

December 1: Anxiety (Psalm 23) – Pastor Heather McDaniel

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help for Heavy Times”. We’re in the fourth month of our yearlong series, where we’ve shifted away from the lectionary to explore what it looks like to live fully in every stage of life. Our desire is that as we walk this path and listen for God’s voice together, our congregation might continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

To that end, we’ve been applying Scripture to a wide range of topics related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. For December, we’ve chosen a mini series called “Blue Christmas,” because we know that despite the never-ending festivities and celebrations and upbeat music, this time of year can be particularly difficult for folks dealing with mental health conditions like anxiety and depression. As we bring these topics into the light, may we be able to fix our eyes on the solid hope that anchors us, even when we’re waiting in the darkness. Please pray with me.

Lord Jesus, you are our Good Shepherd, and we need you. We need to rest in the safety that you provide, and we need the refreshment and peace that you offer. We need your voice to ring louder than our anxiety. We need your presence when our paths take us through dark valleys. Thank you that your goodness and faithful love pursue us all the days of our lives. May we hear you speak truth to our anxiety today. In your name, amen.

Over the past few months, we’ve explored some lesser-known Bible passages that aren’t often read aloud in church. Today’s passage, however, is not in that category. My guess is that no matter what your faith background is, you’re at least a little familiar with the words and phrases of Psalm 23, because it is one of the best-known, best-loved, and most-quoted passages from all of Scripture. It’s a simple prayer of trust and confidence in God that was written around 3000 years ago and is attributed to Israel’s King David, who spent his early life as a shepherd; and it has captured people’s hearts and minds and imaginations ever since. Not only is it frequently read at funerals and public services; its phrases have also found their way into countless books, poems, movies, and even rap songs; and it’s inspired compositions from musicians as diverse as Bach, Duke Ellington, and Pink Floyd. There’s something deeply compelling about this short prayer, both in sacred and in secular spaces. No matter what our faith background is, it speaks to our anxious souls.

Psalm 23 was the very first Scripture that I memorized on my own initiative. I was 8 years old and had just moved from Bangladesh to the US, and although I couldn't articulate why, I knew that I wanted to have Psalm 23's words in my heart and mind. So I sat down with the old King James version and committed it to memory so effectively that it's still with me now, still just as powerful and beautiful as it was 40 years ago – and I still need its reassurance and truth just as much as I did as an anxious, displaced 8-year-old.

Because despite my many wonderful childhood memories, I struggled with anxiety. One of my most memorable worries was that a volcano would erupt in the town we lived in – maybe even in our own backyard – and annihilate us in a pyroclastic flow. During the day, I would check out all the volcano books from the library and read them avidly; and then at night, I'd bury them in the depths of my closet and tremble in bed, afraid to go to sleep, reciting the 23rd psalm and singing the songs I learned in Sunday School to calm myself down.

You may be wondering where my family was living at the time of this consuming volcano-focused anxiety. We were in Brunswick, Georgia, which is not known for its eruptive potential – but despite reassurances from the adults in my life, I remained vigilant, because you never know...

Before I go on, I want to explain how anxiety is different from fear. Fear is what we experience when we encounter a very definite, real, and immediate danger – for example, we're hiking on the slopes of a volcano, hear an explosion, and see lava bombs began to rain down around us. Our body's response to this danger is automatic, and it's what we call the fight or flight instinct: we feel a surge of adrenaline; our heartrate, blood pressure, and breathing rate all increase; blood is transferred away from places like our gut and extremities and sent to our major muscles; and our senses are sharpened. Our body is preparing us to survive: in this case, to run as fast as we can to a safe place while we dodge lava bombs.

Anxiety, on the other hand, is what we experience in response to a threat that's not concrete or immediate or clearly defined. We get anxious about things that we think or feel or imagine *might* happen, like a volcano erupting in our backyard. Anxiety involves uncertainty and lack of control, and sometimes, we can't even articulate what is making us anxious. And even though there's no immediate threat, anxiety triggers our body in the same way as fear – pounding heart, fast breathing, buzzing limbs – and that's a problem when there's nothing to do with all of that energy except lie awake in bed and tremble.

You'll be happy to know that even though I now live in sight of a real, live, enormous volcano (at least when the mountain is out), it's never kept me up at night – but that doesn't mean I left anxiety behind. As I grew older, and married, and got pregnant, and raised children, I discovered so many other things to be anxious about, things I cared about but had no ultimate control over, from the small to the existential: would one of my kids get the stomach virus going around and throw up all over, and then we would all get it and all be throwing up everywhere? If my adventurous kids and husband went off-trail hiking, would someone end up tumbling down a mountainside? Would my children have friends? Would they make good choices as adults? Would one of the trees behind our house fall on us during a storm? Were Luke and I likeable, or were we too weird and different for other people? Would our democracy survive? Was I doing enough with all that I had been given, or was I wasting my potential? Sometimes, I simply had a nonspecific feeling of impending doom.

