

Anxiety and the Armor of God

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, —Ephesians 6:10-13a

In these anxious years of Covid, anxiety is making its way into the news and popular discussion, and for reasons other than virus related stress. The matter of undue stress in sports is still much in the media, and anxiety is a topic of regular discussion among young people. Ask around and you may be surprised to find how many young people speak freely of having anxiety and being medicated for it. (And no, I am not exaggerating this claim.)

My feelings toward this development are genuinely mixed. I am glad that a real and harmful affliction is being openly addressed, and I can remember a classmate in my junior high days who would have benefited greatly from proper medication. I can also confess having dealt with significant anxiety over my lifetime. It is not fun. I am, on the other hand, deeply concerned over how this affliction is being named and addressed, for I fear that much of the present treatment may prove more harmful than the illness.

Like depression, which has been called “the common cold of mental illness,” anxiety is also a common illness and our first response to illness is a passive one. For instance, when struck by a headache, we take an aspirin and lie down for a nap. This is good and appropriate medicine and illness usually requires such a passive response as the body needs to rest and heal. While anxiety truly is an illness and there may be times when rest and retreat are necessary, my great concern is that this is *not* the primary way it should be addressed, and this alone may not lead to health, but only to deeper illness. Anxiety has a paralyzing effect, which left unchecked stifles our dreams and ambitions. It sucks the life out of life! It is an enemy and must be treated as such. So how shall we meet this foe?

First, we must identify anxiety. Most basically it can be understood as *a non-specific fear*. We sense a vague fear but cannot name the fear or its source. Anxiety becomes an invisible foe. Anxiety and its sources always need to be identified, and this is often not so difficult a task. Many anxious folks have been counseled to carry a note pad and to record every worrisome thought or stress which crossed their minds. Keeping a daily journal can be extremely helpful. What are your dreams telling you? What is it

which you fear? Actively pursue the root causes of your fears. Identify those fears as specifically as you possibly can.

Next comes a plan of attack. How shall we deal with that fear? Discuss it with a trusted friend or counselor. Give it to God in prayer. Know who your support team is. Then comes the attack. A grand scale attack is often unwise. Go step by step. Have a plan! For years I was phobic about hospitals and when the opportunity for a semester of hospital chaplain training presented itself during my time in divinity school, I immediately recognized it as my necessary path. It does little good for a pastor to sidestep phobias which may inhibit their ability to properly pastor! The beginning of that semester had its moments, but soon turned into an ultimately joyful session of growth and renewed love for ministry. I was learning to not necessarily steer away from things which frightened, but toward them! This is the path of growth. (And don't get me started on how one learns to become comfortable with public speaking.)

One by one and step by step anxieties are to be identified, studied and confronted. For some, anxiety is a significant life issue, but let us remember that *all* deal with anxiety. It is a part of life and has been called an expression of youth's "growing pains". Appropriately dealing with anxiety is a battle, and battle should be familiar to the believer. In Ephesians 6 Paul presents this life as an ongoing warfare and he delights to remind us of the armor which we have received from God to fight this battle. Paul also reminds us that the battle is long, so we are not to set our hearts on a quick or easy victory. I am grateful to report many victories in my own life but will freely confess that the battle can be hard, and not every battle is won.

I have spoken frequently about anxiety over the recent years, only because I have seen this affliction presenting itself so repeatedly in these difficult times. Anxiety is real and painful, so let us all have sympathetic hearts as we hear more and more people speaking of their struggle. It is also a battle (and hasn't life always been a battle) so let us be ready to show the world how the war is won.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

Father, give to us, and to all your people, in times of anxiety, serenity; in times of hardship, courage; in times of uncertainty, patience; and, at all time, a quiet trust in your wisdom and love; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

—New Every Morning