

The Confluence of Anxiety and Peace
Reading from the Old Testament: Micah 5:2-5a
Reading from the New Testament: Luke 1:39-45

You know what frustrates me? When I have anxiety about my anxieties. I can be anxious about many things, often at the same time. It sort of comes with the job, and one coping mechanism is to write out an old-fashioned to-do list, thus fostering the illusion that life will be a breeze once the boxes are checked, as if just looking at the list of tasks yet to be completed will not in itself inflame indigestion. Yet, even if the to-do list momentarily calms the heart by making life seem somehow manageable, what happens when you lose the list? You are suddenly freaking out and frantically mustering all your energy to find the list instead of using that energy to mark items off the list. Just recreating the list is out of the question, because I'm 61 and remembering what I had for lunch is a stretch. And there you have it: anxiety about my anxieties.

Describing a character in her novel, *Blue Shoes*, Anne Lamott writes, "Mattie sat at the table, obsessing, orbiting around herself. She was sick of her worried, hostile mind. It would have killed her long before, she felt, if it hadn't needed the transportation." Oh, there are

days when such an image cuts close to the heart. Remember the "Love Doctor," Leo Buscaglia, all about dem hugs? A Peanuts comic once had Snoopy, acting out of character, giving Charlie Brown and Sally these warm sincere hugs. Charlie explains to his confused sister, "You can always tell when he's been listening to Leo Buscaglia." Well, ever the cheerleader, Buscaglia once said, "Worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow, it only saps today of its joy." I read that and thought, that may read well on a coffee cup, but its nonsense. Constructive worry may prevent any number of potential sorrows, certainly not all of them, but several, nonetheless. Look, a worrisome mole may prompt the doctor's visit that allows the physician to say, "I'm glad we caught it early." So there, Dr. Love!

Among the more meaningless pieces of advice regularly uttered has to be: "There's nothing to worry about!" Even when Jesus uttered that most famous anti-anxiety proverb, "Tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day," he acknowledged that there would be plenty of residual worry still hanging around.

So, what are the shared worries of the day? When I asked that question this week, the list sounded pretty legit: Inflation, Covid, the angry rift dividing the country, alarming threats to democracy, racial tension, lack of affordable housing, education, Panther quarterback issues, global warming. I mean, you have to admit it is a bit worrisome to think that soon, when a friend mentions renting a house at the beach, she's talking about Alaska! Yet, these could all be labeled as meta-issues, real societal concerns that we dare not ignore or remain complacent about. You can also add your own daily worries to your personalized panic meter: parenting issues; health concerns; neighborhood squabbles; office drama; unexpected repairs; navigating traffic, not to mention navigating family politics at Christmas.

We do tend to be rather myopic in our worries, assuming nobody has seen the troubles we've seen, that our worries are unprecedented, and our challenges are worse or more dire than at any point in the history of the world. Yeah, tell that to the guy cornered by a mastodon or the worker building a pyramid without a crane.

Our scripture texts today wake us up to the fact that we are certainly not the first to juggle several balls of worry at once. We begin

in the precarious nation-state of Judah in the 8th Century BCE. Micah hits the prophecy circuit during the reigns of Judean Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah with only one of the three rising to the level of good. It was a precarious time in Judah, yet they were faring better than their estranged sibling Israel to the North. You see, the dominant player in the region at the time was powerful Assyria, and Assyria was well into its dismantling of Israel, having already sent its leaders into exile. Judah, at least in name was still an entity, though its kings were basically vassals to the powers that be in Ninevah, paying the Assyrians tribute and thus, putting their own people in economic peril.

So, problem #1 in Judah was being able to feed one's family. In addition, there was no Tylenol to put in the nonexistent medicine cabinet and the neighborhood Minute Clinic wouldn't get its certificate of occupancy for another 2 2/3 millennia, so a cold could be as fatal as a tumor. The incursion of Assyria in the north had resulted in lower wages and fewer jobs in the south, and the Assyrians weren't interested in starting a sister cities program. If a delegation of Assyrians showed up in your town, they weren't looking for relationship, they were planning an invasion.

Therefore, I think it safe to say that the average Judean experienced every bit as much anxiety as we face today. Our situation in life is not nearly as unique as our laments would imply. The list of worries may have been edited through the ages, but there has never been a time when worry has not cast a shadow on hope.

