

Finding Peace in Anxious Times

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Scriptures: Philippians 4:6-7, Jeremiah 17:5-8

Yesterday at our virtual Men's breakfast, we enjoyed a wonderful presentation about fly fishing in Minnesota. As our presenter showed photograph after photograph of beautiful, secluded fishing holes along the North shore where the trout are plentiful—and even photos of fly fishing opportunities in Argentina, Spain, and the Florida everglades—I found myself reflecting on this reading from Jeremiah that has been in my head all week, “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream.” I envied the trees in these pictures—I yearned to plant myself by one of these streams for just a day—far from the sounds of highways and snowblowers and suburban life, far from the sounds of text messages arriving and keyboards click clacking—to stand along the river bank, or even wade into the water—and feel connected creation. To soak up this feeling of being disconnected from the hurriedness of my life and reconnected to the rhythms that God composed in the score of nature.

Now to be honest, the only thing I knew about fly fishing before yesterday was what I had learned from my favorite fictional Presbyterian Minister John Maclean, played by Tom Skeritt in the film *A River Runs Through It*. The film, like the book that inspired it, is narrated by Rev. Maclean's oldest son Norman, who says this about the intersection of fishing, theology, nature, and even math, “As for my father, I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician but he certainly believed God could count and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty...” And here's the best part of the quote, “Unlike many Presbyterians, he often used the word ‘beautiful.’” Ouch. That hurts, but I also feel seen. I can speak only for this Presbyterian—I know I need to spend more time outside in the beauty of what God has created, in the beauty of the creation that continues to unfold.

I have always loved this passage from Jeremiah and it's echo in Psalm 1—such a powerful metaphor for the benefits available to us when we trust in the Lord, when we cultivate our connection to our creator. Of

course, these refreshing words are nested within a larger warning of the dangers of trusting in one's own power and wealth. The prophet Jeremiah was active in Judah, the Southern kingdom, from about 526 BCE until the destruction of the Temple in 587. He served during the reigns of five kings, from Josiah the great reformer to Zedekiah, who watched his kingdom be destroyed. Jeremiah prophesied against those in power, calling them back to justice and righteousness and warning them that their behavior is putting their nation on a path to destruction.

Our passage begins with the negative example—“Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord.” It's not an abstract warning, but rather one directed intentionally towards the ruling class of Judah. They put their faith for the future in human power, in military might, in wealth, in innovation, in profit, in all sorts of smaller pursuits that led them away from God. They began to believe their own press, and their egos swelled, and they began to trust only in themselves. This led them farther and farther away from the path of justice and righteousness, farther away from walking with God.

But even if Jeremiah was speaking directly to those in power in the kingdom of Judah, his powerful words still ring true for us today. He reminds us that there will be years of drought. There will be times of distress. Things might be going just fine for a long time, but there are always hiccups. Indeed, we find ourselves in a year of distress right now in our nation and in our world. There are literal droughts, but also droughts of justice, droughts of goodwill and cooperation and mutual respect, droughts of generosity. We're living in a time of scarcity when folks are hoarding what they have.

And Jeremiah says that if we've planted ourselves next to the stream, if we've built our trust in God, then even when the drought comes, we need not be anxious. That our connection to the living water God provides will sustain us, and we can continue to bear fruit. It doesn't mean there won't be hard times; it doesn't mean we won't suffer. But it does mean we won't be alone; it does mean that we can draw on the resources of faith to sustain us and help us continue to thrive.

There are several ways that tape into the living water of this stream of God's love—several different ways we can reach our roots deep into the water. One way

is simply by participating in Christian community—which all of you are doing right now simply by worshipping together, whether you are in the same room or connected via the internet across the country or across town. In community—in congregations and small groups and friendships—we carry each other's burdens. We surround each other with support and prayer and friendship, and when things get tough, we support each other. We help each other be drought tolerant. Whether we are experiencing individual struggles or a shared struggle, we're in it together. And if you're willing to be open about your life and your burdens, then there's no longer such thing as an individual struggle. Because we carry it together. We walk with each other in pain and illness and grief—just as we also walk with each other in joy and celebration and healing.

