

Sermon for Aug 1 2021 (Tenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Today's texts: Exodus 16:2–15, Ephesians 4:1–16 and John 6:22–35

Old Testament Reading: Exodus 16:2-15 (Manna and Quail)

The whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Then the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily." So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, "At evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your grumbling against the Lord. For what are we, that you grumble against us?" And Moses said, "When the Lord gives you in the evening meat to eat and in the morning bread to the full, because the Lord has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him — what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the Lord." Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, 'Come near before the Lord, for he has heard your grumbling.'" And as soon as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. And the Lord said to Moses, "I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'" In the evening quail came up and covered the camp, and in the morning dew lay around the camp. And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat."

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In 1964, Bob Dylan wrote these words...

*Come gather 'round people, Wherever you roam...
And admit that the waters Around you have grown
And accept it that soon, You'll be drenched to the bone...
If your time to you is worth savin' Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone....
For the times they are a-changin'*

*Come senators, congressmen, Please heed the call...
Don't stand in the doorway, Don't block up the hall
For he that gets hurt, Will be he who has stalled...
The battle outside ragin' Will soon shake your windows, And rattle your walls...
For the times they are a-changin'*

*Come mothers and fathers, Throughout the land...
And don't criticize, What you can't understand
Your sons and your daughters, Are beyond your command...
Your old road is rapidly agin'
Please get out of the new one, If you can't lend your hand...
For the times they are a-changin'*

*The line it is drawn, The curse it is cast... The slow one now, Will later be fast
As the present now, Will later be past... The order is rapidly fadin'
And the first one now, Will later be last...
For the times they are a-changin'*

Words that are relevant today, written almost 60 years ago... Maybe the times are NOT changing so much. Everything OLD is NEW again, that's part of the message in this song. And there is a warning to those who would change the world: You, too, will get old. And you, too, will have the things you value pushed aside to make way for the new generation.

There is NOTHING new under the sun. The only unchangeable constant is God's word. There we find an anchor and hold fast so that we are not swept away with fear and anxiety like the people of Israel in our text. They had God with them as they escaped their captivity in Egypt. Set free. And still, they grumbled. Like us, they were living in anxious times.

As Bill Bridges points out in his influential research on managing change and transition, "It's not the changes that will do you in. It's the transitions." The transition is that neutral zone of chaos, when the OLD systems are no longer in place and the NEW systems haven't quite come online yet. This is a time of HIGH ANXIETY.

Look at the Israelites... They are no longer under the rule of the Egyptians, living under familiar (even if they were oppressive) systems....now wandering the wilderness, on their WAY to a Promised Land that they do not yet occupy. When I look at it from that perspective, I'm a whole lot more understanding of the attitude of ingratitude. In fact, I'm almost surprised that it was limited to open grumbling; there are signs that it was ready to boil over into open rebellion.

Living in times of high anxiety. I think we might be able to sympathize with that. Because things seem awfully familiar to our day and age.

One thing you ought to know about living in chronically anxious times is that anxiety itself doesn't harm or endanger a system. In many respects there are positives to experiencing anxiety in a family, institution or governing system. The problem -- the danger -- is in HOW that anxiety gets addressed. If emotional systems are allowed to run amuck, rather than letting cooler heads prevail, the likelihood of bad outcomes increases.

That's one of the blessings of Lutheranism. It tends to put reason and rational thought over emotionalism. That doesn't mean that Lutherans are not inclined to emotional outbursts. But we are strongly reminded not to let emotions rule over our decision making.

I remember that I was buying a car from a salesman, when he asked me what I did for a living in order to fill out my credit application.

"I'm a pastor," I said.

"What denomination?" he asked.

"Lutheran," I responded.

"Oh," he said, "one of the Frozen Chosen."

I had never heard it put that way before, but I knew what he meant immediately.

Naturally, he was Pentecostal. He liked the fact that they were more emotional and expressive in their worship.

It sometimes seems like an either/or... head or heart.

But when we are anxious, THINKING is not always easy to do. The effects of anxiety can clue a person in that there is something happening around them that they ought to pay attention to and the effect that the anxiety is having ON THEM.

The word anxiety itself is a clue... It means to clutch, squeeze or choke off. These are all signs that the system is under stress. It's hard to breathe. It's hard to open up. It invokes a survival response of fight, flight or freeze.

The root word of anxiety gives us such words as, DREAD, GRIEF, ANGUISH, STRANGLE and ANGINA. The Hebrew word for human distress is *Zazzar*, to squeeze, claustrophobic... The antonym of which is the Hebrew word for OPEN, *Yesha*... the root word of Yeshua... Savior.

