

Bruton Parish Episcopal Church  
The Second Sunday in Lent  
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March 17, 2019

Most of us live with a certain amount of anxiety. Sometimes it's because the world is a terrifying place, and some of the humans who live here with us seem capable of great evil. Thinking of New Zealand this week, or a synagogue in Pittsburg and a school in Parkville, Florida just a year ago, it's hard to imagine not being worried.

Maybe it's because of uncertainty—perhaps it's the outcome of something deeply personal, such as a relationship. Or maybe you're working toward a goal or a degree, and the sheer fact of living each day with that goal hanging in the balance creates anxiety. Or maybe there is a conflict in your life that creates this anxiety—a conflict with loved one, or an employer.

Some of us have lived with anxiety for so long that we're not sure whether there is a singular source of our anxiety. It just hangs around like a bad odor.

Whatever its many sources, anxiety seems to be one of the inevitable but unhelpful conditions of our modern life.

And yet, anxiety and worrying aren't unique to this age.

Consider Abram and Sarai, formerly of Ur of the Chaldeans. Their epic begins with the invitation from an unknown God to pack it all up and move Westward. This God had promised them many descendants and much land. And yet, several years later, Abram and Sarai are still childless.

If I were in their shoes, I know I would have probably been riddled with worry.

Abram asks a good question: What good would all of this land be if their family simply ended, then and there?

It seems plausible that this state of affairs had forced Abram to reckon with his own mortality, and perhaps even with the way he had lived his life, the fact that he, lacking children and land, had followed this unknown God into a dangerous wilderness. Maybe Abram reasonably feared that all of this would simply come to nothing.

I wonder if you would have shared these anxieties with Abram and Sarai. I wonder if you would have shared Abram's terrifying dreams.

We can infer from Abram's lament that the promise of an heir went straight to the source of his desires. "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir."

Abram's desire came from the center of his being.

Desire is a powerful thing. I don't mean mere wanting; wanting that raise, that home, that outfit, that birthday or Christmas present.

Rather, desire goes deeper. Our identity is wrapped up in it. Desire is that inclination that comes from the heart of you, your very core. Desire is that thing toward which you strive.

Abram's desire tells us a lot about him.

As he got older and older, living with that frustrated desire for a child caused him to worry about the Lord's covenant with him. "How will I know that I possess the land?" he asked.

But fortunately for us, that desire wasn't all there was to him.

In Romans, Paul calls Abram, later Abraham, the father of the faith, because in the face of his anxiety, Abram persisted in his belief that that God would bring the covenant to pass. And because Abram was faithful, the Lord brought about the salvation of the world through those promised descendants.

It's not that Abram's anxiety went away. Rather, Abram had the courage and the fortitude to hope in the Lord's promise despite his anxiety. What if that's what faith is: not just believing in what we don't see, but believing through the anxiety of not seeing?

Paul promises that despite the humiliation and failure of human life and death, we will be transformed into the likeness and glory of the resurrected Christ.

Transformed into the likeness and glory of Christ. What a strange and marvelous promise that is!

Here is something that will eventually overcome all the anxieties we have. Here is a desire that when fulfilled will end all desires. Here is something worth hoping for, something that outstrips all the other things that we so often set our hopes on. All those other things that really don't merit our hopes and aspirations. Here is a glory that won't fade.

This is the glory that Paul desires, not for himself, but that somehow he will be able to participate in this desire along with those who in faith have become part of the Church, the body of Christ.

Paul is not a young Christian by the time he writes this letter, and he's dwelt on this desire for Christ's glory for so long that it has matured him, it's shaped him.

And just like Abram, Paul comes to a faith in spite of anxiety, a faith that calls upon him to believe that God will honor the promise of resurrection despite the anxieties and worries that he might have. Just like Abram, Paul moves forward and grows into a new identity, a new name even, one based on that hope.

So when Paul calls the believers in Caesarea Philippi "brothers and sisters," he's not doing so to be nice or fraternal with them. Rather, he believes that they have all been adopted as children of the Father, and so are siblings with Christ. And because

they are Christ's brothers and sisters, descendants of the Father, they will share in the resurrection as a new promised land with him. All this he knows through hope.

Isn't that a funny idea? To be grown by something you've only experienced as a hope? To set the path of your life and your community on a new ideal, a new reality that is so contrary to the one that animates the world around you?

What if that's what Paul means when he talks about our heavenly citizenship?

We belong to a place that isn't yet our permanent address.

Maybe it isn't so strange, though. Isn't it the case that the people we think of as heroes, even in this day and age, are exemplary because they live in hope, hope that justice will be known, or that love will overpower hatred, or that humans might one day see the inherent value of their neighbors?

So many of us are stricken by anxiety and worry, surrounded as we are by violence and uncertainty on the one hand, and triviality on the other. So often we're tempted to give ourselves and our hopes to lesser things that don't deserve our attention, or we're demoralized and lose hope because we're confronted with an ugliness and terror that looks like it is overcoming whatever goodness and justice we throw at it.

And, at the end of the day, if it came down to us, our ability to be good and just, or to recognize the hopes of the world, well then we'd be right to be anxious.

But our failures, and weaknesses, and anxieties pale in comparison to the promise of the glory of the Lord, even if we, like Abram, don't fully comprehend how God will fulfill this promise.

It takes time for our desires and hopes to change. It takes time to foster growth and maturity, especially in the midst of anxiety. But, my sisters and brothers, it takes time to grow anything worth growing.