

“No Future for Anxiety”
 Sermon for 16 June 2019
 Texts: Genesis 11, Acts, 3:18-21 and Psalm 121

Anxiety is something we all, Baby Boomers and Millennials, can unite around. And it is my hypothesis that the people newly arrived on the fertile plain of Shinar would never have built a city in open rebellion against God had they not grown anxious. Anxiety is a treatable condition (ameliorated with drugs or cured by faith—it is a choice!) The causes of anxiety for each of the three discrete populations varies considerably. The cure does not. I lived through the waning years of the Cold War (in the late twentieth century), when two superpowers (the USA/democracy and the USSR/communism), each with the potential of *mutually assured destruction* (MAD), vied for dominance on the world stage. I remember during elementary school, frequent air raids with jets screaming just overhead in mock bombing raids. We were trained to dive for cover under our desks, or to lie flat on the athletic field in anticipation of the first shock waves of a nuclear device. We were children but we expected that at any moment we could die—either as an effect of the explosion, or a painful lingering death from toxic radiation. We were terrified. The nuclear Apocalypse could happen at any time. Terrifying.

But the bombs never dropped. Bomb shelters were everywhere, and everywhere unused. Yet end-of-the-worlders abounded playing on the threat with messages of doom. I think they have increased in number and are more dressed up these days: however, climate change and overpopulation have displaced nuclear winter as our most singular, prominent terror.

The Millennials are anxious, in a way peculiar to themselves, about living at “two minutes to twelve on the world clock”—many nations have a nuclear capability now. And, in the wrong hands, they imagine devastating destruction could be loosed on the world. Containment of nuclear proliferation has failed. Not only that but daily we are bombarded by end-of-the-worlders, shouting that we have so degraded the environment that 1. we are past the point of no return, 2. catastrophic climate change is in the wings, the ice caps are melting, the sea levels rise and many coastal cities will become uninhabitable; and 3. we, humans, are the blame for this global disaster. Guilt and shame and misanthropic sentiments abound—yet their threat is diffused even where the science is unconvincing. Radical solutions, drastic action prevails in their circles of desperation while they despair.

Fear is not despair.

By way of comparison, the anxiety of the people in Shinar seems very archaic, tame even. They are anxious about the efficacy and goodness of God’s plan of general human dispersion. In short, if they were to **multiply, fill the earth and subdue it** (God’s plan, stage one), they would be irreversibly separated and never see each other again! So they came up with their own plan. “We will build a city and a tower. We will stay together and **make a great name for ourselves**. Besides we’d rather settle down than endlessly migrate back and forth—what’s the point of that? Always pulling up stakes and moving, herding animals and living out of tents—this sensibility resurfaces among the Hebrews on their wilderness wanderings. No, God, we want *permanence now*: brick houses, farms with irrigation systems, streets and markets, and a city *with walls* to defend us from the marauders and plunderers out there.” Or, words to that effect, perhaps. Pride, ambition and insecurity came to outweigh their trust in God (Satan nurtured that) and through anxiety, they gave into *wicked suspicions*. Polytheism, idolatry, paganism and animistic religions offered false comfort through the promise of magical powers to help devotees control a world they believed either to be abandoned by God, or adrift

in secular purposelessness. These gods tend to need to be appeased. Anxiety then provided a seed-bed for error, apostasy, sin and oppression.

All three of these populations gave in to *wicked suspicion* of God. My generation was deceived into thinking that the world was godless and so, not trustworthy—of course, it isn't godless! We yielded to our culture of threats and detente. The Millennials can, I think, sympathize with fearful anxiety. But they, presented with a world lost beyond repair, have yielded to despair. The giant of despair, depicted in Pilgrim's Progress, represents a present reality to them. And they even struggle to escape through the opened door! The **children of man** on the Shinar plain, forgot their history, a history which set forth the divine plan of restoration of all things and settled for much, much less . . . **a city with a tower**. Typically, people abandon God, not the other way around.

God's plan is comprehensive, but like Psalm 121, it unfolds in stages. We will see some of that this morning. With regard to God's plan, there are two stages: the dispersal stage and the regathering stage. All the peoples, all the descendants of Japheth and of Ham were slated to **dwell in the tents of Shem eventually**—a picture of reunion and future re-integration. It is necessary to point this out early on, because the fears of **the children of man** were, and continue to be *unfounded*. They would, on the far side of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the abolition of death, fully and actually be together again—that is the destiny of all the elect of God. The implications for Millennial despair and for Baby Boomer terror are obvious. And if the foundations of anxiety are undermined, how long shall anxiety stand?

