

Sermon: “Surviving Anxiety”
Rev. Martha Hodges **July 12, 2009**

There is plenty these days to be anxious about. Our families are dealing with layoffs and furloughs. Our state is going bankrupt. Our congregation is facing big changes in how we do things in order to stay afloat. If you're not anxious, you haven't been paying attention. Or, as the parody of Rudyard Kipling's poem "If" has it, "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs, then you probably haven't understood the seriousness of the situation."

Because there is so much to celebrate today, my reflections on anxiety can only graze the surface of all I would like to say on the subject. I have no doubt we will return to these matters in a variety of contexts over the coming year as we struggle together to adapt to new realities as individuals and as a congregation. That being said, I've been reflecting on my role as your minister during these anxious times, and on how this church ought to support you in your struggles to define your future and discern the path to reach it.

Anxiety – and its close cousins, worry, dread and uneasiness – contrary to what our gut tells us when we are in its grip, isn't a bad thing. How might the anxieties we all experience these days illuminate that path? For anxiety can do that – shed light and clarity – when it is controlled, and its energy wisely channeled.

If you doubt this, think of the anxiety that precedes any great change in life: a marriage or birth, a divorce or new job. Of course these things make us anxious. If they didn't, we would have to be in massive denial. (Not that denial doesn't have its place when employed in moderation. We all have our limits to just how large a dose of reality we can take at any one time.) But think of those anxious times in your life and how worry did or did not help to prepare you for what was coming. Anxiety can paralyze. It can also act as a catalyst. It can overwhelm and bring on despair and helplessness; or it can provoke us to learn new skills and imagine creative solutions and entirely novel scenarios. It is, if we use it well, a great teacher.

Now, in the first throes of a crisis, it is normal and natural to panic. Our reasoning brain shuts down. We refuse to admit new information into our awareness and become blind to the cues that our surroundings are providing. We try to flee responsibility, looking around for scapegoats, turning the spotlight on someone else and demanding that someone else fix the problem. Anxiety doesn't feel good. We want to feel better, and that drive to feel better, to restore our stability and familiarity, makes us prone to look for easy fixes and short-term solutions. We're not thinking clearly or deeply.

But this state of affairs needn't last – shouldn't last -- if we are mature, spiritually rooted and self-aware. If we stay true to our principles and rely on them to guide our decisions, anxiety can force us to greater clarity of purpose. It can teach us to practice greater patience and self-control as we refuse extreme reactions. It can lead us to

thoughtful reevaluation of how we do things, and why, and can goad us to take necessary actions that will make us stronger.

But, I say again, it doesn't feel good. It challenges our self-image as people who are calm and competent. As a congregation, it challenges our understanding of church as a haven from life, as a place where everyone is happy all the time, a place that is free from the conflicts and stresses of the world around us. We want to run and hide behind those images, so the temptation is to gloss over the difficulties, to refuse to "understand the seriousness of the situation."

But what an opportunity lost if we were to give into that temptation to make everything comfortable by pretending all was well! Just as twelve-step programs tell us that a substance abuser has to hit bottom before he is motivated to make a radical change for the better, so are we all, as individuals and as a congregation, forced by hard times to take a fresh look at who we are, what is of ultimate importance to us and why we are here. Anxiety is energy. How shall we channel that energy?

As individuals and families, we adjust our priorities when we are forced to make hard choices about how we will spend our money. A family that thrives in anxious times is one that is firmly guided by shared values. A congregation is no different, except that we have an advantage when, together, we address questions of our collective purpose and meaning as a church. When we look at that mission that no one really wants to talk about, but that supplies a direction when we are wondering where to turn and something to rely on when we are feeling unmoored.

How do we "keep our heads" when anxiety threatens to make us turn on one another, or give up? How do we resist simplistic reassurances or the temptation to isolate ourselves so that we don't have to see others' pain, nor reveal our own?

We remind ourselves that pain doesn't last forever and anxiety doesn't kill us. We acknowledge that nothing new ever happens without confusion and resistance, internal and external – that confusion is how we learn, and that resistance is a symptom of change and growth – a sign of life.

We take the long view, or what family systems experts call "the view from the balcony." We learn to observe our own reactions and to regulate them so that they do not defeat us. We see that our suffering is not personal punishment, but part of the ebb and flow of life.

We promise each other and ourselves to stay connected. Connected to our principles, to our yearnings, to each other. We affirm the covenant that holds us in mutually loving and accountable relationship. We share information, and listen, and consider all points of view, and collaborate on solutions. We accept that no one outcome is going to satisfy everyone, and that that's all right. We accept that a perfect solution doesn't exist. That our lives are filled with compromise and ambiguity and "good-

enough” – and that that is how human beings manage to live together. And that together is the only way we can live.

We risk failure. We risk commitment. We risk disappointment. We risk sharing our vision. And we give one another the courage to do this in the assurance that no one is expected to be perfect or unfailingly right, in the assurance that we truly are better together because we each have something to contribute, that we each hold a piece of the vision in our care.

While striving to keep the bigger picture in view, we identify a couple of issues or clusters of issues and decide on desired outcomes. Then we take action to make those outcomes real. We remain flexible and tolerant of discomfort. We each accept responsibility for our own behavior and give up the illusion that there is anything **but** our own behavior that we control.

Surviving anxiety takes trust. Trust in our own ingenuity and resourcefulness. Trust in our collective wisdom. Trust in the reliability of the universe. And trust in the basic goodness of life, as evidenced in the character of this congregation and revealed to us every day in the words and faces and embraces of one another.

This is my trust, my faith. I believe in you, as embodiments of holiness. Not because you are perfect, but because you are human, and, as human beings, we are family. I believe in a future in which all members of our human family who seek greater freedom of mind, largeness of heart and depth of spirit find a home such as this one. I believe in a future in which we stumble and make mistakes, but are guided by a vision of compassion and justice and care for all of earth’s creatures and the planet we claim as home. I believe in a future in which we act on our belief that everyone matters, in which love is no mere abstraction, but a way of living in the world – a demanding and difficult way, a joyful and generous and dangerous way, a way we **must** live because our integrity demands it. This is the vision in which I trust and to which I choose to dedicate my life. But it is incomplete. Only together can we build a vision that is truly inclusive, possible, and worthy of our loving commitment.

This – this faith -- is, ultimately, how we survive anxiety. May our halting steps, with time, patience and hope, become a dance. And may our vision lead us ever closer to living such a faith, to such a saving faith. Amen.