

5th Sunday after Epiphany
February 4, 2024
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
1 Peter 5:6-11

The Devil's Work Undone

Dear Friends in Christ,

I entered the word “anxiety” into a book search on a popular online seller named after a river in South America. Over 60,000 results for books related to anxiety. “The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook”, “How to Manage and Master Your Anxiety” “Unwinding Anxiety” “The Wisdom of Anxiety” “Attacking Anxiety” “Anxiety Rx” just to name a few. I, obviously, did not check out all 60,000 books on anxiety and don’t know anything about the titles I just mentioned. But it is also obvious that anxiety is a big topic in our culture today.

What we call anxiety in our lives might be sinful and might not be sinful. In some sense, anxiety is a gift from God. When the house is on fire, our body and mind should react to that danger. Our heart should beat faster. We should be concerned about getting ourselves and others out of that dangerous situation. Sometimes our body and mind work the way God designed and respond with an appropriate amount of alarm and concern. However, since the fall into sin, our bodies and minds don’t always work perfectly. Some people may be anxious about the house burning down all the time and live in a constant state of panic whenever cooking or running the furnace. That is an unhealthy level of anxiety. On the other end of the spectrum is the person who sees the smoke and fire in the house, hears the fire and smoke alarms, and decides that they can wait another hour before taking action to leave the house. That is not healthy either.

Books on anxiety and mental health professionals can help someone train their body and mind to respond appropriately to situations in life that bring about anxiety. I am not a mental health professional and not an author on such subjects so use those experts for what they are good at. As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, we have an extra tool to combat anxiety, the Word of God. Peter, both tells us why we should be anxious and what to do with all our anxiety in his first epistle. Listen to these inspired words from chapter 5 again:

1 Peter 5:6-11 (EHV)

Therefore humble yourselves under God's powerful hand so that he may lift you up at the appointed time. ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. ⁸Have sound judgment. Be alert. Your adversary, the Devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. ⁹Resist him by being firm in the faith. You know that the same kinds of sufferings are being laid on your brotherhood all over the world.

¹⁰After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who called you into his eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will himself restore, establish, strengthen, and support you. ¹¹To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

Some people are anxious about almost everything. If you tend toward that level of anxiety, I don’t need to list out the things in life that make you anxious. You have a long list, and each person will have a different list. You are fully aware of what brings about feelings of anxiety for you. When does anxiety change from a good response to a dangerous situation into a sin against the Almighty God? This is really a First Commandment question. Whenever we fear, love or trust someone or something more than the Lord, we have sinned. The devil pounces upon us when we are anxious and worried. He tells us that God is powerless to help. He tells us that God is unwilling to help. He tells us that God is too busy to help and doesn’t care about us anyway. When we believe the devil’s lies, then we have sinned against the one, true God.

When this is you, Peter tells us what to do.

Humble yourselves under God's powerful hand so that he may lift you up at the appointed time. ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

The Almighty God does not use his powerful hand to crush those who humble themselves before him. Our loving, Heavenly Father uses his powerful hand to lift us up, to forgive and restore us because he cares for you. Though we don't always trust him to take care of us in every situation, he is still in control of everything for our good. If anxiety is a regular part of your life, continue to humble yourself and believe what your God tells you. He cares for you. He showed it by sending his Son to the cross to forgive you. He shows it by ruling all things for the benefit of his believers from now until eternity.

But what if you are more like the person who wants another hour before responding to the fire alarm in his house? Sometimes we are going along in life and no anxiety alarms are going. You've been able to handle any problems that arise. The things that stop others in their tracks don't even slow you down. You are an overcomer, a victor. You persevere and have an optimistic attitude. Life is generally good, and nothing will get you down. No enemy is too big for you.

Peter also has a warning for those of us who are at times oblivious to the spiritual dangers in this world: *Have sound judgment. Be alert. Your adversary, the Devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.*

Think of life as a believer as walking through an open field with the Lord. He tells us to stay close to him because there is a lion in the weeds. But we get overconfident and foolishly tell the Lord, "I'm just going to go to the edge of sin, but I won't get caught by the lion." "I'm going to get into online gambling but I'm strong enough to not let it hurt me." "I'm going to listen to music and watch shows that glorify sin but I'm strong enough that it won't affect me." "I'm going to read a lot of books and watch videos by false teachers in the Christian church but I'm strong enough not to be influenced by their charm." "Lord, I'm going to get close to the lion, but not get hurt."

Of course, we aren't strong enough to go away from our Lord and be safe from the devil. The bigger problem is that the devil is a lion who does not just want to scratch us with his claws. He doesn't only want to bite us with his sharp teeth. The word Peter uses by inspiration of the Holy Spirit is "devour." The devil wants to devour us. Literally, he wants to swallow us. That means claw and bite and chew and swallow until we are gone. This is the real enemy who is waiting in the weeds for us to wander from our Lord. Talk about anxiety! Why would the Lord give us such a vivid and scary image of the enemy?

He wants us to wake up, to have sound judgment, to be alert. This is the good response to the very real danger the devil is to our eternal souls. This image should drive us back to the Lord when we realize we aren't strong enough. We need his help.

Humble yourselves under God's powerful hand so that he may lift you up at the appointed time. ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

Who better to run to than the powerful God who cares for us? The Triune God created all things by his Word. The devil is one of God's created beings, an angel who rebelled. The Creator is much more powerful than one of his creatures. Jesus showed his power over the devil too. The lion came to him in the wilderness and tempted him to doubt his Father's love and care for him. Jesus stayed close to his Father and the Scriptures, and the devil did not devour him with sin. The rulers of this world gathered against Jesus and put him to death on the cross. But not even death had power over Christ. His resurrection proves that he defeated the devil for us. No longer can that lion accuse us of sin for Christ has forgiven every sin. Cast all your anxiety, doubt and fear on the God who died and rose for you. He is powerful to save, and he cares for you.

Wherever you are on the spectrum of anxiety, Peter's inspired words apply. Cast all your anxiety on God, for he cares for you. But sometimes God seems to take longer than we would like to care for us. Sometimes our suffering seems like it will never end. When we are in the middle of pain and suffering, time seems to work differently. A day of pain can seem like a lifetime. But there is also suffering that lasts weeks and months and years and sometimes a lifetime. It may be like Paul's thorn in the flesh, a pain that God knows about but in his wisdom has allowed to remain. Sometimes it is physical suffering with disease. Some have wounds on their hearts and minds from trauma in the past. Although these kinds of suffering may lessen over the years, it seems like they will never truly end.

What hope does Peter give us today?

After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who called you into his eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will himself restore, establish, strengthen, and support you.

A little while. That is how long our suffering will last. A little while. Perhaps the God of all grace will end a particular suffering after a day or week or year in this life. But even if we suffered with something for decades, that will be only a little while when we've been in heaven for 10,000 years and counting. All our years on this earth are only a little while compared with eternity. Therefore, cast all your anxiety on your Savior now. For he has secured your place in eternity with him where there will be no danger and no devil and no sin and no more anxiety.

To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.