So the effect of anxiety is repressiveness. When we are anxious, we have a **diminished capacity for learning**, which is something educators are paying attention to, in terms of our children's anxiety. You cannot focus when your mind is constantly

being interrupted by anxious thoughts. Another effect on our coping mechanisms is that anxiety interferes with our concentration.

Anxiety likewise replaces curiosity with a demand for certainty and quick-fix solutions. And so anxiety stiffens our position over and against others. These are stress reactions. There is a chemical component to this. Anxiety will flood our nervous systems so that we cannot hear what is said without distortion or respond with clarity. It stifles creative thinking and limits us to yes or no answers. And it leads to defensive behaviors. It restricts OPENNESS and reduces flexibility in behavior and response. And tends to limit psychological responses to fear and anger or helplessness and despair.

Which is what we see in our Old Testament lesson. Cognitive distortions in thinking...
“You brought us here to DIE.”

And anxiety is contagious. It can spread quickly and infect an entire family, congregation or nation.

The car salesman was wrong, by the way. Lutherans ARE emotional, you know. But emotions can lead us astray...lead us to say or do things that we later regret. Whereas if we could take a moment, take a breath and THINK before we acted, maybe we would not have said what we said or do what we did.

You cannot have an emotion in your body without a thought in your head. Your feelings are driven by your thinking. That is the foundation of Cognitive Therapy. If you want to change your feelings, you are going to need to change the way you are *thinking* about those things that make you feel the way you do.

Your thoughts are in the driver's seat. They always have been. And your thoughts can make a difference.

The Israeli army wanted to know how much influence THINKING had on morale. They choose a simple task to use as an experiment. The soldiers were required to take a forced march and divided into four groups that were not allowed to communicate with each other. Each group was to cover the same area, on the same day with the same sized backpack.

Group 1 was told the exact distance they had to go (25 miles) and kept fully informed of how far they had traveled with regular updates on their progress.

Group 2 was simply told to march. They were not told for how long and they were not given any status of the distance they had traveled.

Group 3, likewise, but at 20 miles the group was informed they had to keep going farther. How much? No information.

Group 4 was told they had to travel twice as far as group one, then midway through they were given new orders; then when they had marched the 25 miles were simply told they were done marching.

After which, each group was given blood tests and other tests that detect physical and mental stress. Each group had marched the same distance. But with entirely different ideas in their heads.

Which group fared the best? Group 1, naturally. They were given clear goals and regularly communicated with.

Which group did the worst? Group 4. Given constantly moving goals and conflicting information, they suffered the highest levels of stress related hormones in their system... by far. Not even close to the middle groups, that were higher in stress levels than 1 but still significantly lower than 4.

But the result is clear that our REASON and THINKING play a role in our state of anxiety.

When the Israelites complained about the food, Moses took it personally. And his state of anxiety was quite elevated. The Bible tells us he pours his heart out to God. And I think it's interesting that GOD, TOO, takes it personally. God even tells Moses, it's not YOU, it's ME that they are unhappy with. And they are unhappy because they are ungrateful. People who are ungrateful are always unhappy.

But in spite of the people's displeasure with Him, God doesn't take it to heart. There seems to be a conscious decision on God's part, not to let the people's anxiety filter into Him. He engages with their anxiety, but doesn't let it affect his response... which is rational. Not emotional.

In psychology, they call this being self-differentiated. That's in knowing who you are and how others are impacting you, so that you don't respond emotionally... ("TIMMY HIT ME!") Rather, you respond calmly and with purpose and according to your code of ethics.

Our code is God's code. His response is to turn the other cheek. That takes self-awareness under stress. I'm trying very hard these days to apply that in my own life.

But do you ever wonder why God didn't give His people something better than Manna and quail? After all, He's God. A veritable banquet is not beyond His power.

What do they get? Manna. (Which means, "What IS this stuff?") We know from the text that they could only gather one day's worth of it. That it was a living organism, leaving one to speculate it was some kind of mold or fungus -- mushroom, if you prefer. It could be eaten raw like a cracker, milled into flour, and baked like bread or boiled like porridge. It had a mild, pleasant taste.

But ultimately it was survival food. Like hard tack or protein bars or [Lembas bread](#)... it's only intended to keep you alive. It's a means to an end. It's not the end itself.

Being content and in harmony and in perfect balance sounds nice. But it also means that you are standing still and NOT moving. If you are going to move forward... you are going to have to become UN-balanced.

And being off balance produces anxiety.

But anxiety, under control, is useful. It keeps us aware of our surroundings, alert to danger. Open to opportunities.

God wanted to keep his people moving forward.

And you know what's changed?

Nothing.