

BELIEVING IN VISIONS

Isaiah 11:1-10

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As we come to the end of this decade, I find myself reflecting on what changes I've noticed in myself and in the people who share their stories with me. What I notice more than anything is that more people are more anxious. I decided to check out my hunch and do a little research. The results are overwhelming and stunning.

There is a huge rise in the numbers of people who self-report that they feel anxious and overly-stressed. An increasing number of people are also being diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder. So more of us are feeling anxious about particular situations and events - health, climate change, politics, finances, safety...and some of us are living with diagnosable anxiety. Those are two different but related issues. More young people than ever are being treated for anxiety and depression. Among all Americans, the rate of suicide is up.

How are we coping with these feelings and illnesses? Well, some people certainly try to cope in healthy ways. They receive medical treatment and follow doctor's orders. Exercise is one of the very best antidotes. Some studies have shown that people who participate regularly in a faith community, people who pray and meditate, feel less anxious. Volunteering helps - anything that leads to a feeling of purpose and meaning. So does cultivating healthy relationships and spending time with people who cause you to laugh and feel good.

But an increasing number of people are trying to cope in anxious times by engaging in behaviors that actually make things worse. Addiction rates are rising, drug over-

dose rates are rising, and more Americans are drinking more than ever before. There is a marked increase in the amount of dangerous and binge drinking, especially noticeable among adult women.

So...Merry Christmas! Aren't you glad you came to church today to hear this good news?

It's important that we acknowledge realities like these from time to time, that we say out loud, "We live in times that are anxiety-producing." That we help one another find better ways to cope. That we realize how essential it is to be as kind and understanding with each other as we can possibly be.

Our church offers these specific and practical programs in response to the needs of our world today:

Once a month we have a caregivers' support group, facilitated by two of our Stephen Ministers, an opportunity for people who are caring for a loved one to come together, share their stories, vent their frustrations, cry together, laugh together and learn from each other.

Once a month we offer a mental health support group, facilitated by a mental health professional in our church and by one of our Stephen Ministers, an opportunity for conversation among those who are close friends and family members to anyone living with a mental health condition.

Neither of these groups cause problems to go away, but they do remind people that they are not alone. They provide strength and encouragement.

This spring, during CrossTraining - our Wednesday evening programming which begins in late February, we are offering a six-week parenting course we are calling "Pro-Active Parenting." We will talk about how parents can help establish core values for their

families, how parents can better manage different parenting styles, we'll learn about child and adolescent brain development, and about anxiety and stress.

We offer these programs as a way of saying that we believe that faith and daily life go hand in hand. We live our faith in every decision we make, in the way we treat ourselves and others.

I also firmly believe that our biblical faith contains a message for how to live in these uncertain days. It's a message we hear especially clearly during Advent, as we read from the prophet Isaiah. During the prophet's lifetime, the promised land of Israel had been taken over by the enemy forces from Babylon. The people of Israel were forced to leave their homeland, their towns, their businesses, their farms, their places of worship, and live like strangers in a strange land. When they were allowed to return, it wasn't easy, either. They'd been gone so long that some of them had started to feel at home in Babylon. Some of them had forgotten how to worship. The temple had been destroyed. During the exile and after the exile — both times were full of stress and anxiety for the people of Israel.

The prophet's job is to speak for God, and the prophet's message is one of hope and encouragement. "Keep the faith," Isaiah says. "Better days are coming." Last week we read the prophet telling people to turn their swords into plowshares, their armaments into farming implements and "don't learn war anymore." Today that vision of peace continues. This passage imagines a world where animals who are meant to fight each other are instead lying down together peaceably. This vision has inspired many artists over the centuries. Probably the most well-known painting is this one:

<https://images.app.goo.gl/K9JKiQYiCkwuDeQg6>. The American artist Edward Hicks painted 62 versions of this composition in the 1800's; it's called "The Peaceable King-

dom.” Edward Hicks was a Quaker who lived in Pennsylvania. He believed that God places within each person an inner light, and that that inner light guides us. If we are able to maintain our focus on the inner light and truth which is the presence of God in each of our hearts and souls and consciences, we are capable of great things — even achieving peace.

