

THE ANTIDOTE TO ANXIETY
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BECKY ROBBINS-PENNIMAN
CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD, DUNEDIN, FL

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

What a week this has been for me.

I've had to make a number of decisions, often feeling like I didn't have quite enough information,
or that involved money that I wasn't sure we should spend,
or that concerned our life together and how to be faithful and pastoral,
and yet keep everyone in this precious parish safe.

I so much better understand what is facing various leaders like governors, mayors,
and county commissions – this is all very complex!

Being the person in control, the one who had to make decisions,
caused me some anxiety, and I serve one parish, not a whole region.

In our personal life, we've been awaiting the birth of our grandson.

His due date was April 26th; that day came and went
with him not at all interested in making an appearance.

Day followed day, with our daughter, Sarah, trying to stay calm,
our son-in-law, Jim, texting us updates
because we can't go to Texas to be with them during this COVID-19 pandemic.

Like us, Teddy, the baby, just stayed put.

Thursday, the doctors said that Sarah would have the baby on May 1st, however it had to happen.

Having absolutely NO control over ANY of these decisions or events ALSO caused me anxiety.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, I have the sacred vocation of caring for and about
people in this precious parish, some of whom are having real challenges
with health, with losing their jobs, with family issues, with fear, with isolation.

I have to figure out what God wants me to say to ALL of you.

This, of course, ALWAYS causes me some anxiety.

Anxiety is not a very holy state of being. What's the antidote to anxiety?

Once again, no matter how weird and chaotic our new normal is,
there is ancient, wonderful wisdom that speaks to us yet today.

It turns out the antidote to anxiety is focusing on our problems,
and not on what we don't have that we think we need, like control,
but on what we do have that we can bless others with.

In the Law of Moses, Deuteronomy, Moses is dealing with people not at all different from us:
they want to be comfortable and safe, to control their lives, to not be anxious about anything.

Moses tells them that the LORD loves them, that they are his special people,
and, of course, there won't be any poor folks,
that everyone will be the bankers, the winners, the blessed.

If we read just Deuteronomy 15:4-6, we could even get to the place of saying
that if someone is poor, it's proof they aren't obeying God's commands,
that they are sinners and that they therefore they deserve both to be poor,
and the suffering that comes with being poor.

Many in this country still believe this; the long echoes of the Protestant Work Ethic still resound:
if you work hard, are frugal, and prosper, it's proof you're saved.

Therefore, you deserve what you have, because God loves you. ¹

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestant_work_ethic

However, if you're poor, you must be a sinner, so you deserve your poverty,
and you need to straighten up and do a better job at earning your salvation.

I've heard this very message in the news over the past couple of weeks.

Now, I'm not saying all poor people are perfect.

We shouldn't romanticize poverty any more than we should damn it.

I AM saying that the minute we start talking about THEM,

how THEY don't deserve whatever, but WE do,

then we need to get our noses back into the Bible and read some more.

In Deuteronomy 15:7, Moses pulls hard on the reins of smug privilege,
and spins the horse of blessing around 180 °: if there are poor people, Moses insists,
then you must be generous with them, because, says Moses,

this is the very thing that will lead

to the LORD your God's blessing you in all you do and work at.

Moses says there will ALWAYS be someone worse off than you are,

if they cry out and you don't help, guess who the sinner is?

Now, if you think I'm being political, I'm not, because you can't legislate heartfelt generosity.

True generosity, giving without resentment, is a spiritual gift.

The irony is that the spiritual gift of being able joyfully to give away what we have
will bring more joy and pleasure back into our lives

than will the worldly gift of being able to accumulate riches

that can buy us the luxuries that our culture markets so aggressively.

The fabulous thing is how many people in this little parish clearly have
this awesome spiritual gift of true generosity.

In just the past month, the people of Good Shepherd

have given tens of thousands of dollars to help during this COVID19 crisis.

Some gave to the Discretionary Fund with the desire

to help parishioners and people in the community who have lost their jobs.

Some gave to our operating fund to help this parish weather a tough patch,

knowing that contributions would likely be lower

but that the church staff would be working harder than ever.

I want to say here that I've been a boss in half a dozen offices,

and never, ever have I seen a staff pull together

to do whatever needs to be done with such good will,

creativity and sense of purpose.

Your good care of them brings me to my knees in gratitude.

Indeed, being on my knees in gratitude has happened to me a lot since March 8th.

To continue about all y'all's spiritual gift of true generosity:

Many of you have given time, talent and treasure to keep us connected,

making phone tree calls, sewing dozens of masks, shopping for neighbors;

donating so much food to Dunedin Cares food pantry

that Garry has to make multiple deliveries to them each week;

and helping out with our suddenly complex technological situation.

Be sure to read May's *Vestry Voices and Vibes* for the many ways

the people of Good Shepherd have come together for each other

and for the wider community over the past 6 weeks.

