

Sermon for Sunday, September 23, 2012 James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, Mark 9: 30-47 "The Age of Anxiety"

It was a time when we seemed to have been victorious, and yet strife and tension hung over the world. A major war was ended, and yet the ongoing struggle for power continued like persistent and foreboding aftershocks following an earthquake. We thought everything was settled, and yet it was not. The years to come would bring not a hot war with bombs and planes and guns, but a cold one, with spies and secret missions and subversive activity. And over it all hung the memory of that image, the mushroom cloud hovering over Hiroshima, a terrible weapon that caused greater destruction than humanity could have imagined. That image, etched onto our memory, was not only a reminder of how the war had ended, but what future wars could look like. The genie now let out of the bottle could not be returned.

This was the world that existed immediately after World War II.

Yes, the greatest generation had done its job and defeated Hitler's Germany and Hirohito's Japan. It was a victory, no one can deny it. But it did not make the various and sundry corners of the world friendly to one another. Despite the Marshall Plan and other nation-rebuilding activities in the conquered countries, despite the maneuvering to divide up countries into places controlled by western allies and the growing Soviet Union, despite the formation of a United Nations to be an arbiter for peace, tension and fear returned.

It was in that climate that the British poet W. H. Auden wrote one of his longest and darkest poems, "The Age of Anxiety." An extended allegory, his four characters, each affected by the war and each representing a part of the human personality – thought, feeling, sensation, intuition, sit in a bar and drink and think and talk. And it is clear, in their talk, that they have been broken – shaken, not stirred – by the world in which they live. And the overarching feeling that pervades their lives is, as Auden titles this very long poem, anxiety.

Anxiety, that feeling that something bad is going to happen, that worry that we cannot deal with it. Fear. Concern. Anxiety can make you sick to your stomach, or unable to sleep, or snappish in conversation with your spouse. Anxiety can make it impossible for you to concentrate on your work, and then you become anxious about not getting your work done, and it can go on in a downward spiral until you are utterly immobilized.

Auden was accurate in describing that feeling in the aftermath of World War II. But it was not unique. It had existed long before. If you are following the diocesan program of reading the Bible in a year, the Bible Challenge, you are now in the midst of the Second Book of Samuel, where it seems to be nothing more than one battle after another. And in between the battles, there is no calm and gentle peace. There is simply worry about what will come next. An age of anxiety.

At the same time, in the New Testament, you're reading Acts of the Apostles, and hearing about the apostles trying to build a church in the aftermath of Jesus' death and resurrection. Are you reading happy stories of happy people living in bliss? No, you hear about Saul's persecution of the disciples of Christ, about the apostle James being killed and Peter being imprisoned. Hard-won victories, troubling events, hints of possibilities, but also disagreement and struggle. An age of anxiety.

It doesn't seem much different today, does it? It's election season, and each candidate is determined, it seems, to frighten us into voting for him, or at least against his opponent. Bad enough that we worry about our jobs and our 401Ks and if our children will find employment after they graduate. Bad enough that we read about arsenic in rice and contamination of water so we worry about our health and that of our families. And the news is filled with stories of people in Muslim countries thinking that a crazy video is actually sponsored by the government, rather than the stupid act of someone with his own political agenda, and then there's the story about the guy who threatened to open fire on kids at a neighboring school. And in our fear, we want to find the quick fix, whether it is locking up everyone who makes us nervous or opening up that bottle of bourbon.

An age of anxiety indeed.

So we hear James' letter and recognize what he is saying immediately: "Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures." Sounds as if it were just written yesterday, doesn't it? In the face of anxiety, we don't deal with the heart of what concerns us, we pick fights around the edges of it. We worry about protecting ourselves with power or goods, as if they would ease our hearts.

And we have the same 'aha' moment in today's Gospel: "...he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest."

In the face of one of the most anxiety-producing things he had ever said to them, the disciples got into an argument about who was the greatest among them. Not about what it meant – they were confused about that but were too afraid to ask Jesus about it. No, protecting themselves by positioning themselves for power, as if power would stop what was coming next. Creating a wall of illusion so they could believe for a brief moment that nothing bad was going to happen.

An age of anxiety, and a broken human response to that anxiety.

A line from Auden's poem says it well:

We would rather be ruined than changed,
We would rather die in dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die.

What does Jesus tell the disciples in the Gospel? You've got it wrong. Yes, something will happen that will be difficult and painful. And when it happens, the old rules about what works will no longer apply. Things will change, and to get through it, you will have to be willing to be changed, or else you will be stuck in the old illusion of how you want it to be, stuck in that age of anxiety always.

What does James tell the readers of his epistle? You don't feel good because you are putting all your efforts into satisfying your desires for things that will make you forget your anxiety, rather than asking God to heal your heart. Unless you are willing to be changed, you will be ruined, as Auden says. Unless you are willing to let your illusions of what will make you feel safe and warm and happy die, you will be stuck in an endless cycle of doing all the wrong things to soothe your anxiety.

It would be quite depressing, all this talk of anxiety and human foolishness, were it not for the prescription that sits quietly at the end of the passages from James and Mark: give it up. Give up the anxiety. Submit to God, not as a person who thinks they have all the answers, but humbly, like a child.

Unless we are willing to get down on our knees and say, as they do in the 12-step programs, "I am powerless to deal with this. I need a Higher Power to help me and I turn myself over to that Power to help me find a new way to healing," we will find no relief in the present Age of Anxiety.

Amen.