

Quieting an Anxious Heart

In his sermon last week, Dr. Eugene Bales outlined some of the pain, sorrow, and injustice that exists across the street and around the world. He named examples that have been illumined during the past ten months. He ended by quoting Charles Dickens and expressing his desire that after the winter of despair lasting all through the year 2020, this coming year will be a spring of hope and love.

Even though I didn't know what he was going to say, and he didn't know what we were planning to do next, it's interesting how they tie together. As the worship committee thought about the time between Christmas and Lent, we settled on the topic of mental health as the focus of our worship. We noted how the disruption and isolation this pandemic brought have had a detrimental effect on mental health. Levels of stress and anxiety and symptoms of anxiety and depressive disorders have increased. We want to acknowledge these trends.

As I considered how to address this in a worship setting, the book of Psalms came to mind. These ancient songs were written to be used in corporate worship. They continue to serve a variety of functions in our modern-day worship.

They help us to encounter God. They make us aware of God's amazing and lavish grace. They give us words to use to praise God. They allow us to express a range of emotions including praise and wonder, thanksgiving, lament, grief, and anger. They give us common language that allows us to express an understanding of our relationships with God, the world, and each other. They dramatize our own trials and struggles. They help us express our deepest longings and our highest joys. They inspire our deepest and most intimate prayers. They call us to a deeper commitment to God. They root us in tradition.

During the next few weeks, we're going to spend time in the Psalms, exploring how they relate to mental health. Of course, reading a psalm doesn't replace medication, therapy, and other forms of treatment for mental illness. But there can be therapeutic value in using these ancient poems to improve mental health.

I'll spend time each Sunday talking about an aspect of mental health and suggesting a psalm or two that might address it. I'll talk about the psalm and also invite us to experience it together, both in word and song. During the service, you might create something in response to what you are hearing or feeling. During the next few weeks, you might write your own psalm using the pattern of the ancient psalmist to express your personal desires, laments, and praises to God. If you feel comfortable doing so, I encourage you to share your creations with the rest of the congregation.

Let's begin with a story about a man. I'll call him Fred.¹ From the beginning of his life, the world was a difficult place for Fred. When he was in the womb, he had a rapid heartbeat and was extremely active. As an infant, he was very colicky. When his mother picked him up from preschool, he asked her secret questions every day to make sure she wasn't a kidnapper wearing a mommy-mask. His early years were filled with worry despite his mother's consistent attention and care. He was very sensitive to hot and cold, and to physical pain. Anxiety, at least partially, came from his genetic makeup.

Fred's anxiety also came from several environmental factors. His mother was quite anxious herself. They often spoke together about their anxieties but rather than soothing his fears, their conversations made Fred even more worried.

Fred's religious upbringing may have played a role in his anxiety. In church and at home, he was taught about a powerful God who was waiting to punish anyone who went astray. He came to believe that suffering was the punishment for human sin. The emphasis was on fear of God rather than the love of God.

As Fred entered college he learned more about suffering in the world particularly in Africa, in inner cities, and also in personal situations involving family and friends. Fred tried to make sense of this in his

¹ *Close to Home: Dealing with Extreme Anxiety*, © 2017 by MennoMedia, [CTH_Anxiety_Handout.pdf \(fithandliferesources.org\)](https://www.fithandliferesources.org/CTH_Anxiety_Handout.pdf)

worldview where suffering was a result of God's punishment. He became overwhelmed with the power human beings have. He felt that God's grace was severely limited by sin. Fred was filled with anxiety about avoiding God's punishment, and he doubted God's ability to save him in the everyday situations of a sinful world. This caused Fred to feel responsible for control and safety of his environment. He was left feeling helpless and despairing.

As an adult, Fred realized that he had a problem with anxiety. He compared himself to his friends, who had worries of their own, but were not consumed by them. Fred's anxieties were limiting his ability to try new things and enjoy life fully. He decided to go to a therapist who helped him identify current and childhood patterns of relating to others that increased his anxiety.

Over the years Fred has seen a number of different therapists who helped him focus on the thoughts and beliefs underlying his anxiety. He came to a greater understanding of why he was anxious. It helped him cope with his anxiety, but it never disappeared.

Psychiatrists prescribed medications of various kinds to help Fred. Some drugs decreased his anxiety, but they also caused weight gain and decreased energy, spiritual connection, and sexual desire. Other medications were ineffective or even increased his anxiety. Still others helped him achieve a measure of balance.

Fred still lives with anxiety and struggles to find the best strategies for living with it. But he also notices that, with his heightened sensitivity, he can better understand the suffering of others. In fact, this gift of empathy has influenced his calling to work among others with special needs.

