**What If? What If? What If?**

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What if this sermon makes completely no sense?

What if I can’t walk 15 miles in one day on the Camino?

What if I get lost on the track? What if all my toes fall off?

What if the climate crisis blows up sooner than we think and everyone is scrambling for survival in a dystopic world? What if it is like Hunger Games? Or a Mad Max movie?

What if, what if, what if?

According to the interwebs, the top worries in America are around money, health, our loved ones, our jobs, politics, sleep and death. That about covers every moment of life-ing.

Worry, and her cousin avoidance are anxiety responses—the places we go when life is uncertain and things are out of control. Anxiety is the emotion We all have anxiety, but if it is persistent over time, it is best to seek professional help.

We don’t like feeling anxious, we don’t tolerate uncertainty, and so we typically deal with it in two unhelpful ways. i

Worry is chain of negative thoughts about bad things that might happen in the future. Those with a propensity towards worry believe it is helpful in coping with our anxiety (it’s not)’ we believe we can’t control worry so we don’t try to stop it but at the same time we try to suppress worry thoughts which actually reinforces worry (Brené Brown). It’s an infinity loop that leads to loss of sleep, high blood pressure, and more anxiety.

Avoidance is the second coping strategy. Avoidance is characterized by denial, and working hard to skirt around whatever it is we have anxiety over. We engage in numbing behaviors to like doom scrolling on our phones, drinking or eating or shopping too much, in order to anesthetize our uncomfortable unsettled feelings While avoidance might make you feel less vulnerable in the short run, avoidance will never make you less afraid, according to Dr. Harriet Lerner’s book, The Dance of Fear.

While anxiety, worry and avoidance emerge from the reality that we aren’t in control and don’t know what to do, even deeper is the fact that we are afraid.

Somewhere, in our highly individualized, pull yourself up from the bootstraps success oriented culture, we have absorbed the message that fear is bad, But fear in and of itself, is not a failure of moral nerve. Fear is a universal and important emotion.

Fear arises when we sense or anticipate a threat to our well-being, safety, or security—whether it is a tangible danger or imagined, like social rejection or failure. Fear motivates us to minimize harm~~you may have heard of the flight, flight, fawn or flop responses to fear. Our limbic systems, our neanderthal minds can go into automatic responses when we feel threatened. Back in the day, this was important when we were being chases by being chased by Sasquatch or the Loch Ness Monster that wants to kill us. If we have experienced significant trauma in our lives, we also might have automatic responses when we are activated or triggered, when in reality we might actually be safe from harm. This isn’t always helpful. (Hence, dealing with trauma with a professional therapist is the best course.)

Brené Brown notes that we aren’t our best selves in fear, and so we try to eliminate it, instead of bravely acknowledging its presence. We don’t like the uncomfortable feeling, but the truth is— that feeling won’t kill us. It might make us squirm, but the only effective way to address fear is to acknowledge its presence, and then tend to it with an open heart, open mind, and curiosity.

Here is the thing, excessive worrying or wild avoidance will never bring us more peace but rather they will always amplify our fear.

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For people brought up in Christianity, the interpretation of biblical passages in our western Christian thought is to blame as well. A quick search on the internet for the meaning of “do not be afraid” wields a frightening plethora of platitudes and exhortations that seem to indicate that if you are afraid, you are not faithful enough, you don’t believe in God enough, and are faulty morally and spiritually. Some say that “Fear Not” is in the Bible 365 times, corresponding with the days of the year, but I am pretty sure most of the Bible was compiled before we started counting days using the Gregorian calendar.

I wish the Bible said “I see your fear” 50, 0000 times instead of “fear not.” A close reading of the times the phrase “fear not” is used, it really means “I see your fear, and **you are not alone.**” That part about not being alone is conveniently left off. No wonder we feel like we aren’t good enough and drowning in shame if we have been taught that we shouldn’t be afraid.

Frankly, we are all afraid at one time or million times every day.

Dr. Pippa Grange is a famous sports psychologist who believes the antidote to fear is relationship. Relationship is at the heart of EVERYTHING.

This is what I believe, too. Finding connection to one another, to ourselves and to God leads us to bravely acknowledge our fear and lean on one another to walk each other through our fears.

The 23rd Psalm is one of the most beloved of Psalms.

Did you know it is the liturgical response to the Psalm that comes right before it~~Psalm 22? Psalm 22 is a lament of fear of abandonment of an absent and unreachable God.

 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
    Why are you so far from saving me,
    so far from my cries of anguish?

My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
    by night, but I find no rest.

I am poured out like water,
    and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
    it has melted within me.

It’s a pretty grim and gritty Psalm. It gives voice to the fear that nothing is going to help the present troubles we find ourselves in.

Taking seriously this lament, Psalm 23 comes in with comfort, but not in a fluffy light way. Acknowledging enemies and valleys of death and lurking shadows, this psalm also comes with a promise. Like much of scripture, it is counter-cultural. Instead of promising the victory of wars and battles and success, it promises that we won’t go through troubles alone.

Psalm 23 was written by someone who had intimate knowledge of fear, directed to a vulnerable community that was excruciatingly afraid. Likened to sheep, the song recognizes the experience of an endangered community that has recently walked through the darkest valley, having fallen prey to those bent on Israel’s destruction. The idea of God as shepherd offers the assurance that God is with them, gathering the lost and scattered to her protective care by leading them home.

I read a story about a sheep that was lost in the wild for years, and when it was rescued, they sheared over 75 pounds of wool from him. Domesticated sheep need to be sheared yearly, otherwise they have no means of shedding their coat. If they are neglected, they succumb to painful matting, and diseased painful skin. If the lost sheep, named Baaa-rock hadn’t been found, he would have most certainly died a miserable suffering death. Imagine the fear he experienced being separated from his flock. Imagine the pain he endured without a shepherd.

There is a reason the bible uses sheep as an apt metaphor for humans. Not simply because the stories emerged in pastoral societies, because humans could have been referred to as yaks or goats or chickens. Sheep are incredibly vulnerable creatures Individual sheep become highly stressed when separated from their flock. Sheep need a leader so as not to wander aimlessly. Sheep have no defense against predators without their flock and without their shepherd. Sheep must be able to see each other in order to graze without agitation.

Psalm 23 is spoken by one who knows the fresh pain and abject fear of abandonment.

It is written for:

—For the one facing an unexpected medical condition that needs a scary procedure.

—For the child growing up in Gaza where the threat of war and violence is a daily occurence.

—For the immigrant in the United States who now lives in constant fear of what they might face.

—For the millions who depend on Medicaid and SNAP benefits, and other entities facing cuts to these programs which will lead to more food insecurity, reduced access to health care, job losses and strain on state budgets.

You can add your scenario here.

Where are you afraid? It’s okay, the Shepherd sees you. The flock is with you. You are not alone. We need each other to remind us of these truths:

I do not need to worry about the future, it is not even real (yet)

I do not need to worry about the past (it is over).

I have everything I need right now.

The Lord is my shepherd, your shepherd, our shepherd.

Friends, difficult situations cannot be avoided, and fear comes with a double punch. This Psalm reminds us that we are not alone. We won’t walk through the valley of death alone, because we have each other.

What if….

what if we took this to heart?

**SOURCES**

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