

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

September 1, 2024

BIG FEELINGS:
Anxiety
Laura Bentley

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An Invitation and a Promise

This morning, we will hear a familiar story. It is the story of Mary and Martha, sisters who lived in Bethany, both followers and friends of Jesus. It is a story that has often been used to characterize women as “Mary’s” or “Marthas,” pitting them against one another, intentionally or unintentionally. It is a story that, on the surface, offers a simple dichotomy.

My invitation, and perhaps challenge, to you this morning is to hear this Scripture with fresh ears, to dig a little deeper, and listen anew to what Jesus is saying to Martha and to us. When you feel the tug of dichotomy—Mary or Martha?—resist it. When you hear Jesus speaking to two women, take that into account, but also listen for Jesus speaking to you—regardless of your gender, age, ethnicity.

While I ask you to do something, I want to offer you a promise. As we delve into the big feeling of anxiety together, I will not tell you, amid your worries and concerns and, perhaps, daily struggle with anxiety, to just calm down, to just stop being anxious, let go and let God. That is not the word we hear from Jesus this morning, and it will not be the word you hear from me.

So, with fresh ears and open hearts, let us hear this story of Mary and Martha and—guided by Scripture and the Spirit—explore the big feeling of anxiety. First, will you please join me in prayer?

Prayer for Illumination

God with us,
No matter how our week has been
or how much our minds are racing,
you call us here to be in community,
to pray, to sing, to hear the good news of your kingdom.

You call us to draw near to you
because in you there is grace, truth, hope, and life.
Through these words, may your Spirit speak to us,
and give us peace that will ripple out into the world. Amen.

Scripture: Luke 10:38-42

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her, then, to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried/anxious and distracted by many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

The Word of the Lord.

Roles and Expectations

If Martha lived in the 2010's, she may have been called a Girl Boss. This was a woman who ran the house. She had her own money, her own property, and she decided who she would welcome into her home. We don't get Martha's backstory, but this type of economic and social independence for a woman at this time was rare. The most likely explanation is that she was a widow. She may not have asked for the independence she experienced. Yet, she used it to support Jesus' ministry and to offer him and his disciples (maybe up to 72!) hospitality. She was breaking the mold—whether she wanted to or not—and she had a lot to juggle.

My own compassion for Martha greatly increased as I read this story during back-to-school season. I call it a season because, for me, it takes several weeks to get back into the rhythm of a fall schedule. Our daughter is in fourth grade this year. Our son is in pre-k. And, even with fairly young kids, our shared calendar has filled up. It is filled up with all good things—PTA events, soccer practices, Wednesday nights here, tutoring, counseling, birthday parties. But then to keep the basics going working, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, and making time for friends and family, it becomes dizzying.

You may be in a less or more hectic season of life. But in every season, we find ourselves navigating our roles and the expectations that come with them. We can find ourselves “worried and distracted by many things,” anxious and spiraling

because we can't live up to the image of who we believe we ought to be.

Martha felt the expectations on her, in her role as a woman, as a host, and as a follower of Jesus. She was to provide for the welcome and comfort of her guests. She was to do so with joy. She was doing so with no help from her sister. It's no wonder that anxiety bubbled up and spilled over in misdirected frustration.

Non-Anxious Presence

In theological education, there is an oft-repeated phrase for what it looks like to provide good pastoral care: Non-anxious presence. Pastors are to enter hospital rooms, make condolence calls, engage in sometimes heated meetings, listen to feedback, and show up in the midst of boiling over anxiety as a non-anxious presence. Easier said than done some of the time. But when we, not only pastors but siblings in the faith, when we can be a non-anxious presence in a moment of great anxiety, it is a real gift.

This term, non-anxious presence, was coined by Jewish rabbi and family systems therapist, Edwin Friedman. He wrote about his own struggle of getting caught in the spiral of anxiety, "I've been in that anxious place, trying to be something that I thought others wanted me to be. More times than I want to remember in my career, I've lost myself as I've absorbed the anxiety of the moment and the people around

me. This has resulted in pretending, defending, posturing, and reacting.”

I had a good friend when I was in seminary, who sometimes experienced panic attacks. She had a list of people who were her speed dials when she felt unable to catch her breath and to exit the cyclone spinning in her mind. She asked me if it'd be comfortable with her calling if she needed to sometimes. And I was honest, I didn't know what to do if she called me.

But she had been working with a therapist, a professional non-anxious presence, and she walked me through what she had learned she needed. What would help her to feel the ground beneath her feet again, breathe deeply, and slow down her racing thoughts. She told me that she needed to pay attention to the present. I could ask her what she could see or hear around her. I could tell her about something that was happening right in front of me. Anything to draw her attention to this moment, to this place, to this current breath.