Some level of anxiety is a normal part of everyday life for all of us. But when you have a consistent inability to relax, irrational fear, irritability, muscle aches, repeated uncontrolled thoughts, inability to sleep, or worry for no apparent reason—then you may have what is known as an anxiety disorder. Your anxiety feels overwhelming and beyond your control.

Anxiety disorders affect around 20% of adults and 7% of children in the US.² People experience them in a variety of ways. The most common are panic attack, phobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder. The types of treatment proven to be most effective for many people experiencing an anxiety disorder involve a combination of psychotherapy and medication. Complementary health approaches include stress and relaxation techniques including recognition of the triggers of anxiety, breathing and calming exercises, yoga, and physical exercise.

Someone experiencing anxiety and stress might use Psalm 46 as part of a calming routine. Read the psalm noting words and phrases that stand out to you.³

¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. *Selah*

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.

⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

² [Anxiety Disorders | NAMI: National Alliance on Mental Illness](#)

³ Psalm 46, *New Revised Standard Version*

- ⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD;
 see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
- ⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
 he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
 he burns the shields with fire.
- ¹⁰ “Be still, and know that I am God!
 I am exalted among the nations,
 I am exalted in the earth.”
- ¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
 the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

Historically, Psalm 46 has been associated with the deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrian threat in the days of Isaiah.⁴ In a time of destabilization, the congregation confesses hope and trust in the Lord, in Yahweh, as God of the universe.

The psalm begins with the cataclysms of nature and a declaration of God as a refuge in the midst of this chaos. God is a well proved help in trouble. God provides refuge, a place where one can find safety and security.

The psalmist envisions a river running through the city of God bestowing security, prosperity, and peace. This is living water which provides stability. This river stands in contrast to destructive waters or invasive forces which threaten the people’s existence. God has power over all the forces that seek to challenge God’s rule. God’s thundering voice can make the earth tremble and shatter all foes. God’s majesty prevails.

The final stanza points to judgment and how God will make wars to cease by destroying the weapons of war. Verse 10 is not simply an invitation to become quiet and relax and meditate. It also has the force of a command: “Leave off waging war, and know that I am God!” Step back from looking for security in anyone other than God. The psalmist depends on God and allows their thinking and vision to be directed by God. Because of this, the psalmist boldly dares to hope.

Psalm 46 wrestles with the danger of an unstable world. How might this psalm of trust speak to our current situations? If you were writing this psalm today, what signs of instability would you list? Can you accept the psalmist’s invitation to place radical trust in God even in the face of overwhelming threat? Will you use these words to hold steady before the dangers present in your life and world?

Political structures and weapons of war don’t guarantee security. We too need to “become still,” to “know” the sovereign Lord of all chaos and peace, and to accept the truth of Immanuel, God with us. In a world being destabilized by many forces, this quiet song of confidence stands as a reminder to place trust in God as refuge and strength.

Read the psalm again, from a different translation.⁵

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength,
 always ready to help in times of trouble.
- ² So we will not fear when earthquakes come
 and the mountains crumble into the sea.
- ³ Let the oceans roar and foam.
 Let the mountains tremble as the waters surge! *Interlude*

⁴ Background on Psalm 46 drawn from James Waltner, *Psalms, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2006, pp. 233-237.

⁵ Psalm 46, *New Living Translation*

- ⁴ A river brings joy to the city of our God,
the sacred home of the Most High.
- ⁵ God dwells in that city; it cannot be destroyed.
From the very break of day, God will protect it.
- ⁶ The nations are in chaos,
and their kingdoms crumble!
God's voice thunders,
and the earth melts!
- ⁷ The LORD of Heaven's Armies is here among us;
the God of Israel is our fortress. *Interlude*
- ⁸ Come, see the glorious works of the LORD:
See how he brings destruction upon the world.
- ⁹ He causes wars to end throughout the earth.
He breaks the bow and snaps the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
- ¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God!
I will be honored by every nation.
I will be honored throughout the world."
- ¹¹ The LORD of Heaven's Armies is here among us;
the God of Israel is our fortress. *Interlude*

Another psalm that might be used to combat stress and anxiety is Psalm 86.⁶ This prayer song is the lament of a person beset by foes. It is a cry to God for help. The lament is interrupted by a confident hymn and vow of thanksgiving, affirming the awesome and unique power of God. Read the psalm⁷ noting words and phrases that stand out to you.

- ¹ Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.
- ² Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you;
save your servant who trusts in you.
You are my God; ³ be gracious to me, O Lord,
for to you do I cry all day long.
- ⁴ Gladden the soul of your servant,
for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
- ⁵ For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving,
abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you.
- ⁶ Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer;
listen to my cry of supplication.
- ⁷ In the day of my trouble I call on you,
for you will answer me.