Once unholy misgivings have taken root in the human heart it is devilishly difficult to uproot the distrust and plant love and trust in their place. *That is our challenge*. And the outcome of that challenge determines the future of anxiety.

It is important to recall that the people in this Shinar scenario did not originate in a state of innocence as Adam and Eve did. No, the cataclysm of the Flood had wiped out evil's prior effects, but the memory and the power of sin remained. So, we are aware, biblically, that the world had been ruined twice before—first with the cataclysm of original sin and second with the generation of Noah. And neither occasion stalled the restoration purposes of God, or derailed his plan (which is impossible)—indeed his plans for the world's redemption were in place from well before the transgressions in the Garden, before Creation actually. That's a vital perspective. We may be tempted to give up on this world, but God is not. His plan will come to pass. Trust God.

Things might have gone better at Babel, if the people had asked God, "Do you think we ought to build a great city? And what about a tall, really tall tower? (The desire to talk face to face with God was not listed among their motivations.)" . . . "Sure, you know that we want to make a great name for ourselves—whereas we know that you want us to make a great name for you—but can't that wait until we have completed this wonderful building program? Can't we just put your glory on hold? We don't want all the credit—just the bulk of it." What they proposed was a disruption of the divine plan for restoration—which entailed the return of all the misappropriated souls, realms and kingdoms and the cancellation of all unlawful, fraudulent seizure. Satan's play for stolen glory—read, stolen valor—failed massively.

Let's not be too hard on our biblical predecessors. We, too, may have proposed that God stall his redemptive work in our lives. Just long enough for us to to enjoy ourselves, to indulge

our carnality, to work up our self-esteem and pride of accomplishment (“Don’t return just now Lord, I want to complete this business transaction, my new home . . .”). We want a little time to feel good about feeling good (whether induced by drugs, sex, or some other indulgence) and to be happy. ***We would even like to manage feeling good about being bad, if it’s all the same to you.***

Can anyone else see how off—putting it is to God to be put off? We seem too willing to do anything to stop feeling sad, frightened, or lonely. We angle for better distractions, more entertainment—preferring simulated love and sex, family and marriage to the authentic, real thing—building pseudo-relationships with each other and with our God. We are robbing those created for authenticity! I’m not sure we have really advanced so very far from those gathered on the plain of Shinar. God actually clarified their entire situation by confounding their plans, confusing their language (something the gift of tongues would illuminate in the early church) and dispersing the rascally band. He is willing to prod us along, too.

Given that God’s treatment of those who choose to be strangers to him, i.e. rebels and infidels, is very severe, we as his servants should set ourselves the task of introducing those strangers, *everyone we can*, to our God. We should share the history of his wondrous deeds on our behalf! We should present God for who he is, in terms of what he does, to avoid a degeneration into abstract philosophy—which never saved anyone. Do you remember that he has let nations go for the sake of his beloved? Do you remember that he judged the whole world for our sakes? He said our enemies are his enemies for our sake. However, don’t deny the anxiety of Baby Boomers, the dread of the Millennials (or their despair). Rather be sympathetic to all, as you try to share another point of view. Speak as “the spared” to those God would have spared. Both the helpless and the hopeless are prone to despair so we must ***embody the hope*** they both need—for mercy’s sake.

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Scripture, I note, is mute on whose brain child this city/tower project was. Some have suggested it might have been Nimrod, the son of Cush. Besides, the ante-diluvian world had cities in it as examples—like the city (Enoch) built by Cain in defiance of his sentence for murder (***you shall be a wanderer and a fugitive all the days of your life*** (Gen. 4:14)). The ruin in Eden extended to Enoch and beyond. God did not commute Cain’s sentence, Cain broke parole; he married, settled down and built a city. (Hey, what a great idea!) No one told the people at Shinar that the idea had to be original!

It is written: **God came down** (in person) **to see the city and the tower which the children of man had built.** (v. 5) It was a pastoral visit! Although the city was big and impressive to man, as one commentator remarked that it wasn’t *so big that God could view it from heaven*, he had to come down to inspect it. I guess that the pyramids in Egypt are puny to God while enormous to us. The Creator of the universe would not be unduly impressed with their project—or any of ours. It is recorded that their project was *unfinished* (***they left off building the city***) then the Lord **dispersed them from there over all the face of the earth.** (v. 8) Therefore, what they most feared, ‘dispersal,’ came to pass anyway. Only later would they learn about God’s plans to reunite the whole human family (***through faith in Jesus Christ***) despite the seeming impossibility of that prospect. No one had explained the gospel to them beforehand but they knew restoration was on because they were alive. They were the expression of God’s blessing, as recorded, on the renewed mandate (Gen. 9:1).