My husband does this sometimes to calm our kids:

Name two things you can see.

Name two things you can hear.

Name two things you can smell.

Name two things you can feel.

Where are you? Are you safe here and now?

It can seem like magic. It is simply the power of a non-anxious presence bringing them into the present—this moment, this place, this current breath.

“Martha, Martha”

“Martha, Martha,” Jesus says. Jesus, the incarnate presence of God, drawn near to us, says her name and brings her into this moment: *Martha, Martha*.

One of the challenges of Scripture is similar to the challenge of getting a text or email from someone, especially someone of a different generation or culture. What do they mean by a period or ellipses or small smiley face? What is the tone— is it warm or passive-aggressive? Too often in this passage, Jesus’ tone has been assumed dismissive or belittling. “Martha, Martha” [a condescending tone with a headshake].

But God does this double naming elsewhere in Scripture, and never out of exasperation. God calls to Abraham— Abraham, Abraham— at the binding of Isaac to stop him and to draw his attention instead to the ram that God had provided. God calls Jacob’s name twice when he is to be renamed Israel; God calls Moses’ from the burning bush, and Samuel’s in the middle of the night. Jesus calls Simon Peter’s name twice before Christ is arrested and Peter’s world flipped upside down, Jesus calls Saul’s on the Damascus Road, and Martha’s, here in her home, as her sister sits listening to his teaching.

“Martha, Martha” is the invitation to notice God’s presence at a crucial moment of transformation. Jesus is grounding Martha in his presence. He is calling her to a different way of being than that of her roles and expectations, distractions and anxiety. “You are anxious and distracted by many things,” Jesus, rightfully observes, “but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

On her own, Martha had stretched the societal role she played. But she was not freed from it. She was not free within herself because of the expectations she felt from her culture, upbringing, written and unwritten rules of her gender, and the dynamics of her family.

Jesus as the non-anxious presence of God opens new possibilities for Martha. Mary had found freedom sitting at his feet. That would not be taken from her. Martha, now, was invited to do the same— to find freedom in him. To find the solid ground of presence and finally exhale that she had done enough; she was enough; she could be free.

And maybe that freedom would look still like serving, but from a place of love instead fear or worry.

A Call for All of Us

Maybe what freedom in Christ looks like for you, in this stage, in this place is different than the person beside you or the younger you. Listen, Christ calls your name again and again, to

set down the expectations that overburden and overwhelm. Christ calls your name when your anxiety is spilling out sideways as frustration for others that "just need to get it together." Christ calls your name when the expectations of your inner critic or family-of-origin or society at large are acting like a vise to your soul. Christ calls your name to ground you in his presence and to give you the freedom to exhale. To pause. To let the world fall from our shoulders. To discover what God's call for us here and now actually is.

I want to end with a blessing, written by Kate Bowler, professor at Duke Divinity and writer of many blessings for ordinary life. Take this moment as an exhale, as an invitation to be grounded in Christ, to be free in him.

This is "A blessing for when you feel like the world rests on your shoulders."

God, I know that what I am trying to carry
is far too much,
but I don't know what else to do

O God help me.

Come to me all you
who are weary and burdened,
and I will give you rest.

Matthew 11:28

Blessed are we who say,
Jesus, I'm taking You at Your word.
I am coming to You just as I am,
almost worn out, craving rest,
but still tempted to keep going like I always do,
propelled from one task to the next
as if the world depended on it.
But I know this can't go on,
for this kind of energy is a harsh driver.

Blessed are we, quietly closing the door,
willing to fold ourselves into the small space
that is the present moment,
and trust that it is Your desire, o God,
that we no longer be driven, but led.

So God, slow me down.
Place Your hand on me
and calm the beating of my heart,
deepen my breathing and quiet my mind
so I can catch up with myself,
and feel what I feel, know what I know,
and remember whose world it is
that is holding me up,
and not the other way around.

For "Before the mountains were born
or You brought forth the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting,

you are God.”

Psalm 90:2

And suddenly it is the truest thing in the world
that this small enclosure
with You here is the spacious place
where little is enough,
and I know in a new way
that not everything has to be done,
and not everything has to be done by me.
and I begin to see that it is my limits
as well as my gifts that can shape
the natural contours of what is mine to hold,
and mine to do.

It is the narrowness of the riverbanks,
after all, that gives strength to the river.

Rob Des Cotes

Depend on it.

God will take care of all that you can't.

and you too, dear one.

Amen.



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