I didn't realize how much anxiety was impacting me until one spring, nine and a half years ago, when I suddenly stopped sleeping. I wasn't too worried, until I spent a second night wide awake and unable to relax, and then a third. By then, not only was I not sleeping, but my heart would pound and my body would jolt whenever I lay down and began to relax, even during the day, and I was terrified that I had forever lost my ability to sleep.

After a full medical workup and lots of labs, I was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder and moderate depression. Like millions of other people, my anxiety had increased to a level that was not manageable, and it was interfering with my ability to function well and live fully. I joined the almost 1 in 5 Americans who are estimated to have an anxiety disorder each year; and like so many of them, my anxiety went hand in hand with depression.

I am so grateful to God for that diagnosis, and even for the crisis that preceded it, because it forced me onto a journey of recovery and growth that has, among many other things, brought me here today. I want to tell you a little bit about that journey and what I learned about anxiety along the way – but even more importantly, I want to bring us back to Psalm 23, because I believe that it speaks truth to anxiety better than I ever could.

I'll begin by sharing a few things I learned about anxiety as I looked it in the face during my recovery journey. First, anxiety means well. It wants to keep us safe, and it can be helpful when it alerts us to things we should pay attention to or prompts us to take meaningful actions to minimize risk, like putting on our seat belt, or installing smoke detectors, or studying for a test we're worried about.

However, anxiety is a terribly unreliable narrator. It doesn't know when to stop, and it cannot be trusted. It's really lousy at differentiating between a true risk and one that is horrendously overblown, and it has a fabulous ability to imagine terrible outcomes. But its imagination only goes in one direction: it always favors the worst possible interpretation of anything, and it never proposes best-case scenarios. If a friend seems out of sorts, anxiety says that they're angry at you; if your child coughs in their sleep, anxiety convinces you they're getting sick; if a teen doesn't answer your phone call, anxiety suggests all kinds of ways they could be in trouble. Anxiety sees the world as a scary, hostile place of scarcity and threat.

And when anxiety gets out of control, it becomes a bully and a thief. It hijacks our brain and steals our sleep and our peace of mind. It can make us so obsessed with minimizing risk and controlling outcomes that we don't fully enjoy anything; it can prompt us to over-protect those we love and keep them from healthy risk-taking; or it can just make us so overwhelmed that we avoid things and withdraw from real life.

But the thing is, even when we realize that anxiety is a problem, we can't control it or quash it or banish it by battling it head-on. I know, because I've tried. During those terrifying sleepless nights and days of panic attacks, I attempted to will my anxiety away and I begged God on my knees to take it away and let me sleep. But it remained. My anxiety was finally calmed when I stopped focusing on it and began to direct my mind and heart and body towards what was real and true and healthy and life-giving. And here's where I want to turn us back to the 23rd psalm. Because even though it doesn't mention anxiety directly, I believe that it was written by somebody who had battled it and had learned to speak truth and lean into faith and active trust in the midst of a world they couldn't control. I think this is why this psalm spoke so powerfully to me as an anxious 8-year-old, and why it continues to nourish and calm me today. Listen:

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.

The first step to calming anxiety is to get our bodies and brains out of the fight or flight mode, to a grounded place in which we know we are safe and can begin to relax. And that's exactly where Psalm 23 begins – in a place of protection and stillness and plenty, where the psalmist imagines themselves as a sheep who is so confident in the protection and provision of its shepherd that it can lay down in green pastures and rest. It doesn't even have to eat the grass that surrounds it, because it knows that the resources it depends on won't disappear if it takes a break. This is the opposite of a hostile world of scarcity and threat. It is from this space of safety and stillness and trust that the rest of the psalm flows, and we also need to be in a space like that in order for our brains to listen to reason and truth instead of anxiety.

Here's how I worked on bringing my body and brain into a place of safety and regulation after my anxiety diagnosis: I spent more time outside and listened to music in the car instead of the news. I got more serious about practicing the Sabbath, intentionally taking a day off each week to rest "in green pastures" and let things go. I began to run and swim again, I cut back on my caffeine intake, I stopped looking at screens after supper, and I practiced deep breathing and muscle relaxation. When I felt the physical symptoms of anxiety – the pounding heart, and buzzing muscles, and tingling skin, I learned to relax and let them roll through me rather than fighting them, trusting that I was safe. I visualized God's love surrounding me and protecting me. And I took the antidepressants my doctor prescribed, which didn't fix my anxiety all by themselves, but did help calm my brain enough so that it could take in and accept the truth that I was telling it.