Allow me to establish, once again, the importance of having an expounder of scripture—by way of an example. Acts 3:18-21: **Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out.** (v.19) This exhortation, from Peter's first, post-Pentecostal sermon is powerfully encouraging. However, v. 19 is only the first clause of a much longer sentence. That sentence, the longer one, has four outcomes. And here they are: 1. **blotting out** of our sins—personal **forgiveness**; 2. the coming of **times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord**—personal and corporate revival, refreshing and empowerment, a succession of moves of God; 3. the **sending** of Jesus in his second advent, or the second coming—as **the Christ appointed for you!**—something of corporate/race-wide importance (for the church, for the nation Israel, and for the whole world); 4. finally, that **the time for the restoration of all thing** would occur! (This is rather complex, so I am going to repeat all four outcomes.)

Okay. Here's one point: our repentance, although hugely significant on a personal level, is actually part of something much larger—by our repentance we re-enter the main stream of what God is up to in our world and universe of meaning. The times of refreshing, the second coming of Christ, lead up to the restoration of all things (as promised by the prophets and initiated by the coming of Christ). Restoration of all things is the goal, the final completion of God's plan for the world and everything/everyone in it. Our "reading" of our circumstances must always be deemed secondary to God's intentionality. **We must never capitulate to anxiety.** We should question, counter and refute ourselves first. Stopping with Peter's first clause, as we all tend to do, simply won't cut it. Peter has the long view and he is sharing it with his **ignorant brothers** (including the current leadership in Jerusalem), he affirms their ignorance by way of latitude (as in "if you had known better, or with deeper understanding, with a spiritual mind, you would not have behaved so badly—out of wicked expedience, out of a mistaken adherence to the status quo, out of fear or despair and any other capitulation.")

Brothers, **be more spiritual!** exhorts Peter; or, better, perhaps, learn from my mistakes to be more *biblical* in your understanding of things! Hear the Word of the Lord and be conformed to it. God has a plan, get with the program! *That's a good and timely message.* Peter's message is offering correction, a realignment. So that they might be proper spiritual children, not **like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation. whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God** (Psalm 78:8), **who still sinned; despite his wonders, they did not believe** (v,32). The wheels are about to come off the chariot of the state! For us, the issue remains this: if we find ourselves misaligned, **anxiously** out of the main stream of God's plan? How do we get back on board? We must repent entirely. Let me spell that out:

He that confesses, forsakes his sin, pursues the discharge of his sin debt with God (Proverbs 28:13 & Acts 3:19) ***by the marvelous means already provided (in Christ), will be pardoned, and, by acquiring divine mercy, will find himself back on the path, well-aligned and good to go.***

This is like pulling out of the mechanic's garage with renewed confidence in the safety and performance of your vehicle except that life is rather more challenging than driving your car! Life is about more than your own religious experience—much much more. Life is about our participation in the purposes of God and it encompasses all we do to bring glory to God as we serve him and each other.

One take-home is: **get wisdom, acquire insight** (Proverbs 4:5-7). Remembering this broader perspective, we come again to Genesis 11. The people are streaming southward, away from their point of origin, the ark located in Armenia, in the mountains of Ararat. The trajectory of their migration appears then to have taken them eastward as well for we read **As they migrated from the east** (perhaps some rebounding, away from the Indo-European divide?), until returning **they found a plain in the land of Shinar**. Then, it would appear, they derailed. I mean, they put aside the divine program for a lesser one of their own devising. Rather like thinking repentance is just about our own personal forgiveness and not majorly about the other, larger objectives God has revealed to us—**namely reunion, restoration, the Coming Kingdom, Christ's return, the end of history with the resolution of all things perfectly**.

The point? Whereas God wanted them to disperse, **fill the earth and subdue it**—as *the first stage in the reclamation process*. (Remember, the restoration of all things which Peter preached is the second stage.) They just want to settle down. They are wearying of wandering, migration, doing what they were told. Oh, self-directed, man-centered rebellion. Yes, they rebelled.