The second major way to tap into the living water is through faith itself. I recognize that faith is not something everyone feels, nor is it something that everyone feels to the same degree. And faith in God is not a requirement to part of this community—you are welcome to be here with all of your questions and all your doubts. Faith is an ongoing invitation to you with no expiration date, you don't have to RSVP by the end of the month. At different times in our lives, our faith may feel stronger or weaker or absent altogether. But the beauty of Christian community is that we carry each other in faith, as well. Even if you can't find your voice in prayer, know that the community lifts up their voices in prayer on your behalf.

I say this often, but it's important: Faith, at its core, is simply trust. Though faith is deeply intellectual for many Christians, especially many Presbyterians, it's not about believing all the right things. Rather, faith is orienting oneself towards God in a posture of openness, in a posture of trust. And believing that Jesus loves you. This is how Julian of Norwich could face the suffering of the world and the sin of the world and say confidently, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." It might not work out like we hope, but it will work out, and it may be hard, but we will keep going. For God is with us, and Jesus carries our burdens for us.

We live in a time of great anxiety. I don't know about you, but I feel like I walk around all the time with my muscles tight, with my jaw clenched. We're all carrying trauma from this pandemic in our bodies—and many among us were already carrying

other traumas in their bodies before the pandemic, and this simply adds to the burden: Trauma from abuse, from racism, from discrimination, from job loss, from the grief losing friends or loved ones, from our work, and from all sorts of things. Since the pandemic began, many more people are reporting symptoms of depression and anxiety and other mental illness.

There are some practices of faith that help you regain your center---that can help you find peace in the midst of the storm we all find ourselves in. But first, let me make a plug for seeking out mental health care. I'm a strong proponent of seeking counseling and medical care for mental illness. If your anxiety is disrupting your life, please don't wait to reach out to a mental health professional. You will learn new ways to cope with stress and anxiety, and you might learn of a medication that can bring you relief.

But I also recommend accessing the resources of faith—especially trying out practices or rituals that you may find helpful in strengthening your relationship with God. Many of these practices help you let go of distractions and worries while spending some focused with God. You may find that regular worship is enough to help you feel connected to God. Or perhaps hymn signing on your own or listening to sacred music. Perhaps you enjoy reading a daily devotional—I recommend Luther Seminary's God Pause if you'd like it to show up in your email inbox each morning.

Some of us set aside time each morning to read scripture and pray—that's lovely. But for others among us, our personalities and the realities of our hectic lives make such routines impossible. If that's you, then I recommend creating a list of different ways to connect with God. Actually write it down and carry it with you. And when you find yourself especially stressed and disconnected—pull out the list and try something on it. Perhaps your list contains a few scripture passages that you find refreshing or reassuring. Perhaps a quote you can read to yourself over and over. Maybe the suggestion to name 5 things you are thankful for, or 3 ways you've seen God already that day. One way to relax yourself is to become aware of your muscles. Sit down and think about different muscles in your body, relaxing each one in turn. Or take a walk and pay attention to what each footstep feels like on the ground. This can help center you and clear your mind to be able to listen to God. Some people enjoy a breath prayer—choose

some simple words to say each time you breathe in and out. Holy Spirit, come to me. Jesus Christ, have mercy. Or visualize yourself breathing in God's Spirit and God's promises, and breathing out God's love for others and for the world. When I was quite young, I would imagine myself being held in God's warm embrace. I still do this from time to time—just close my eyes and imagine being hugged by God.

One of the most helpful things I experienced on my sabbatical in 2019 was engaging in 30 minutes of silent meditation in a cold, unheated 500 year old chapel each morning for a week on the holy island of Iona. It was long enough to let go of any worries, long enough to let myself relax into God's hands and feel connected and loved. Or you know what?—maybe fly fishing is the answer for you—or any other

way to get out into nature and contemplate the beauty of God's creation. I recommend experimenting with different spiritual practices to see which ones help you feel connected to God, to see which ones help you feel God's peace, to discover which ones remind you that you are beloved, that you are known and cared for by God, and that Jesus calls you by name.

We're all different, and so we will respond differently to different practices of faith. But what we all have in common is that Jesus loves us, and that the living water of God's love is available to us. The storm will come, the drought will come. But if we can remain rooted in the stream of living water, rooted in God's love, then we can continue to thrive and bear fruit.

Amen.