

Sermon: The Devil in the Cereal Aisle**Scripture: Jeremiah 17****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: February 17, 2019**

Our youth are off this morning to Alabama for their mission trip. They'll share with us in a couple of weeks about their experience. It is wonderful for our church to encourage in the kids a sense of service and mission and they often return with some pretty profound God-moments that these trips encourage. It's also an opportunity for them to turn outwards away from their stressful lives and the expectations we put on them; the pressures of school, achievement and success. I wonder how much their anxiety level dropped when they got in those vans and headed off to the airport.

Did you know that the National Institute for Mental Health estimates that 30% of teen girls and 20% of teen boys have anxiety disorders. 100% of them have anxiety cause that's a part of being human and for sure human teenagers but 20-30% of American teens have anxiety to the levels of disorder – leading to substance abuse, cutting, debilitating fears, etc. I wonder if you looked at communities like ours if you'd find that percentage increased even with the pressure of parental educational levels and career success that marks highly affluent areas like our own in the shadow of Harvard, MIT, and other elite schools.

Even outside of that, though, wouldn't you agree that to a certain extent we seem to be an anxious people living in an anxious land in an age of anxiety and our children of course will bear that anxiety in

themselves. And so we should pay special heed to the many scriptures that tell us not to fear, do not worry, releasing our anxiety by way of trusting in God. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord like trees who spread their roots out by the stream and are not anxious in times of drought. Truly blessed are they. And don't we feel the curse of anxiety when we've lost touch with the benevolent presence of God in our lives and our world?

How many of us and our children live these days with a chronically low-grade sense of threat around the corner, whether that's with our finances and wondering when the next stock market crash will come or where the next mass shooting will occur - (I wrote a first draft of this sermon and that statement on Thursday afternoon about 20 hours before the Aurora shootings) - or for many Americans fear of what the next disturbing proclamation from the White House will be or the next climate catastrophe to say nothing if you are a woman walking through an empty parking lot to your car at night or a black man being pulled over by the police... how many of us live with this low level, or maybe high level - sense of threat that we have simply gotten used to, that accompanies us to bed at night and departs with us as we leave the house in the morning?

And while that might be true for the majority of us who are still able to function, get through our days, raise our families and make it through this world, there are other tortured souls among us who seem to bear a heavier weight of all that anxiety to the level of psychological disorder which means that the sense of threat has reached such a level that they are rendered incapable of daily functioning. It's become a

common aspect of our communities - obsessive compulsive disorder, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, social anxiety disorder, and general anxiety disorder. These are God's children who for whatever reason, because of mis-firings of the brain or memories stored in the body or triggers from trauma, are unable to manage that interior sense of threat like the rest of us and as a result are overwhelmed and incapacitated by fear.

A friend of Tracy and mine who has been diagnosed with general anxiety disorder thinks it can be traced back to her childhood with a hyper-religious mother who was constantly warning her about the wiles and seductions of the devil that lay around every corner and the importance of being faithful to God to protect your soul. Her vulnerable brain and psyche at a very young age simply got into patterns of feeling extremely threatened. Though she's found enormous relief through therapy and medication as well in a renewed and healthier engagement with faith, there are still moments when in the aisles of grocery stores, for a reason she cannot quite understand, with all their hundreds of options laid before her, that she becomes near immobilized with the onset of a panic attack. When she's aware that she's in a particularly vulnerable state, she asks her partner to grocery shop for her because she's conscious now of how she might be triggered. Of course with the disorder, rational explanation "there's nothing in the grocery aisle to be worried about" does very little to effect the response that fires in her body or brain or wherever it's coming from.

The Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard would not be surprised by her response in the grocery store as he connects anxiety to

our very freedom to choose. He considers the example of a person standing on a high cliff's edge where he experiences both the extremely focused fear of falling but also a terrifying impulse to throw himself off the edge. Anxiety derives from our utter and total freedom to choose either of those – stay put or throw oneself to one's death. Kierkegaard referred to this as the “dizziness of freedom” saying in the Garden of Eden, anxiety preceded sin. He said it was the moment that God told Adam not to eat the fruit of the tree of good and evil that Adam had the anxiety-producing realization that he was free and had a choice to either obey God or not. That anxiety preceded the sin of choosing against God and eating from that tree. So you see there's something essentially human about anxiety, it's what CAN keeps us alive and well and aligned to God and God's purposes for our lives BUT it can lead in the other direction too. Sin follows from anxiety when the freedom to choose leads us to choose separation from God.

The healthy human being is ordered in such a way to have freedom of choice and it is to such as these that Jeremiah's words are reaching – *cursed* are those who trust in mere mortals and do not look to God and put their trust in God, they are like dried up shrubs in the desert BUT *blessed* are those who trust in the LORD, they are like trees rooted by the stream who are not anxious in times of drought.

In our anxious materialistic culture and age, it is a worthy warning that we should heed and we need to develop ways to foster the choice toward God through spiritual practice, prayer, and study such that we can release our anxiety and trust that ultimately all of this is

held by a benevolent hand... trusting that whatever may come, in the end it all passes and falls away and God reigns.

But let's be clear that many of those with mental illness, including anxiety disorders, are not in need of exhortation against lack of trust – “you must trust in God more!” - so much as they are in need of healing; healing, which might come from divine intervention in healing prayer or through psycho-therapy or through medication or a combination of such things. It's an important question to ask are we sick or are we sinning. Are you and I anxious about many things separating ourselves from God in a way that we need to be challenged on, or have we, for whatever reason, lost something of our fundamental human capacity to choose – standing immobilized in the cereal aisle for instance – and in need healing. In some instances it might be a both-and, some of us might need healing and also a reminder of the ways we separate ourselves from God and might restore that relationship again. And for sure all of us need communities, like this community of faith, that fosters trust and peace and connectedness to one another and to something higher than ourselves... in a culture of individualism, isolation and materialism. For I think those with psychological “disorders” say something often about the “orders” of our society.

There have been times in the grocery store when I've thought of my friend as I've looked down the cereal aisle at over 100 different choices for one single item like cereal and I've thought to myself: maybe SHE doesn't have the disorder, maybe our culture that equates freedom with an obscene number of choices has the disordered. Maybe we should all feel dread at the very edge of the abyss of so many choices

that in the end mean nothing! Does our consumer culture use up all our precious human capacity for freedom and creativity, on trifles so there's little of us left for deeper questions of what it means to be human and what our purpose is? "I think I'll choose Frosted Mini-Wheats... no I think I'll choose Life - Cinnamon Life." Really? Are we choosing Life? Maybe our friends and family, our children, with anxiety disorders can also highlight for us the disordered nature of our society and call us all towards the critical work of creating communities that are gentler and less anxious and more supportive... where, as the Apostle Paul puts it: "we rejoice in the Lord always and trust that the Lord is near, letting our gentleness be known to all and instead of compounding anxiety upon anxiety, by prayer and petition and with thanksgiving, we let our petitions be known to God. Then we'll find together that the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus , Amen!