

HOPE IN A TIME OF ANXIETY, Part 1

Matthew 5:1-16; 6:31-7:12

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Jesus says, “don’t worry,” but that is easier said than done. Even if you are the rare person who doesn’t have many particular personal worries at the moment, there is plenty to worry about in our world. The news cycle presents us with just a relentless daily stream of suffering – from the storm and fire disasters of our climate crisis, to the wars that continue to claim lives and seem to only be growing into wider conflicts, to the damaging inequities that persist in nearly every setting, to the many faces of hate and prejudice we see in our world. To think about the future – of our planet, of the economy, of the church, of technologies with capabilities we can barely imagine – is to risk worry overload. But right now, just at this moment, we find ourselves in a time of very particular and specific anxiety, as we approach a consequential election and an uncertain future, amid bitter division and hateful lies.

I realize that some of you may think this is not a topic for church. I could talk – and would be glad to talk with you anytime – about our theology that says there’s no part of life our faith doesn’t speak to. But this sermon is not so much theological as pastoral. Jerry and I see and hear and feel how deeply this is affecting all of us - the tensions we feel in our bodies, the seesawing from hopefulness to despair, the generalized anxiety. We’ve heard from many of you about particular fears that are weighing on you. So we made the decision to devote this Sunday and next to addressing the reality of these days we’re in – the challenge the anxiety of this time poses for our faith and our hope. Figuring out how to engage in faithful ways is important... and Jerry will talk about that more next week. Today I’m going to focus on the need to center ourselves in hope.

The anxieties are real. Every day brings new lies, some fresh vitriol, or more demeaning remarks intended to divide. We wonder how much more of this we can bear.

We are anxious about how the election itself will go. We worry about voter access and the safety of election workers and how much trust has been undermined. We fear what might happen if the result isn’t immediately clear, or isn’t accepted. We fear that there’s potential for political violence, whatever the outcome.

Looking past election day, we are anxious what the future might bring. We are afraid of what might change, and of what might not change. We fear that the tension we’re living in will not lessen, that it will just continue and maybe get worse. We are concerned about the future of our democracy. We fear the loss of freedoms and hard-won rights, and what such losses could mean for us and people we care about. We worry that shifting priorities will exact a human cost. We wonder about the safety net, the future of efforts to address climate change, the

functions of government. We are concerned about who will have a seat at the table and who will be left out. We worry about a future with leaders we may not trust.

We wonder how it will ever be possible to pull back from division and distrust. We try to imagine how the depth of bitterness, anger, and betrayal so many of us feel can be overcome... and we can't see a way. We fear that the impact of all this on some of our personal relationships may never heal. We fear that truth and decency in our public life will be permanent casualties of this time.

And we just don't know.

So how do we live with it?
And how do we hold on to hope in the midst of this?

I want to talk about some ways we might be able to keep our equilibrium during this time, before getting to what it means to orient ourselves toward hope as we look to the future.

But first... a few words about Jesus' sermon that we call the "Sermon on the Mount."

In Adult Ed, we have been talking about the practice of Biblical interpretation, and specifically how significant context is, when we are trying to attend to how a scripture text might speak to us. That includes *our* context – the circumstances and questions and needs we bring to the reading. Now, we usually read the Sermon on the Mount as a kind of practical guide for everyday Christian living : Be humble, be a peacemaker. Love your neighbor – and your enemy. Love God more than money. Do good in the world. Don't worry. Don't judge. Don't be a hypocrite. Do to others as you'd want them to do to you.

But I have to tell you that when you read the words of the Sermon on the Mount consciously and intentionally through the lens of this moment we are in, it reads differently. Almost the whole of it seems to speak profoundly and pointedly to people living with uncertainty, tension, and anxiety, and longing for hope and guidance in the midst of it. I suppose that shouldn't be surprising, since the first readers of Matthew's gospel themselves lived in a time of considerable anxiety and uncertainty.

At any rate, I'd highly recommend the reading of the whole of it – chapters 5 through 7 - as a worthwhile spiritual practice over the few weeks.

This morning there are a couple of things I want to draw out of this sermon for us.

The first is sort of a general principle that I might sum up as "take care of your spiritual well being." I don't mean "self-care" exactly – although that's not a bad thing either. But I'm thinking more about nurturing a faith and a relationship with God that can ground and guide and uphold us even when things are hard and we're afraid.

