

Contending with the World

Mike Banta

September 28, 2025 at Elizabeth Presbyterian

This is the second message in our series titled “In the World – Not of It.” Last week we started by exploring how non-religious activities can be used to further the Kingdom of God. Car shows, Pie & Ice Cream socials, even visits to a tavern could apply, and Jesus took advantage of secular situations to minister to those who needed Him. This week we will dive into how the world impacts us emotionally, and how to cope with it, or even thrive.

There’s an old folk tale that tells of a young, rather dimwitted boy who never felt any fear. When his father asked him what he would like to learn in order to support himself, he said he would like to learn how to shudder (as in, have fear). Many people had tried to frighten him, pretending to be ghosts, making him sleep by some gallows, and more, but to no avail.

He was told of a nearby haunted castle, and that if he could manage to stay there for three nights in a row, not only would he learn how to shudder in fear, but he could win the king’s daughter as a bride along with vast riches. I’m not one to believe in hauntings, although the demonic can be very real. Horror after horror was visited on him while he stayed in the castle, but the boy remained totally unfazed and would peacefully go to sleep.

The following morning, the king told the boy that he could win his lovely daughter. The boy agreed, though upset that he had still not learned how to shudder.

After their wedding, the boy's continuing complaints "If only I could shudder!" annoyed his wife to no end. Reaching her wits' end, she finally sent for a bucketful of stream water, complete with fish. She tossed the freezing water onto her husband while he was asleep. As he awoke, shuddering, he exclaimed that while he had finally learned to shudder, he still did not know what true fear was.

We are not that way, right? As our crazy world continues to turn, every sunrise seems to bring news of another insanity. Assassinations, school shootings, wars and rumors of wars, floods, fire, doom and gloom! I have felt and have heard from many of you that you are experiencing deep unease, fear, and even anger at this upside-down planet’s shenanigans. We wonder what the future will bring for

us, our children and grandchildren. Starvation, cruelty perpetrated on humans by other humans, outlandish claims by politicians on both sides of the aisle, all of these things feed our anxiety.

I browsed through Reddit, Quora, and other dialog sites on the internet, and found many examples of this, often expressed by young people. “I’m afraid of the direction the world is possibly headed with recent political events among other things to the point I feel terrified of my future and the future of others.” “I don’t know what else I need to say. I am absolutely terrified about the Direction the world could go, and I honestly always feel paranoid about it.” “I’m scared. the world is gradually getting worse and I’m terrified. How do I shake this feeling of dread, like the world is out to kill me?”

One young son asked his father how he deals with it when his wife, the boy’s mother, yells at him. How does he remain calm? The dad revealed his coping mechanism – he cleans the toilet with his wife’s toothbrush. “Wow, Dad,” said the boy. “That’s exactly what I do when you make me angry!”

We often feel helpless to generate change for the good. Against such a horrible headwind of evil, what can we hope to do?

You’re likely familiar with the story of Job, who had tremendous personal calamity inflicted on him, losing sons and daughters, wealth, health, and more. He exclaims in our passage today that life and light given to the one in misery is almost mocking him. “For the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest, but trouble comes.” While we are not always in such dire straits as Job was, he gives us words to express these feelings of unease, fear, anger, and the inability to do anything about it. You may remember that Job had three friends who tried to help him through this time, but gave cold comfort instead, claiming that Job must have done something bad to cause all of this. (Just as a side note – whenever you hear someone preach or teach from Job, check on who is speaking the particular passage being used – Job, his friends, or even God. Some spectacularly bad theology has come from the misuse of this book!) Like Job, we are sometimes overwhelmed, and whatever those around us have to say seems to fall short. It just doesn’t feel right that the sun should be shining and the day beautiful around us while we are in the throes of this despair.

So how should we respond? There's the old fable of a snake exploring through an abandoned woodworker's shop. As he crawled through the stacks of old tools, he brushed against a rusty saw and suffered a slight cut. In anger the snake struck and bit the saw but only managed to cut his mouth on the blade. Now in a complete rage, the snake coiled around the saw to compress it to death. He of course only succeeded in creating self-inflicted wounds and ended up losing his life.

We clearly cannot stay in our emotional state of fear or anger; it only brings self-harm to us. These feelings can even add to planetary insanity. Instead we can lean back and relax into the basics of our faith in Christ. This faith gives us our framework for responding appropriately to a world gone mad.