This wise messenger knows that what people need in anxious times is a reminder of the world God envisions for us. We need to be able to imagine a better world, and keep that vision in front of us, so that we will be motivated to work towards it. The belief that something better is possible is essential to humanity. It inspires us to do good for others, and it is vital to our emotional, mental and spiritual well-being.

Even the government knows that people need the inspiration that comes from the arts. The United States Department of Justice established a permanent home in 1935. From 1938-1941, 61 murals funded by the Public Works Arts Project were completed in the Art Deco building. Each mural revealed artistic vision of what justice in this nation should/could look like.

One of the most striking images emerged from the mind of Symeon Shimin, a Russian born immigrant to Brooklyn, New York. In 1938, Shimin was hired to paint a mural; he called it “Contemporary Justice and the Child.”

<https://images.app.goo.gl/1aSW8sS4gpMNMqay6> It took four years to complete the mural, which can still be seen on the third floor of the Department of Justice building in Washington D.C. today.

Through the eyes of an immigrant, we move from what is to what could be in the United States, left to right. On the left-hand side, Shimin depicts the brokenness of the

nation. Dooming factories billowing smoke into the sky. The haunting eye contact from a mass of poor people in shades of gray. A pair of men asleep, contorted, in the shadows.

On the right-hand side are images of the activities that lead to the construction of a just land. Note the brown hands holding the tools for reconstruction in the America of the late 1930s, decades before African Americans even had the right to vote. And see women alongside men, laying blueprints out for a just land. See the scientists, male and female, white and brown, innovating a just future. And see the way hope is depicted in the top right corner in a green land with clean air.

Finally, in the center, a mother and her child. As the prophet Isaiah says, "A little child shall lead them."

In my own life, I am aware of times when I feel at peace and times when I feel far away from that inner truth that brings peace. I am most at peace when I am living out what I feel is God's purpose for my life. And ironically, sometimes that means putting myself in situations which do not feel peaceful. When we are aware of injustice, when we are aware of suffering, when we are aware that this beautiful world God has given us is being destroyed, and we do nothing, how can we be at peace? I cannot make peace with the fact that we live in a world of gross inequality, where many people live in luxury while many other people have no place to live at all. The week before Thanksgiving, a member of our church called me to ask for my help. Her son's best friend at school was suddenly homeless. She took him in, but his mother and the other siblings had to stay in a hotel. The only homeless shelter in Lorain County that accepts children and families has been full for three weeks. I thought about that family spending Thanksgiving in a

cheap hotel room. How would the children entertain themselves? What would they eat?
Fast food meal after meal?

Thursday night Doug and I met at Crocker Park after work to do some Christmas shopping. I'm not there very often in the evening. It's beautifully decorated and so festive, and I enjoyed seeing the trees and the lights and listening to the music, but at the same time, I wasn't completely at peace. I know how many people are homeless in Cleveland and Lorain. I know that while we were focused on selecting the right gift for a member of our family, there are thousands who are focused on mere survival. I cannot be completely at peace.

But when I know that our church is involved in a variety of mission projects that make a difference, when I know that my contributions to our food drive, to our mission giving tree are helping to bring food and hope, it gives me peace. When I know that we are planting a seed for mission in our young people, when I know that members of our church served Thanksgiving dinner at Denison Avenue in Cleveland, when I know that our Thrift Shop gives clothing and household goods to anyone in need, it gives me peace.

We are not meant to be at peace every moment of the day. We are meant to be disturbed by poverty and injustice, disturbed enough to get involved, to speak up, to make a difference for good, to work towards the world Isaiah imagines for us, the better world led by a little child.

Sources cited: The interpretation of the justice mural is from Casey Thornburgh Sigmon, on Working Preacher.