Certainly, the prophets were not prone to fostering false hope. Micah had already made it clear that if the people were not anxious, they should be. In chapter 3, Micah declared, "Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the Lord and say, "Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us." Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins..." Yikes. Not much good news there, certainly nothing to shorten their list of worries. So, in our text today, when Micah turns to a word of hope for the fragile and few who were hanging on to their tenuous faith, its source is not false optimism or fantasy, but conviction, trust.

To an anxious people in an anxious time, Micah observes, "Now you are walled around with a wall; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek. But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days ... And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord ... And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace."

Here we see the images that have sustained people of faith through the ages: the thought of a just ruler whose concern is for all people; a caring shepherd who leads, prompts, redirects, nurtures, feeds, sustains, protects, and in whom they find strength for their journey and peace in their hearts. This image is not original to Micah but sewn into the narrative of God and God's people throughout the scriptures: Ps. 23 - "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;" Ps. 121 - "He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep;" Isaiah - "The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He

shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;" Jeremiah - "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock;" John's Jesus, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep;" "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

These promises do not ignore the palpable anxieties that vex us, nor do they deny the actual challenges that confront us. Yet, as has often been said, life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you respond to it. There is truth in that, but I think Micah and later, Mary and Elizabeth, would amend it to say life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how **and with whom** you respond to it.

We celebrate in this season the good news that Gabriel brings to Mary of a child to be born, dressing it up with heartwarming candles, adorable pageant donkeys, glorious roof-raising music, and minty chocolate (always minty chocolate), but though Mary was addressed as "favored one," and she assented to the mission impossible assigned to

her, that doesn't mean she sidestepped the panic meter. When you receive news that could be categorized as unsettling, foundation shaking, or just confusing, what do you do? I can't speak for you, but I know I'd be scrambling to find someone I trust, someone whose experience is relevant, someone I know to be wise, and I'd go to them to process what has just been laid upon me.

That's what Mary does. She could have gone to a neighbor, or maybe a childhood friend, or perhaps the rabbi over at the synagogue. However, morning sickness aside, Mary "set out and went with haste" to see Elizabeth (who was a few months ahead of Mary in her own pregnancy, and who lived, not down the street, but 80 miles away from Nazareth down in the Judean hill country). So, I think it obvious that Mary wasn't dithering about who to confide in, and no mountain, valley, distance, wind, weather, or nausea was going to keep her from getting to Elizabeth. Remember, life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how **and with whom** you respond to it. Though Luke mentions no one traveling with Mary, she does not go alone, for when Mary and Elizabeth come together, Luke tells us there is a third someone with

them, the Holy Spirit, garnering even the attention of the baby kicking at Elizabeth's intestines.

The confidence of a trusted friend you love and value, the presence of God's sustaining, embracing, nurturing, illuminating, protecting spirit. Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how and with whom you respond to it. Jesus would say, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them." Through the grace of God's Spirit, our Lord has given us the who and the how to respond to life's anxious moments, trusting that no event, catastrophe, confusion, dilemma, or threat will separate us from the love of God. Micah understood that, trusted that - "And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord ... and he shall be the one of peace." Mary and Elizabeth understood that, trusted that - "For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Will you understand that, trust that? At the end of modern newscasts, they'll throw in that heartwarming story that's supposed to take the edge off all the bad news about which they've just reported.

Some person's life has been redeemed, rescued, sustained, or transformed through the benevolence, compassion, and vigilance of a stranger. The stranger's life-changing gesture was not offered for remuneration, publicity, or accolade, but was the product of goodness and grace. Such stories serve as a reminder that life is not completely about scandal and greed. Though the sky often seems to be falling, there is still goodness to be found in the world.

They are great stories, but you don't need to wait for the stranger to conclude that there is goodness to be found. For most of us can come up with a name or two of someone who, when the proverbial poo hits the fan, you want to show up for counsel, for understanding and wisdom, for consolation and the capacity to see the big picture and help you make some sense amidst the mess. Micah, Mary, and Elizabeth know that a third person will show up and grab a hand to hold, the very Spirit of our Lord. With them you discover that peace isn't the absence of anxiety, but the fellowship of hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.