



Sermons from Northwood United Church

**“Change: Living Between Memory and Hope
Part 4: Anxiety- What's the worst that could happen?”**

Psalm 46, Mark 4:35-41

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

It is the final scene in the life of Jesus as portrayed by the gospel of John. Jesus has been crucified, and his mother comes to the foot of the cross. It takes virtually no imagination to get the poignancy of this moment. So much could be said. So much emotion held in the silence. And he turns to the disciple whom he loved dearly, and says simply, "Here is your mother." And he turns to his mother and says, "Here is your son." And then, moments later, the story is over.

Peter Short calls this the 11th, or other great commandment. When all is said and done, when your dreams lie dead in the hills what is left? Brother, here is your mother. Mother, here is your son. Take care of each other. Belong with each other. What is left is to reach around and know who is there and be in it together.

Over the last few weeks we have been working our way through a sermon series on change entitled "Living between memory and hope." We have been grappling with what is really a very common human situation. Things are not how they used to be, and they are not yet the way they are going to be. There has been an illness, a death, a loss of some kind, or maybe something wonderful has happened, a birth, a new job, a new challenge that you have long hoped for. But you find yourself on new ground- things are not how they used to be, and you have not yet fully lived into the new reality. This happens to us personally, in our families, in our work life, and in our community life. Things change, and the soul's work is to metabolize these changes, to usher us through the in between time such that the changes of our lives become woven into our story and who we then become.

In the first week we looked at some soul words for this transition time: Impermanence, Imagination and faith, all things to be attentive to in this landscape of change. And since then we have been looking at things we all stumble over. Denial- the tendency to avoid the truth about our situation, loss- with every change, good bad or indifferent comes loss, and today I want to look at the emotional landscape of change with a close look at anxiety.

We all live with some level of anxiety in our life. It's normal, and good. The fight or flight response is there for a very good reason. But as we go through times of change, it can take a particularly prominent and sometimes debilitating place in our emotional world, and I believe our faith has some things to offer- some things to say to our fear.

In times of great stress, big change, massive personal or collective upheaval, and when you are looking around and wondering how to bolster the troops, how to encourage each other and remain in hope, we often ask a fairly strategic question. We think, ok, I need to prepare for the worst, so what's the worst that could happen? And then our imagination is let loose on a whole wonderful world of imagined disaster. And I know it is coming from an attempt to be realistic and ready for the full force of the change we are in, but there is nothings quite as efficient in raising our fears and anxiety to a debilitating level than that question. When you're really up against it, when you left your last great hope for a positive outcome three miles back in some ditch, when everything is changing and you have your life there in your hands and you

don't really recognize it, ask yourself a different question. Ask yourself, "Who's here with me?" Look around. Do the Jesus thing, "... here is your mother. Mother, here is your son."

The bible is full of great examples of people who are up against it, who are facing huge change and upheaval. I think Mark's gospel has the best one because it works on a couple of different levels at the same time. Jesus and the disciples have been working things pretty hard, and crowds have been gathering everywhere they go. So they head out on the water to get a bit of a break. Jesus falls asleep in the back of the boat and a storm blows up. I can just imagine them trying their best to hold it together, but their fear is growing. And he keeps sleeping. They start to panic. This is getting wild. We are not sure we are up for this... Jesus still sleeping. Finally one of them loses it. The anxiety boils over. "Wake up Jesus. We are in trouble here! What do we do? Don't you care that our life is on the line here?" And he, groggily at first, says, "whoow. calm down!" He says that to them and to the storm. And calm is restored.

Honestly, I can really relate to the anxiety of the disciples. In times of great change, the anxiety gets high, and we can start to panic. But once again, the question is not, will it get worse. What might happen? No, the question is, who is here? Who is in the boat with us?

Before I became a minister I had to complete a year-long internship, and so I was sent up to a tiny little community in Northern Alberta. And when I say northern Alberta, I mean really far north. Just north of the little community of "North Star." I'm not kidding. I was a couple hours south of the Alberta- Northwest Territory border in the two point pastoral charge of Manning-Deadwood. There I was, newbie in ministry in an Anglican-United shared ministry. And I was pretty out of my element. I had not experienced such short days over the long haul. I had not experienced that kind of persistent cold. And I was a starving student with two little kids at the time. I was pretty sure I wanted to be a minister but this was a significant test of that proposition. And I remember feeling quite alone up there.

One of the things we needed to do was keep a journal, and send it in every month to our educational supervisor back in Saskatoon. I decided to really lay it on the line, keep track of all the insights, struggles, doubts. Hold nothing back. So I journalled everything. After the first month I sent it off to my supervisor, Charlotte Carron. I will never forget the day that came back in the mail in a little manilla envelope from St. Andrew's College. I opened it up, looked at the pages I had written, and there was red ink all over it. I thought, Oh no. I've done it all wrong. But then I read her comments. She had read it through in detail. She had commented on all the struggles, all the doubts, shared all the joys. She had listened carefully, I would even say lovingly, to everything I was experiencing, and with deep, profound respect for the struggle, had listened. Seen me. And I thought, "My God, somebody sees me! Somebody knows, understands. Somebody is on the road with me. Somebody has reached in through the bars around my life with the human touch of understanding. I remember nothing of the content of her comments. That was not the point. The point was, I was not alone.

The United Church Creed begins with a simple but profound phrase: "We are not alone. We live in God's world" There are times in life when that phrase carries everything, when the knowledge that we are not alone is all that ultimately matters. It is the beginning and ending of things. We are not alone. In times of great change, fear and anxiety are understandable. We will experience it. And the medical profession will want to prescribe medication for it. And I suppose there is a time and place for that too. But ultimately that is neither a solution nor a lasting way through. Rather, the way through is to look this way and that way and to ask, who is here with me, to stay connected. And I don't mean to stay in agreement all the time. No, I mean stay connected. Find ways to experience the truth of the credal statement, We are not alone.

Anxiety will come. It is part of how we are built as human beings as we relate to the stimulus around us. It is natural. And, we are souls on this journey, called to a live deeper than

the anxiety which we experience on the surface. And the soul is not meant to do its work in isolation. We are a community of souls.

Most weeks as we come to the end of the service I remind us to count our blessings. I don't just mean, pay attention to the good things in our life, although I do mean that. I also mean, look to the left and to the right, look around and take an inventory of the other souls around us on the journey. They are given to us as a blessing. These are the ones who bear the changes of our lives with us, who see us and understand what is at stake for us, who will keep us anchored amid the waves. Amen