

## High Anxiety

Good Shepherd Sunday: Psalm 23  
ACTS 4:5-12  
1 John 3:16-24  
John 10:11-18

I am a worrier. I worry about things. I know it's not an attractive character trait, but worrying seems to be webbed into my very brain. It's hardwired into the way I think about the world.

When I was a kid, I was terrified of tornados. The very thought that some giant whirling funnel could descend from the sky and suck us, house and all, hundreds of feet into the stormy skies absolutely terrified me. On stormy spring days when the skies would fill with those ominous dark clouds, I would vainly call to have my mom pick me up from school.

Later in life, when I was in college, all my worrying manifested itself into a full-blown generalized anxiety disorder complete with sweaty-palmed panic attacks. If you've ever had a panic attack, then you know exactly what I'm talking about and just how strange and disconcerting they can be. But, if you've never experienced one, you may have no idea what a panic attack feels like.

Imagine you are on a safari and become separated from your group. You are a little nervous, but they couldn't be too far away, so you walk with some measured confidence down a little path that you hope will lead you back to camp. Then all of the sudden, you find yourself face to face with a hungry lion. The animal is crouched right in front of you—bearing its teeth and growling. Its eyes lock on you.

Instantaneously, your body is flooded with adrenaline. First, your heart slows, even skips a beat or two, before it races as if you were already in a full blow sprint. Your body explodes in sweat. Your palms are dripping wet. You begin to breathe rapidly. The hairs on the back of your neck bristle. Your body is preparing you. It is fight or flight time. Are you going to turn and run, or will you stand your ground and face down this hungry lion?

Well, in a panic attack, you experience this same fight or flight response, only there is no lion in front of you. There's no apparent immanent danger to your health whatsoever--nothing from which to run and nothing to stand and fight. Nevertheless, your heart is pierced with adrenaline. Your palms are dripping with sweat. You may even hyperventilate.

At least when there's a lion, you know what you face, but with a panic attack, the attack itself causes extreme fear. You may think that you are having a heart attack or that you are dying.

Some folks battle panic attack everyday. Multiple times a day. It's been years since I've had one. I can't honestly remember the last time I had a panic attack. For one thing, if I feel one coming on—I know what it is and I simply remind myself, "Oh, yeah, this is just one of those stupid panic attacks."

Of course, it took years to be able not to fear the attack itself. Worrying about them, and thinking about them, and fearing them when they came, seemed to be a large part of having them. When I stopped worrying so much about them, and leaned to calm myself down during them, I stopped experiencing them, thanks to the Good Lord.

Nevertheless, I'm still a certifiable worrier. Swine flu scares the living daylights out of me. You have to understand, I worry even about seasonal flu. The threat of another pandemic like the 1918 pandemic is the stuff of a hypochondriac's worst nightmare. Thankfully, the news seems to be getting better. The virus lacks a certain protein that made the 1918 so virulent and deadly. Thank God.

Speaking of God, Jesus was near about fearless. He never worried much about anything. He certainly didn't worry about food or money. He didn't even worry about catching leprosy, and he told his disciples not to waste their time worrying about stuff, but to trust God in all things.

Once, when there was a great storm on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples went into panic mode. They were all convinced that they were about to lose their lives. All the while, Jesus slept peacefully on a pillow. The nonplussed disciples were amazed at Jesus, even angry at him. How could he be so at ease, so calm and serene, in the face of certain death?

There is something faithless about worry. It is in many ways the opposite of faith, the opposite of trust. It is a kind of practical atheism.

Of course, the opposite of fear is foolhardiness, and foolhardiness is just as damaging as fear. Jesus was never foolhardy.

The night before his betrayal and arrest, he was filled with fear. That night the disciples slept peacefully while he sat up praying and wringing his hands with worry.

We are often afraid when we should be fearless; and fearless when we should be very much afraid.

We have problems trusting in the goodness and benevolence of our Creator.

One of the deepest and most beautiful metaphors found in Holy Scripture is the metaphor of God as shepherd. The 23 Psalm speaks of God as humanities shepherd, guiding us and leading us to green pastures and still waters, meaning and restoring us, renewing and recreating us.

The New Testament expands on this deep and important metaphor. Christ is the Good Shepherd and we are his sheep. He knows each one of us, and we know and listen to his voice. His love for us is so great, that he lays his own life down for us.

The Shepherd's love even enables us to love one another with such love that we lay our lives down daily for one another. The Shepherd's love protects us, and not even sin and death can separate us from our shepherd. Whether we live or whether we die, we belong to him. So what have we to fear?

Imagine if we lived as Christ lived. Imagine if we lived in a state of near fearlessness, and worried only about or obedience to the Father in Heaven. Imagine the courage, the faithfulness, the sacrificial love, with which we could face any trial. Imagine how the world would change if we lived our lives by giving them daily to help others in need.

The shepherd is calling to us. He knows us by name. We hear and know his voice. He calls to us saying, "Fear not, my sheep. I am with you always. Love one another, just as I have loved you."

With Christ as our shepherd, let us be fearless in the face of any adversity. Even tornados. Even Swine Flu. Even death.

Amen.