipped-up out of the Shenandoah Valley. It was on a direct path towards Northern Virginia, rapidly accelerating at up to 70 mph! The heavens were spitting out hail, pelting rain; there were winds like tornados! It was crazy, scary for many of us; crazy-scary for me, in the car, driving home from church at about 6:08pm that evening!

That same evening, at Bonnie and Al Grouge’s home, an enormous, towering oak tree was literally ripped up out of the earth and thrown down. That tree was over 33 inches in diameter, with a 12-foot-deep-n-wide “root-ball.” That derecho threw that tree down, tearing apart the yard, crushing the driveway. It was instantly destructive; ask Al and Bonnie—they’re still living the trauma of it.
Some of us live with anxiety so much more acutely—what I call the “derecho of anxiety.” It can be persistent, even all-consuming. Someone close to me, whom I love dearly, describes her anxiety as “like a life constantly lived in a fox hole.” It’s like a constant derecho thundering through her life, wrecking her body, pelting her soul. It’s like living her life as if in a “war-zone,” on the lookout for the next danger warning sign or the next threat up ahead—mentally, relationally, emotionally. This anxiety is often not rational, but it’s real.

Do you know that the word for “worry” originates from an Anglo-Saxon word that means “to strangle or choke”? Anxiety can literally leave us gasping for air. Anxiety steals our breath, it saps our energy (Bruce Goettsche’s Sermon, 8/11/14).

Right now, before we go any further, let’s breathe; may we pause and pray, as we get ready to center-down, just for a little while, on this topic today. Let’s pray: Father, in Your Presence, You know who I am right now, with all my stuff, all my strengths, all my weaknesses. Father, You know everyone here, who each of us is—all our mess, our strengths, our weaknesses. You care personally and lovingly for each one of us. You call us Your treasured son, Your precious daughter. God, we belong to you; all our days, all our circumstances are in Your Mighty Hands. We together entrust ourselves to You—our anxious thoughts, hearts, our bodies, our minds—in Your mercy and grace! Amen.

In the last five years, anxiety has overtaken depression (the sermon topic for next Sunday) as the most common mental-health challenge in the US, for both men and women. Sadly,
however, anxiety is seen as a less-serious challenge; and because it’s so common among us, anxiety is often dismissed or ignored. One out of every three teenagers, one out of every three adults, struggle with frequent anxiety (NIMH, NY Times 10/11/17). Those who live with anxiety—young or old, it doesn’t matter—they are often “silent sufferers.” They are overlooked or mistaken for being shy, withdrawn; or that they have so-perfected certain coping strategies to help mask and manage their interior stress.

Our memory verse this week is the Psalmist describing his own anxious heart: Psalm 61, first two verses, the New Living Translation: “O God, listen to my cry! Hear my prayer! From the ends of the earth, I cry to you for help when my heart is overwhelmed.” Anxiety can “overwhelm” our bodies, our minds, our hearts.

How are we going to pay the mortgage this month? Am I saving enough for retirement? I pressed SEND and now I wish I hadn’t. What will they think of my outfit over dinner at the Club tonight? Will I or someone I love get cancer? Will I be a good father? Will my child make friends; will my child get into a good college; will my child land a good job? Is this plane going to be safe enough to fly in this thunderstorm? “Hear my prayer, God! …. I cry out to You for help when my heart is overwhelmed” (Psalm 61:1-2).

Now, to those among us, who live in the fox hole, or with the derechos of anxiety, I want to share this: There are really good resources to consider, such as working with a
counselor, combined with consistent physical activity, or anxiety medication, or a support group. Anxiety is a real crucible for many of us; there are resources. This is also where Renewing Prayer can be supportive. This is where intentional time spent with one of our trained, confidential Stephen Ministers can be helpful. Let Pastor Glenda know or let me know if you want to access these healing ministries at VPC.

Now, with the time remaining, I want to go to Scripture and offer some practicals. I offer two hopeful “remedies” for anxiety: One, get out of yourself and get into God; and two, get out of yourself and get into Community. Get into God; Get into Community.

1. Get out of yourself and Get into God. Number one: Get out of yourself and get into God.

You and I have a choice. We can worry or we can trust the Trustworthy One. When I feel anxious about any number of circumstances, big ones or small ones, I ask myself, “Am I trying to control something here, or can I trust God with this particular problem?” Am I controlling, or am I trusting? To be honest, perhaps it’s a little of both.