One story out of the many I could tell you: As we do every month,

last week, your Discretionary Fund Team took calls from the community,

A stay-at-home mom with 2 very young kids called in a panic: her husband had been laid off.

All of the sudden, they couldn't pay their utilities. She didn't know what to do.

She'd heard about Good Shepherd. Could it be true? Would we help?

Hers was not an unusual story, of course; we hear it all the time. But it was utterly new for her.
When we said we would help, what she did next WAS unusual.

She and her kids sat down and made a thank you card for us,
and they delivered it in person with tears streaming down the young mom's face.

Because of you, the poor are blessing the Lord.

Let us contrast that with a sign I saw on the news.

I have no idea where it was from, but another young lady with tears on her face
waved a very different message: *Stop Ruining My Senior Year.*

OK, she's entitled to her disappointment and anger.

We do have to acknowledge those real and understandable feelings;

I admit that the policies in effect now mean we cannot travel,

we cannot be present to support our precious daughter,

I cannot kiss the very chubby cheeks of our new grandson.

I've shed my tears, too. I get it.

What I'm asking is this: whose heart would you like beating in your bosom?

Or, better asked, whose heart is more like God's heart?

The angry young lady who wants what she wants?

The grateful heart of the poor stay-at-home mom?

Or, your hearts, that opened your hands to give to people you will never know?

If you have any lingering doubt about this, let's take a look at the Gospel.

Chapter 10 of John is only halfway through the book,

but Holy Week begins in Chapter 12; Jesus' death is already imminent.

As he faces his last days, Jesus says he came to save the sheep

so that the sheep could live life to its fullest.

For Jesus, "saving" the sheep is not about heaven after they die,

but living a life of health, wholeness, security, NOW; good pasture, NOW.

Notice, please, that the sheep don't do a darn thing to deserve this salvation.

Jesus cares for the muddy, speckled and runty ones as well as the perfect ones.

The rod and staff of the Good Shepherd comfort us in our anxiety

simply because it is the nature of the heart of God to give the sheep salvation.

The sheep follow the voice of the Good Shepherd

not because the SHEEP are particularly smart or obedient or worthy,

but because the SHEPHERD is trustworthy and good.

It all begins with the giving heart of the Good Shepherd.

Very soon after this passage in John's Gospel,

Jesus will give us that new commandment, the only one a Christian really needs:

that we love each other as he has loved us.

This is what it means to be Easter People: to know God already has saved us

so that we can give our lives as Jesus did, have the heart Jesus has,

demonstrating God's goodness to everyone until all God's sheep –

even the muddy, speckled and runty ones –

have the health, wholeness, security and good pasture God intends for all lives.

What's the antidote to anxiety? to proclaim with our lips and with our lives:

We are Easter People! We are a sign that miracles truly happen,

and that, with God, all things are possible.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen, indeed. Alleluia!

COLLECT OF THE DAY:

O God our shepherd, you know your sheep by name and lead us to safety through the valleys of death. Guide us by your voice, that we may walk in certainty and security to the joyous feast prepared in your house, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

DEUTERONOMY 15:4-11

Of course there won't be any poor persons among you because the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance, but only if you carefully obey the LORD your God's voice, by carefully doing every bit of this commandment that I'm giving you right now. Once the LORD your God has blessed you, exactly as he said he would, you will end up lending to many different peoples but won't need to borrow a thing. You will dominate many different peoples, but they won't dominate you.

Now if there are some poor persons among you, say one of your fellow Israelites in one of your cities in the land that the LORD your God is giving you, don't be hard-hearted or tightfisted toward your poor fellow Israelites. To the contrary! Open your hand wide to them. You must generously lend them whatever they need. But watch yourself! Make sure no wicked thought crosses your mind, such as, The seventh year is coming—the year of debt cancellation—so that you resent your poor fellow Israelites and don't give them anything. If you do that, they will cry out to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin. No, give generously to needy persons. Don't resent giving to them because it is this very thing that will lead to the Lord your God's blessing you in all you do and work at. Poor persons will never disappear from the earth. That's why I'm giving you this command: you must open your hand generously to your fellow Israelites, to the needy among you, and to the poor who live with you in your land.

PSALM 23

- ℣ The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
- ☞ **He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.**
- ℣ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
- ☞ **Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.**
- ℣ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
- ☞ **My Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.**

ACTS 2:42-47

The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.

JOHN 10:1-10

I assure you that whoever doesn't enter into the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw. The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The guard at the gate opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. Whenever he has gathered all of his sheep, he goes before them and they follow him, because they know his voice. They won't follow a stranger but will run away because they don't know the stranger's voice."

Those who heard Jesus use this analogy didn't understand what he was saying. So Jesus spoke again, "I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest."

SERMON HYMN: *For the Healing of the Nations*

BLESSING: The God who is creating a new heaven and a new earth, who walks where least expected, who disturbs the comfortable and comforts the distressed, and whom death could not control, now sends you out to announce with your lives that the Lord is risen indeed. Go, you are blessed in the name of our Triune God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.