Where do we begin? Simple trust in God. He is not only strong, but his intentions are good and kind. I chose a passage from Luke today as a parallel to today's situation on earth. Does this mean that we are in the end times as Jesus described? Maybe, maybe not. But that's not really the point I would like to make with this passage. Yes, today we have nations against nations, earthquakes, famine and disease. I think the terrors and signs will be much more when the last days finally approach. I don't think they're that far off. Students of prophetic scripture point to a number of events of the last one hundred years or so that make the events described here more likely. The reformation of the nation of Israel is one of those, nuclear weaponry another.

Jesus speaks of the distress or dismay of nations in perplexity, and people fainting with fear and foreboding. That is kind of like today's world, right? The Greek word translated as "distress" (or "dismay" in other English versions) is *synochē*, which comes from a root meaning a narrowing or contracting part of a way. Think of how it feels when things close in on you as you're traveling down a lonely road, with cliffs or trees hemming you in. That's the kind of distress Jesus describes, as everyone copes with the bizarre happenings around us. People are fainting – from the word *apopsychō* – which means literally falling away as one waxes cold. It's a feeling of almost death, hearts failing as they look forward with foreboding of evil.

But how does Jesus say we should respond to all of this? **"And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these**

things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” God wins! His strength is sufficient to our need, and even far in excess of what we need. And we win too, as we are redeemed from these terrors. This is a far cry from feeling unease, worry, fear and anger.

As we trust in God, what else do we do? Prayer! God is totally open to hearing you speak about your expression of feelings. He’s not going to be surprised or shocked if you tell Him you’re scared or mad. Let Him listen to you, which will be so cathartic, even healing, as you unwind your heart in front of Him.

And then listen. I think prayer should be ten percent talking, and one hundred percent hearing what God has to say to you. (Yes, I know the math doesn’t add up, just making a point!) It’s vital that we come into a place of quiet where God can be heard. Turn off the television, the radio, and definitely the cell phone. There are many ways to accomplish this listening, through meditation and scripture for example. Pat Russell has delighted in teaching us the practice of Lectio Divina, where a passage from the Bible is used to draw our spirits near to God, and to truly hear His voice. There are many other ways as well which we don’t have time to go into today.

Let God reassure you of who He is. As I said a few moments ago, His intentions are kind toward us. And we have a promise from Him not only of our redemption, but of the total healing of the world that is to come. The world won’t be crazy forever!

Next, look to your virtual “back yard” to see where you can be of service to others, and to the world. Most of us are not going to be in a position to have major influence in Washington, Moscow, or Jerusalem. But we have the ability with little steps to have great influence on what comes within our reach. You can be the life changer for a single person – the neighbor dealing with grief, the grandchild trying to hide their despair, the single parent who struggles to put a meal on the table for the kids. You can volunteer for the food bank, knit prayer shawls, and go visit the homeless at the coffeehouse downtown. The world can be changed, but it happens best “one heart at a time.”

Look for opportunities to speak up for justice, when you see someone not getting a fair shake! And let your compassion speak for Christ wherever you are – the workplace, the grocery store, the coffee shop, even the church. The point here is

very simply that we cannot change the entire world, but we can be very influential in our little corner of the world. If you're not sure how to do this in your current situation, remember that you have God's Holy Spirit alive in you at all times. He can and will direct you as you ask for His guidance. And then the Spirit will empower you to do whatever it is you have opportunity for. We are not left alone to contend with the world.

So far, we have covered three ways to cope with the unease, fear and anger the planet seems to want to fill us up with. Trust in God, pray, and look for God to lead you in ways you can provide service. And know that you will be empowered to do so.

There is one more thing we can acknowledge and do – love. Love never fails, said Paul to the Corinthians. God's love is always active, and always will be, even if it's hard to see sometimes. And we can express and share this same love around our little part of the world. We don't have to try and cover the entire earth with our love – God has that one. But we still have the opportunity to show love and by doing so change one corner of the world for better. In First John, which we just completed a study of, we are told that perfect love casts out fear. What is perfect love? It is what Christ demonstrated to us with sacrificial living – and dying. No greater love is there than one who lays down his or her life sacrificially for others. Not necessarily to physical death, but as we lay down our fear and anger and reach out to those around us, we too can participate in Christ's love. Hallelujah!

Amen.