“Don’t be anxious about anything;” Paul writes, “instead, pray about everything; tell God your needs and don’t forget to thank God for His answers” (Philippians 4:6-7, The Living Bible). There’s the choice: do I grab hold of my anxious thought, chew on it, and keep it to myself, or do I trust God with that thought and then give it to God in prayer? Have you heard of this little saying, “I can’t; God can; so I think I’ll let Him!”

Paul was nearly beaten to death; he was deserted by friends. He was imprisoned, confined to a dark dungeon,
alone and mistreated. I think we could say that Paul ought to have lived a pretty “anxiety-riddled life.” But he chose not to. Instead, Paul declares with joy, “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am” (v. 11). Paul constantly chose to let go of any control he might have had over any circumstance, and to give it to God.

Choose to get out of yourself, and instead get into prayer. Choose to get to God, the Trustworthy One. I don’t mean to over-simplify the challenges of anxiety here; managing anxiety is not simply a matter of making a simple choice. Yet, there is the core question to ask yourself, “what can you control in this, or not; and Who can I trust with this? The Trustworthy One?

There’s Paul and then there’s Peter. Peter urges us (5:6-7): “Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God…Cast all your anxiety on God, because God cares for you.” Here is J.B. Phillips’ take on this truth: “Throw the whole weight of your anxieties upon Jesus—unload all your cares on Him—for you are God’s personal concern.” We can worry, yes; we will worry; and we can trust the Trustworthy One (Calm My Anxious Heart, Linda Dillow, p.132). You are God’s personal concern.

The Scottish pastor, whom Clyde Staples Lewis said was his most treasured mentor, George MacDonald, wrote this just for us this morning: “It has been well said that no
(person) ever sank under the burden of the day. It’s when tomorrow’s burden is added to the burden of today that the weight is more than (one) can bear. Never load yourselves on (with this extra weight), my friends. If you find yourselves so (weighed-down), at least remember this: it is your own doing, not God’s. God begs you to leave the future to Him and to mind (only) the present (today)” (Annals of a Quiet Neighborhood, p.203).

Get into God; get into prayer, wherever prayer happens for you, in your living room recliner, your prayer closet; out walking the dog, or even mowing the lawn! Wherever, get into God, into prayer. “I can’t, God can, so I think I’ll let Him!”

**2. Get out of yourself and Get into Community.**

Number two: Get out of yourself and get into community. Back to Philippians (4:13): “I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me.” The crucified, risen Christ has poured into you His very own Spirit. Through His Spirit Jesus has given you His Strength. Jesus is strengthening you to face your anxious moments, with Him! You are strong with Christ alongside you! You are strong in Christ with community upholding you!

Here’s the thing: Jesus loves you enough to give you a community. Jesus loves you enough to give you a family of faith. He gives you brothers and sisters, who are here to share, together, in the burdens of life. Get into Community. Jesus does not want you to be alone or isolated when anxious times come. Jesus doesn’t want you to get snared by the whispering lies of the Accuser (Satan)—that you ought to be ashamed of yourself; that you’re weak; that you’re an unworthy, unlovable mess; that you’re anxious because you’re not praying enough, or don’t have enough faith! In the name of Jesus, these are all lies. You are God’s personal
concern; you are His precious son—you are His precious daughter. God cares for you! You are God’s personal concern. That’s truth!

A remedy for anxiety? Enjoy Christian friendships around the table, around a meal—this morning at the Summer Breakfast, over a dinner this summer, or a 4th of July Picnic. Get into a community of spiritual friends. Trust them with your burdens; trust them in your vulnerabilities; trust them in your brokenness, which we all have. Get out with one of your spiritual companions and do something with them—an outreach event, a music concert, a hike, a cup of coffee and meaningful conversation. Get out of yourself and get into community.

And, then, there’s Him. Specifically, Jesus has a specific word for you when you are on the brink of a passing anxiety or an overwhelming anxiety. It doesn’t matter—all anxiety is real! Jesus says, “Come, come, I can see you are at the precipice; you are weary; I can see you are carrying something really overwhelming. I’ll meet you as you come to me, I’ll give you rest. Whatever fix you’re in, I promise to be humble and gentle for you. Rest your soul in me. And with me I will help you make your life lighter” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Closing Prayer:

Lord, we bring our anxiety to You—our passing anxiety, our overwhelming anxiety. Thank you for the living promise that, by Your mercy, we may unload the whole weight of our anxieties on You—that You are with us, and that we are Your very personal concern. Thank you that, through it all, in it all, You come to us humble and gentle—to give us rest, to lighten our lives, even now as we come to the Table of Love which You have prepared for us. Amen.