

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
“THE HUMAN EXPEDITION”  
FEBRUARY 27, 2011  
Matthew 6:24-34  
ALL SERVICES**

There are people in our church who live with unrelieved anxiety and fear. I meet with them in my office. Two of the most frequent disorders encountered by doctors today are depression and anxiety. We all have brief instances of each, and we know how opposite they seem. But some disorders involve both of them as alternating emotional states. Anxiety and depression are serious symptoms for which we should seek appropriate help. Stress can empty deadly toxins into our bloodstream.

In the text this morning, Jesus offers some wise words to his disciples. They are not to have divided loyalties, but serve God alone. They are not to worry over earthly things and matters over which they have no control. They are to see in nature the many signs of God’s goodness and care, and trust continually in God.

The levels of anxiety and fear seem to be rising all about us in the world and among us wherever we are. Threats of every kind proliferate - - - economic, environmental, political, international, and interpersonal. Safe places seem few and far between.

If you have ever watched a cat methodically groom itself, you may have wondered why you weren’t born with such useful instincts. But we have other qualities and different needs. Among the various requirements for our existence is a sense of meaning. The human expedition requires that some kind of purpose be among our provisions. We cannot go far without some sense of where we are going and why. We simply cannot live in a world we do not understand.

In 1947, W. H. Auden wrote a long poem titled “**The Age of Anxiety.**” It concerns three men and a woman who meet by chance in a New York bar during World War II. All are suffering from the malaise of the time, and feel guilty,

isolated, and rootless. In a dream they all set out on a quest through a barren wasteland. The title came to be used to describe much of the twentieth century with its existential issues and alternative lifestyles. Today anxiety still seems to be the **“favorite disease”** of our time and culture. Some forms of anxiety are serious psychological disorders that require treatment. Other forms of anxiety are more-or-less natural human responses to seemingly threatening situations and perceptions.

Anxiety is nothing new! Jesus addressed the subject in his famous Sermon on the Mount. The King James Version translates Jesus’ words in verse **34** as, **“Take no thought”** for tomorrow, but this seems to recommend indifference or idleness. **“Do not be anxious,”** or, **“Do not be distracted,”** are better translations. Jesus never prescribed irresponsibility or slothfulness. Far from being idle, Jesus was active and engaged. He is often pictured as physically tired and needing rest, or emotionally depleted and seeking solitude. What Jesus was warning against was distraction or worry over such things as food and clothing. Such anxiety was not necessary, not profitable, and not appropriate. If God cares for the birds of the air, God can be trusted to care for us. Anxiety is unprofitable, adding not a single day to our lifespan, but more likely to shorten it. Finally, anxiety is not appropriate for a person trusting in God because it is a sign of **“little faith.”**

It is possible for us to be at least partially responsible for our anxiety. The person who has scheduled eighteen hours of appointments for an eight-hour day should not be surprised to experience little waves of panic. Far more serious, however, is the situation of the person who has signed conflicting business agreements, or who has robbed Peter to pay Paul, or who is waiting for some other shoe to drop. We sometimes put ourselves in situations where anxiety is unavoidable. Wherever the fault lies, somewhere along the way we failed to decide.

The freedom to choose is one of the hallmarks of our humanity. The actual act of choosing or deciding, however, will test our wisdom, our character, and our courage. Albert Camus was a product of the Age of Anxiety. The celebrated writer was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. He was identified with French existentialism and was a troubled soul who was tortured by a sense of life’s meaninglessness. Unable to embrace religious faith, he was haunted by the abyss of nothingness. Unlike other writers of similar perspective, however, he found hope in the human freedom to choose life rather than succumb to absurdity. **“In the midst of winter, I found there was within me an invincible summer.”** As people of faith, we have resources other than mere courage, but the necessity of

choosing is unavoidable. As Moses said to the Israelites in the wilderness, ***“See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil . . . therefore, choose life.”*** (Duet 30) As Joshua said to the tribes of Israel, ***“Choose this day whom you will serve . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”*** (Joshua 24) In this same spirit Jesus offers a truth that is profoundly simple, yet difficult to remember: ***“No one can serve two masters. . . . You cannot serve God and mammon.”*** (Mt 6:24)

Choosing to whom or to what you will give your highest allegiance is a life or death matter. Choosing whether to follow Christ or your own inclinations, for example, will affect not only where you will go but who you will become. The difficulty is seldom in knowing what is best but in having the courage to do what is best. Jesus’ own commitment to God was unqualified. He would seek only the will of God in his life. This did not make his life any easier, but it made it simpler and infinitely more fulfilling. And trusting God freed him from anxiety.

Jesus saw God everywhere and in everything. When he spoke about not being anxious, not fretting over tomorrow, and not worrying about our security, he found examples in nature. ***“Consider the lilies of the field,”*** he said. ***“They neither toil nor spin, yet even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”*** Jesus offers lilies for our consideration. They are perhaps the most beautiful of flowers, as biblical writers and poets of every age remind us. John Ruskin had a memorable line on lilies: ***“Remember that the most beautiful things in the world are the most useless; peacocks and lilies for instance.”*** Jesus found them useful - - as a vivid contrast to anxiety.

Some things in life require significant effort on our part. We have to make them happen. Other things happen without our help. In fact, our efforts to help them happen may actually keep them from happening. Faith in God is extremely relevant at this point. We act upon life and the world in appropriate and responsible ways, and we trust God’s presence and providential processes for the rest. Responsible action and basic trust are the best antidotes to anxiety.

Polar opposites characteristically resist each other, whether they are personalities, points of view, or power struggles. We see examples of this internationally, locally, and within ourselves. Often, however, it need not be a matter of ***“either – or.”*** Sometimes opposites need to find an appropriate balance, so that the value of each is kept. For example, the life of faith involves both acting and trusting.

The Apostle Paul is an excellent example of this; the honest and faithful servant of God. He does not worry about what others say about him and his ministry. He seeks only to be pleasing to God and faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ who called him to be an apostle.