Because that was my next step: through cognitive behavioral therapy, I learned to notice the thoughts and beliefs that fueled my anxiety, and I began to speak truth to them and then act in accordance with that truth, rather than responding to what my anxiety told me to fear. My therapist would prompt me to name exactly what I was afraid might happen during an upcoming event, then calculate how likely that was to happen, plan what I would do if it happened, and identify my resources for handling it. I'd differentiate what I could control from what I couldn't control, and take action based on what was real rather than what I feared – and to my amazement, most of the time, doing

the things I was anxious about turned out well – and even when it didn't, I was okay, and life went on. Psalm 23:3 says that God, as my shepherd, “guides me along the right paths for his name's sake,” and I think this is what happens when we listen to the faithful voice of truth, which comes from God, rather than the unreliable voice of anxiety.

But here's the thing. When I drilled down into my worst-case scenarios and applied truth to them, some of them were, indeed, about as likely to happen as a volcano in Georgia. But there is no 100% guarantee that some of the outcomes I fear most will never happen. Sometimes, the diagnosis we dread is confirmed, the candidate we fear is elected, the betrayal we suspect turns out to be real. Not all of our anxieties are irrational.

One of the verses from the book of Job that claws at my throat every time I read it is Job 3:25 – it's after all his children have been killed, and he laments: “What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me.” Job did everything right, and not even God could find any fault in him – but that didn't prevent his deepest fears from being realized, his worst-case scenario from coming true. And no matter how much faith we have, how closely we follow all of the rules and guidelines, and how tightly we hold our kids and pray for them, we can't fully shield anyone from the pain and brokenness and evil in this world. Speaking truth to our anxiety doesn't mean giving it false hope that we can prevent everything it tells us to be worried about, or that God will never let certain things happen.

To truly calm my anxiety, I have to believe that *even if* the things I dread most come to pass, I and those I love will be okay. And I can't find any other way to do that than by leaning into faith and choosing trust. I have to acknowledge the reality of the darkness that anxiety alerts me to – because it is real – but then turn my eyes and my mind to focus on the light that persistently shines in that darkness that anxiety doesn't see, the light which the darkness can never overcome. Speaking truth to my anxiety means that I assure it that *even if* its worst-case scenarios happen, all will be well – because there's a deeper, truer, more *real* reality out there, beyond what anxiety can ever foresee or imagine.

And here's where Psalm 23 becomes most powerful for me, and for so many who struggle with anxiety. It doesn't pretend that our path won't lead us through the valley of the shadow of death. It doesn't pretend that we won't be surrounded by enemies, by physical and spiritual forces that seek our harm. But it opens our eyes to an even more foundational truth – that *even though* we walk through the darkest valley, we are not alone. God is with us, and we

fear no evil because God is in the business of taking what was intended for evil and transforming it into good. Anxiety will warn us that death is stalking us, and it isn't wrong. But what anxiety doesn't see, and can't tell us, is that God's goodness and faithful love are pursuing us with even more tenacity, every single day of our life, and that death has no power to separate us from God's everlasting love – Psalm 23 ends with the defiant and joyful claim that “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Do you notice how the language of Psalm 23 changes halfway through? The psalm begins in the third person, talking *about* God – “The Lord is my shepherd” – he leads me, he refreshes my soul, he guides me. But in verse 4, the psalmist stops talking *about* God and begins talking directly *to* God: “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for *you* are with me.” When things get dark, abstract statements about God aren't enough; we need God's personal, relational presence, *with* us.

The season of Advent, which we begin today, invites us to trust in the light, even as we wait in the darkness. As we walk through the darkest days of the whole year, we're prompted to be honest about the darkness in this world and the darkness in us; to name our anxieties and confusion and distress; and to confess our inability to control or fix things on our own. As we do this, though, we look towards Jesus, the Good Shepherd and the light of the world who came to be God-with-us; we believe that he is with us now; and we hold hope that he will come again to make everything new. As we gaze at the Light of Christ, we invite Jesus' light and presence into the darkest places in our own lives and hearts and in our world, the very places that feel most desolate and without hope. We listen for his voice, we trust that his light will prevail, and we take the next right step on the path he's showing us. When we are able to do this, we invite powerful truth into our anxiety.

This is Communion Sunday, and as you prepare to come forward, I invite you to identify one specific anxiety – a worry or a fear that just won't let you go – and to bring it with you to this table of grace, which God has prepared for you, and entrust it to the care of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who gave his own life for his sheep, whose body was broken so that we may all be healed and safe. As you pause to receive the gifts of bread and cup, may you be overtaken by God's goodness and unfailing love, and may you know how deeply and tenderly Jesus cares for you and those you love. All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. Amen.