Now, from the vantage point of the Tower of Babel, let's look backwards once again: to Gen. 6:13: **And the Lord said to Noah**(the man God created—who he knew by name and mission), **“I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold I will destroy them with the earth.”** Noah's call is a divine encounter! This is but one among many such calls in scripture—there's also Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, the disciples and Saul of Tarsus and others. Notice: that God **voices** this call (**he speaks it**). What one *hears* is the call and what one does about it (obey?) is one's *response*. God called out to Noah and said, **“Build yourself an ark** (Noah had no idea what an ark was, had never built a boat before—we have to believe that God explained the ship's design in detail, too.) **I am sending a flood of waters**. (This suggests, I think, that more than rain was in view.) Gen. 6:13-21 contains some very specific directions, including measurements and ship specifics (roof, side door, a window, the hull coating and three decks with stalls, or rooms). At this point, I should observe that a “climate change” is in the forecast, and a natural disaster comes with it is a divine judgment on wicked violence in the earth—mankind included.

You and I are persons (created beings) united to each other by family ties (names and lineage) in a universe created by a personal Supreme Being, God. We are moral beings because he is a moral God. He created us to worship, enjoy and glorify our God!

And now let's state the obvious: Noah is not the problem, the Flood is. He is the solution, the divinely selected and equipped rescuer, and through Noah all that survive the Flood do so because *he was placed there and called to do it*. God uses mankind to maintain, to sustain his created world—to right it, direct it, develop it and realign it. It's part of the dominion/stewardship piece we are familiar with. **No other life form is tasked with this work**. People are not the problem, friends, BUT certain human activities can be/are problematic. Population control is not chief among them—indeed that is why murder is costly, warfare is a waste, aborting babies in harmful and euthanizing each other can be described as evil, wasteful and wrong. Besides, the earth is not full yet. It is vital to keep anti-human bias

out of this equation. Anyway, Gen. 6:22 records **And Noah did all that the Lord commanded him to do.**

Again, knowing the Lord's will keeps us from creating more problems than we can solve. Then Gen, 7:1-4 contains follow-up instructions on the boarding process. Now mark this, after Noah's entire obedience, after the ark exists and is completed, after the animals were gathered, numbered and ordered, and after everything and everyone was in place, then it rained . . . then the fountains of the deep burst, then the Flood came upon the earth. Not a fable, or a fantasy, not a vision, hallucination or a dream—not the product of an unsettled imagination but real weather on a real earth. Not a fairy tale, folk tale, or an epic myth and not projection of the collective unconscious! If such speculations were not put forth, we wouldn't be putting this correction forward. The psyche is overrated.

None of the Flood *occurred in Noah's head*, none of this narrative was summoned from the depth of one man's innermost being. God *spoke* and Noah *obeyed* him in real time, in real space as objective fact, verifiable and related about persons engaged in a series of events. Noah was too busy being God's servant to search for his authentic self, or emergent being, from the depths of his interior and subjective reality. God gives us our identity, God works us into his plans and purposes and we find meaning, fulfillment and significance through our engagement with God. Yes, and that is what it means to be created beings according to biblical psychology.

Observation: is it possible that primates resemble us, more than we resemble them? Yet only humans hear from God, talk to God and walk with God so far as we can tell.

For starters in reflection on these things, I would describe Noah's "call" as an anxiety inducing revelation. Earlier we learned that **Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight. and the earth was filled with violence.** (v.11) That also induces anxiety. Noah may have been relieved to think that God's assessment was like his own, especially given that he was **blameless in his generation and walked with God.** It was at some time in that walk that God spoke to Noah. Then God, as we recall, gave Noah directions to build the ark (vv.14-15) **For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh that has breath of life under heaven.** (v. 17). This verse is weighty because it asserts that all life possesses the breath of life—that all life is a gift from God! That life itself comes from outside the material realm, from God, and from thence enlivens matter *without which there would be no life.*

Again, here is God, who is outside of man, speaking to man: directing, instructing and commanding man. Noah, **the righteous and blameless man**, responds to God with obedience. (v. 6:22—**Noah did this, he did all that God commanded.**) The first five verses of Gen. 7 records a follow-up conversation between God and Noah. Help from the outside, not help from within. God instructs Noah in the loading of the animals. **And Noah did all that the Lord had commanded him.** (v.5)

Pay close attention to the order of things. The word came to Noah. The word which was outside of him, the word which did not belong to him, was not sourced in him, that word came to him **from without** himself—it came from God. That is a really key concept: also the word of the Lord came to Noah, as it even now comes to us, objectively speaking, from outside and not from inside of us. We must help this generation escape the prison house of our subjectivity. Our reductionist subjectivity.