In these chapters, Jesus talks about how what's in our hearts matters, about priorities and the fact that we can't live with divided loyalties, about reckoning with our own sins, about integrity, about prayer, about trusting God, about being careful who or what we listen to, about being humble and honest and vulnerable, and desiring and seeking what's good.

In times like these, this is a much-needed reminder. Attending to the health of our souls is more necessary now than ever.

To do that, we need the gifts of Sabbath – in whatever form we find it: rest, worship, time in community, time in nature, time with God, maybe even the occasional technology sabbath or news sabbath. It's important to be informed and involved, but we do not need to be engaged with either our own anxiety or the stuff that makes us anxious every single minute. We can put it down for a time. Of course we want to do things, try to make a difference; and yes, our faith absolutely calls us to engagement and we do believe that we can make a difference in the world. But we are not God. We need regular respite, restorative time, and the reminder to lean on God.

We also need prayer – and by that I don't mean some polite, routine words. We need to be able to draw on *all* the resources of prayer: honest naming of our fears before God, lament, tears that can themselves be prayer, actions that reflect our hopes, words and the promptings of scripture, or a memorized prayer if that's what we need. Maybe the breath prayer – letting God's Spirit fill us up, and releasing our tension into God's hands. Or just the silent, prayer-without-words in the presence of God, which is sometimes all we can muster.

We need to keep turning our attention – every day - to what is good, to blessings, to gratitude, to the earth's beauty and resilience, to the people who love us, to those who show us courage and compassion and true faith, to community, and to the presence of God. Gratitude for all of this will steer us away from hopelessness.

And maybe the hardest thing: we need to steadfastly turn away from – refuse the invitations hate, vindictiveness, and dishonesty ... no matter that these things may be all around us, even normalized. Jesus understands – want us to understand – that hate damages the souls of those who practice it. It's hard. But this – turning away from hate - is what Jesus asks of us, and showed us by his own life.

Jesus' words are addressed to his disciples – not just to each but to *all* – together. We should hear them that way, too. Know that we need to help and support each other to care for our collective spiritual well-being. This is a community project.

The second thing that struck me forcefully when I began to read the Sermon on the Mount with conscious awareness of this anxiety we're feeling – *I'm* feeling – it that this is all about *who we are*. Who we are even when we don't know what's going to happen, even in times that threaten our hope.

We are blessed. We are children of God. We are salt and light in the world. We are truth-tellers and truth seekers. We are people capable of living with integrity and courage, even in the face of obstacles and opposition. We are called to be loving, forgiving, merciful, humble, generous, prayerful people – no matter what others want us to be.

It's always important to know who we are. It's especially important in times that threaten our hope. Who we are is not what someone else wants us to be, not what our culture wants us to be. We are children of God, made in God's image, known and beloved of God. Our ultimate belonging is not to a political party, and we certainly do not – should not - see ourselves, ever, as belonging to a political leader. We belong to God.

Some of what we fear may never come to pass. Some of it probably will.

It's entirely possible that the future might be harder than we would wish it to be, for our loved ones, for the vulnerable, for those who want to do what's right, for people of faith. It might call for us to work, to give, to pray harder than ever. It might require more courage and persistence than we think possible.

But, whatever the future brings, it will not change who we are. It will not change who we belong to. It will not change what is true and what is right. It will not change our calling.

Whatever happens, we will continue to preach the love of God for all people. We will continue to be a community, supporting and praying for one another. We will continue to offer a welcome that doesn't exclude people based on who they love or how they understand themselves. We will continue care about the needs of our neighbors. We will continue to talk about injustice and educate ourselves about racism. We will continue to prioritize earth care. We will be open to new needs, new callings. We will try to make a difference in the world. We will advocate for the hungry and vulnerable. We will wrestle with our own weaknesses and complicity in the world's evils. We will try to live peacefully. We will comfort those who mourn. Because this is who we are, who Jesus has called us to be.

We will also look with joy and gratitude at the flowers of the field and the birds of the air and celebrate all the goodness God has made. We will make music and art. We will laugh together and eat together, enjoy our children, and find meaning in the rhythms of the church year. We will continue to mine the richness of the scriptures and listen to what God wants to teach us. We will hear each other's stories and delight in diversity. We will welcome new insights and new ways of being community. We will live whole and joyful lives, in response to God. We will engage the world, and we will be salt and light. We will be people of hope. Amen.