

Give Your Anxiety to God

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
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Friday I was driving from the church to meet someone for lunch. I was almost at Rocky River City Hall. Traffic was stopped up ahead, waiting for the light to change. I didn't want to block the driveway out of the fire station so I stopped on this side of the drive, 3 or 4 car lengths behind the vehicle in front of me at the other edge of the driveway. That's when the motorist behind me honked, and as I glanced in the rearview mirror I could see he was yelling and waving his hands, incensed that I hadn't pulled as far forward as I possibly could.

Instinctively, I immediately felt tense, angry that my driving decision was being questioned, ticked off that the guy behind me didn't realize the sensibility of not obstructing a fire station. But in that moment I made a conscious decision not to respond, but rather take a few deep breaths to calm myself. By then the light had changed, and a moment later traffic began to move.

As I closed the gap between me and the car in front of me I noticed that the incensed motorist had begun to pull around me but then changed his mind. By the time I cleared the intersection he turned and sped away.

Now, he couldn't have gotten to that turn any faster if I had pulled forward those few car lengths. What was going on?

I think what was going on with him is what's going on with probably all of us these days. We are feeling anxious. We're feeling anxious because there's a threat to our health, to the health of our family and loved ones. We're feeling anxious because we cannot see what's threatening us.

This viral pandemic is not like a blizzard warning that our senses can comprehend, with winds kicking up and temperatures plummeting and snow drifting across the roads. With this COVID-19 viral pandemic we're being told to take actions to prevent the transmission of something we wouldn't even know we had until it's too late. Sometimes we *realize* we're feeling anxious, but anxiety stirs up emotions and physical reactions even when we're not aware of it.

These are unparalleled times for Americans. Not since World War II have we faced such wide-ranging restrictions in daily activities like going to school, watching a game, gathering for worship. We're being told what we *can't* do and what we *shouldn't* do. But besides washing our hands religiously and maintaining proper social distance, we don't always know what to do.

Our anxiety drives us to want to do *something* so that we can feel like we have some control over what's happening. So we rush to the store and clear the shelves of cleaning products and bottled water and comfort foods. We rush to the rec center or library or museum one last time before it closes for an undetermined period of time. We

allow our anxiety to drive us like the motorist behind me who was so anxious he couldn't tolerate a gap in the line of cars waiting for a light to change.

What can we do with that anxiety? Give it to God. Give it to God. Let God dispel our anxiety. Listen to what St. Paul advised in Philippians Chapter 4:

⁶ Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. ⁷ Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

Anxiety is that experience before we've remembered to ask God to handle the burdens we're bearing and the worries we're juggling. That's what our prayers are for: for us to take stock of what's weighing on us, and then ask God to watch it for us. As Paul wrote, "*bring up all of your request to God in your prayers and petitions....*" Paul adds, "*...along with giving thanks.*" It's always good to remember all you have to be thankful for.

So, how can we heed Paul's guidance to not be anxious about anything?

- 1) When you *notice* your anxiety you might do some intentional deep breathing (though probably not too close to someone else!). Recently I saw a group of first graders demonstrate a calming technique that they use in their classrooms: breathing in for a slow count of 8, then breathing out for a count of 8, repeating it twice more. They vouch for it: changing your breathing pattern can help calm you immediately.
- 2) Or to ease your anxiety, you might get outside, whether you stroll around the parking lot of your condo, or you walk to the end of your driveway, or you meander through your neighborhood, or you explore the paths of the Metropark. Coming out the winter season we remember how healing fresh air and sunlight can be for the spirit.
- 3) And it might help ease anxiety to take a break from the news. Yes, you want to stay abreast of developments in this ever-changing situation, but turning off the news helps you step back and put what's going on in perspective: that you have food to eat, a place to stay, people who care about you, meaningful and satisfying things you can do with your time.

We can't stop these unusual and uncontrollable times from making us anxious. But as St. Paul wrote, through Jesus Christ we know that we can entrust our hearts and minds to God who loves us.