Perhaps some people are unduly anxious in today's world because they are looking for answers in the wrong place. They have been told to look within. They have been told that their identity is found within, that it emerges from their own being—and not from God, the Being that made all beings! It comes as shock to them to realize that God is not “the great therapist in the sky” (a kindly, benign counselor who gently advises, never commands or condemns) and that, shockingly, the meaning of life is not bounded by their religious experience. The thought that holiness matters more than happiness to God is almost blasphemous to secular ears. Maybe they are rightfully anxious, I think this because they may have occupied the center of the universe which lawfully belongs to someone else, **to Jesus**. The further thought of being asked to step-down, to assume a lower, more fitting place, is, as Jesus warned us, uncomfortable—but some have been raised to consider it unthinkable. That produces anxiety as well.

Humble thyself in the face of the Lord . . . and he will lift you up is startling doctrine to those raised on their need for good self-esteem. Feeling good about oneself, or even about feeling good about feeling good . . . or survival of the strongest, fittest, or brightest. In the spiritual realm mis-education is a major source of anxiety and discomfort. Perhaps they are anxious because they have been *believing wrong things—or not believing the right things* about themselves, God and the meaning of life.

A broken compass is not better than no compass

A broken clock has no function except as an art object

A headless hammer is not a tool, it is just a handle

Friends, anything's possible, I suppose, but some things are more likely within a biblically constrained worldview. That's a comfort. Because of those constraints, what is likely, or even probable is not sheer mystery to us. We have guidance to help us discern what projects God is into, and so we can seek to join him in them. We can also seek direction through prayer and the counsel of the spiritually wise.

Therefore the Psalmist writes: **I will look unto the hills from whence cometh my help . . . my help cometh from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.** (Psalm 121:1-2) **From whence**, and **from whom** are answered by from outside myself, even from God, the Maker of Heaven and Earth. God, who is outside of myself. The Creator of Heaven and Earth—the Maker of all—is described in this same psalm as my **Keeper**. And not just Keeper, but an ever present, vigilant, all-powerful and alert sentinel (**he never sleeps!** v.4), God keeps watch so that we may sleep. Look how the Psalmist leads us step by step to a renewed faith in God. Faith cures anxiety.

Let us reach into the medicine cabinet of faith—for faith is the cure for anxiety and obedience is the treatment plan. Here are some directives:

Don't look within for meaning, identity, being or purpose

Do learn to look through the physical and the material in order to see God (It is important to read what objective reality is telling you about the Creator.)

Do look to God for purpose (in addition to glorifying him) for being and life

Yield the center of the universe to its rightful heir—even the Lord Jesus in whom all things cohere. It requires displacing yourself and any other significant person

Honor Christ as King . . . not therapist, buddy or an old friend

Embrace the quest for holiness—if that is your aim you will find happiness

Remember that being good is superior to feeling good—the later can be deceptive
 Remember the magnitude of God's magnificent plan—it is truly godlike
 There are more reliable sources of wisdom than intuition and feelings but talk to the veterans and not the casualties
 If holy things are stored in the treasure chest of the bible—look for them there

Here follow some specific prescriptions to the treatment of anxiety. Baby Boomers need to get a grip on the fact that the Apocalypse we need to be most concerned about is divinely ordered (not the accident of nations). And for all you heard about the world being godless, the simple truth is: it isn't. Saying so, doesn't make it so. God's love and concern for his creation is a protective reality that can lessen anxiety.

Dear Millennials, be assured that God is able to repair, or to replace anything. Scripture records that climate change has occurred before and it did not bring the end of the world. Man was instrumental in the ensuing rescues. We are God's provision for disaster relief. So, the sense of two minutes to twelve is likely a miscalculation, driven by fear. Remember King Hezekiah. God put some time back on the clock for him! If we could downgrade the threats to our environment to concerns, everyone would be less agitated and less tempted to extremes.

All of us could cope with anxiety better by believing in God, by affirming his plan, by exchanging misgiving and mistrust for their opposites and by learning our spiritual history (in the bible) tends in that direction. We should believe more on the Lord Jesus, the result of which is being saved—from hopelessness, helplessness, terrors by day or night and despair. Look for answers outside of ourselves . . . absorb the revealed truth of God and we will find our identity, recover our purpose and find our peace.

Look to God, connect with God, talk to God, listen to God, read about God, study and worship God . . . walk by our available light. Obey him and glorify him always. Do this, and anxiety will fade away.

So **look to the hills**, look to the heavens, **look to God**—and behold the One who made the heavens and the earth, and everything therein. There is so much more to life than meets the eye, more than the visible. Let the word richly indwell you heart and mind. Knowing God requires looking into the holy things, into the divine Other, taking seriously his revealed word, his introductions to himself! When he calls, take the call . . . don't hang up!

Amen