

Proper 3, Year A
Isaiah 49: 8-16a
Matthew 6: 24-34

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, CA
May 25, 2008

In the Grip of Anxiety:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

I suppose long-time preachers, the kind I heard this week, would likely tell you that scripture and life have a surprising way of converging sometimes. They sure did for me this week. I found myself living in the space between Matthew and Isaiah, between anxiety and the anchor of a mothering God. I found anxiety—that free-floating worry about the unknown—ruling my life and I caught glimpses of a mothering God.

Tuesday—the first full day of the Festival of Homiletics--started out well—I found a parking place almost in front of Central Lutheran Church where the Festival of Homiletics was being held. Of course I had no change for the meter. Taking my chances, I parked there anyway. I wouldn't have to wait in a long line to get out of the parking lot. Next I got a good seat close to the front of the church where the morning worship, sermon and lectures were being held. I was on a roll! The sermon was amazing. The two thousand one hundred preachers in attendance shook their heads in awe as the preacher made his final turn. A silent “wow” swept the room. I was walking on a cloud as I went out for a lunch-time swim. Until I looked across the street for my best friend's car. It wasn't there. I crossed the street and checked again. Not there. A woman said to me, “They tow right away.” You can imagine how that fed into my anxiety. My heart started pounding. My breathing got shallow. My nerves were twitching. What would I do? She must have caught the panic on my face. She said, “Go in there quick. Go to security. Maybe you can stop them.” I went straight to the security window of Hennepin Country Offices. No luck there—they just handed me a sheet of paper with instructions about the impound lot. I called the number and found that I could do nothing without the license plate number, my friend's notarized signature and proof of insurance and the title to the car. My friend was in Chicago. On work. My heart started pounding. How could I interrupt her work? How could I not? What choice did I have? Of course I called her. She told me where the papers were and promised to fax a note later in the day. All settled thought I as I headed back to the conference and Bishop Curry's sermon.

Late in the afternoon I got the call. My friend had faxed her notarized approval to the impound lot. I was good to go. A simple cab ride, a check to pay the fine, and I'd be on my way. As he dropped me at the lot, the cabbie asked, “Are you sure your car is there?” “Of course,” I replied. When my turn came to pay my fine and get my car, I said to the woman at the window, “I hope you're rested. This won't be an easy case.” Little did I know how hard it would be or who would need to be well rested. The clerk found my friend's note. No problem there. And I had all the paper work I needed. No problem there either. The problem was she couldn't find the car. My heart started pounding, my mind raced ahead. “Not here. Not there. Not in any of the lots? Are you sure.” She checked again. The car was nowhere to be found. “Oh dear,” she said, “Oh dear. The car must be stolen.” That touched the chord of my anxiety. It set me off.

Fighting back tears, determined to hold it together, my mind raced ahead. “How would Mary Ellen afford a new car?” “How would she get the money to pay the difference between what the car was worth and what a new car would cost?” “How would I tell her?” “What would she say—would she be cold, angry or a little understanding?” “How would I get the money to pay her costs?” I called Mary Ellen, I called her insurance company, I called the police. All the while I was feeling lousy. Finally, a long hour and a half later, the police came to take my statement. As they were leaving, I asked them if they would take me back downtown where I could rent a car. Driving out of the lot, the officer said to me, “Let’s just swing by the place you left the car.” And there it was. Just where I left it. Not even a ticket. There it was—my anxiety ruling the day. A free-floating fear of the unknown contradicting all that was known. Contradicting my own good sense. Contradicting all that I knew about myself and all that I knew about God. Anxiety calling me out of trust into fear.

Jesus says, “Do not be anxious....Do not be anxious about what you will wear or what you will eat, do not be anxious about tomorrow....” And later on in Matthew we hear Jesus say, “do not be anxious about what you will say....” “Do not be anxious.”

Anxiety. That corrosive fear of the future—not so much a fear of what is as a fear of what might be. The kind of fear that sent me and Mary Ellen and impound clerk and the police on that wild goose chase.

We as a people live in a time of deep anxiety in a country on perpetual orange alert. An underlying anxiety fuels much of our own personal anxiety. We get jittery. We fear the worst. Worry and anxiety float underneath our consciousness like an underground river ready to burst out whenever the soil wears thin. All of this feeding into the fears that are part of life as we know it.

Of course we respond. Of course we try to control things. We engage in a flurry of activity. We cut corners. We hedge our bets. After all, we are on orange alert.

But Jesus says, “Do not be anxious.” How can we do this—how can we help but be anxious? We live after all in anxious times.

As we witness the horrible loss of life in Myanmar and China, as we look on with horror at the instances of genocide throughout the world, as we see people in New Orleans still waiting to rebuild, how can we not join Daughter Zion in lamenting, “The LORD has forsaken me, my LORD has forgotten me?”

On this Memorial Day Weekend as we mourn the loss of sons and daughters in service to their country, as we see veterans returning home with serious head injuries, as we remember the alarming rate of suicides among Iraq War vets, how can we not feel forgotten?

A life partner isolated by Alzheimers, a new child—a child of hope—diagnosed with profound hearing loss, friends struggling to stay afloat in this precarious economy, a family marked by tragedy facing yet another tragedy, another disappointment in a life of disappointments—how can we not feel abandoned?

Yet listen to the words God says to Daughter Zion: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? “ The good news is that God is as close to us as a mother is to the child in her womb. We are bound to one another. God mourns with us, laments with us. God shares our hunger and our thirst.

God bears us in her womb and births us. God provides for us like a mother provides for the child in her womb. God is there—there in the hands that help, in the voice that calms, in the heart that understands. God is here, with us, in the face and hands and feet of friend and stranger—as close to us as a mother with an infant at her breast.

How does Paul put it—neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

God can't abandon us. God cannot be God without the child in her womb, without the infant at her breast. Do not be anxious.