⁶ Background on Psalm 86 drawn from James Waltner, *Psalms, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2006, pp. 418-422.

⁷ Psalm 86, *New Revised Standard Version*

- ⁸ There is none like you among the gods, O Lord,
nor are there any works like yours.
- ⁹ All the nations you have made shall come
and bow down before you, O Lord,
and shall glorify your name.
- ¹⁰ For you are great and do wondrous things;
you alone are God.
- ¹¹ Teach me your way, O LORD,
that I may walk in your truth;
give me an undivided heart to revere your name.
- ¹² I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart,
and I will glorify your name forever.
- ¹³ For great is your steadfast love toward me;
you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.
- ¹⁴ O God, the insolent rise up against me;
a band of ruffians seeks my life,
and they do not set you before them.
- ¹⁵ But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.
- ¹⁶ Turn to me and be gracious to me;
give your strength to your servant;
save the child of your serving girl.
- ¹⁷ Show me a sign of your favor,
so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame,
because you, LORD, have helped me and comforted me.

The prayer of supplication recorded in Psalm 86 begins with cries of desperation. The writer lists reasons for God to intervene and appeals to God's sovereignty and might. Words the psalmist uses to describe God's character and activity include *gracious, good, forgiving, great, able to do wondrous things, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness*.

The psalm centers on the God who does wondrous things. Other gods are incomparable to the one, true God. At the center, the psalm proclaims, *You alone are God*. A request follows the proclamation: *Teach me your way, O Lord*. Walking in God's truth calls for single-hearted reverence of God's name. The psalmist's response is a vow of thanksgiving and praise for the steadfast love through which God has delivered him from Sheol, the abode of the dead,

The lament resumes in the last section of the psalm. The wicked are characterized as *insolent* – arrogant people who are oblivious to God's instruction and will use their power to destroy those who stand in their way. In contrast, God is *merciful, gracious, and abounding in steadfast love*.

The psalmist ends with a request for some sign of God's favor, a demonstration of God's action so that foes may be put to shame. The conclusion is a statement of trust in the Lord's help and comfort.

How could you use this psalm to reduce anxiety and stress? What, or who, would you list as your foes? In what situations do you want God to intervene? What names and words do you use to describe God's character and activity? How can these help to build trust in God?

Read the psalm again, from a different translation.⁸

- ¹ Bend down, O LORD, and hear my prayer;
answer me, for I need your help.
- ² Protect me, for I am devoted to you.
Save me, for I serve you and trust you.
You are my God.
- ³ Be merciful to me, O Lord,
for I am calling on you constantly.
- ⁴ Give me happiness, O Lord,
for I give myself to you.
- ⁵ O Lord, you are so good, so ready to forgive,
so full of unfailing love for all who ask for your help.
- ⁶ Listen closely to my prayer, O LORD;
hear my urgent cry.
- ⁷ I will call to you whenever I'm in trouble,
and you will answer me.
- ⁸ No pagan god is like you, O Lord.
None can do what you do!
- ⁹ All the nations you made
will come and bow before you, Lord;
they will praise your holy name.
- ¹⁰ For you are great and perform wonderful deeds.
You alone are God.
- ¹¹ Teach me your ways, O LORD,
that I may live according to your truth!
Grant me purity of heart,
so that I may honor you.
- ¹² With all my heart I will praise you, O Lord my God.
I will give glory to your name forever,
- ¹³ for your love for me is very great.
You have rescued me from the depths of death.
- ¹⁴ O God, insolent people rise up against me;
a violent gang is trying to kill me.
You mean nothing to them.
- ¹⁵ But you, O Lord,
are a God of compassion and mercy,
slow to get angry
and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness.
- ¹⁶ Look down and have mercy on me.
Give your strength to your servant;
save me, the son of your servant.
- ¹⁷ Send me a sign of your favor.
Then those who hate me will be put to shame,
for you, O LORD, help and comfort me.

⁸ Psalm 86, *New Living Translation*

I invite you to return to these psalms when you experience stress and anxiety. God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. Thanks be to God.

This prayer for mental health may be useful to you.⁹

Hear our prayer, O God of healing and hope,
for all who struggle with mental illness
and those who care for them,

for their families and friends, their church and community.

We pray for greater understanding, compassion, strength, endurance.

Make your presence known even when fears threaten,

when anxieties overwhelm, when thoughts fragment and accuse,
and the burden seems too heavy to carry one more step.

Almighty and merciful God, grant one more moment,

one more breath, one more foot in front of the other.

Bring healing. Restore peace. Raise up hope. Amen.

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