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Psalms 94:8–19, NIV

- ⁸ *Take notice, you senseless ones among the people;
you fools, when will you become wise?*
- ⁹ *Does he who fashioned the ear not hear?
Does he who formed the eye not see?*
- ¹⁰ *Does he who disciplines nations not punish?
Does he who teaches mankind lack knowledge?*
- ¹¹ *The LORD knows all human plans;
he knows that they are futile.*
- ¹² *Blessed is the one you discipline, LORD,
the one you teach from your law;*
- ¹³ *you grant them relief from days of trouble,
till a pit is dug for the wicked.*
- ¹⁴ *For the LORD will not reject his people;
he will never forsake his inheritance.*
- ¹⁵ *Judgment will again be founded on righteousness,
and all the upright in heart will follow it.*
- ¹⁶ *Who will rise up for me against the wicked?
Who will take a stand for me against evildoers?*
- ¹⁷ *Unless the LORD had given me help,
I would soon have dwelt in the silence of death.*
- ¹⁸ *When I said, "My foot is slipping,"
your unfailing love, LORD, supported me.*
- ¹⁹ *When anxiety was great within me,
your consolation brought me joy.*

Anxiety.

The chaplains at my hospital have noticed that there has been a sharp increase in anxiety among patients, family members, and the medical staff during the Covid-19 pandemic. As a nation, we carefully count the number of deaths, the number of infected, the number who have been inoculated, and the number of those who have a right to be vaccinated because of their age or profession and are desperate to do so, but who have not yet been able to find a way to get vaccinated.

Numbers is what our media throws at us. There was a map on the front page of the New York Times recently, showing the percentage of people who have been vaccinated against the virus that causes Covid-19. The highest numbers were in the U.S., Israel, and the United Kingdom. Then came Canada, Russia, China, Brazil, India, and western Europe. Africa and much of central and South America - areas of the globe that don't have the ready access to medicine that we have - showed no vaccinations at all. It's another reminder of how blessed we are in the United States. It's also a reminder of how we attack problems in a scientific, engineered, disciplined fashion. We can throw a lot of money and smarts at a problem, and we can do it quickly. Colorado, I might add, has done a great job of getting people vaccinated; we're doing far better than most of the states in the U.S. The New York Times, like much of the news media, has been hyping the numbers, getting

us to read printed ads and watch televised and online ads from their advertisers by constantly throwing Covid-19 data at us. We can't get enough of those numbers, and we'll watching thousands of ads to get them. Our nation is great at mathematical metrics when it comes to worrying about an emergency. But what we aren't good at is dealing with the subjective side of emergencies, of things that can't be measured with numbers, that can't be attacked with science and engineering. We haven't paid a lot of attention to the stress that has been caused by people being isolated, people being fearful of getting sick or losing a loved one, people losing their work, people having to essentially home school their kids, and people not knowing what their lives will be like when this is all over. I'm certainly not a non-masker. I'm not anti-vaccine. I do believe we need to take this seriously, and I am very cognizant of the number of people who have become sick and died. I do see people suffer for weeks and then pass away with their lungs destroyed. Don't get me wrong. I know that Covid-19 is dangerous.

But I do wish that as a society we were better at helping each other deal with anxiety. And not just anxiety caused by the pandemic. We live in a high-pressured society. It takes a lot of money to take care of ourselves and our families, to get medical care, to retire comfortably. To be considered successful, to be a full-fledged member of society, you're supposed to have a smart phone,

high speed Internet, cable TV, a huge television, a new car, or maybe two new cars, a fancy place to live, and take expensive vacations, etc., etc. At least that is what the media tells us. One of the things I like about coming to Pierce every Sunday morning is that this is a community that doesn't pay as much attention to what society tells us we're supposed to own and do, to what we're supposed to accomplish. Compared to Boulder and to southern California, where I come from, the Pierce/Ault area is far less commercial. Still, there is no doubt that in America today it's hard to relax, to remain calm, to be free from anxiety. Very, very hard.

But what's intriguing is that this is nothing new. No matter what a society has, it's never enough. We push ourselves to have more. People in nations that have almost no access to corona virus vaccinations see us as living like kings, like pharaohs. They have to worry about finding food this evening for their children. They have to worry about diseases that we never see here. They have to worry about streets that are ruled by drug gangs and governments that are run by thugs. Yes, they live in anxiety and so do we. No matter how poor or wealthy you are, it's been part of the human condition since ancient times. Consider our Psalm today. The Book of Psalms is very long. They express the full range of human emotions. They are full of desperation and joy and the praise of God. The Psalms are sometimes classified as Psalms of trust in God, praise of God, laments

about terrible situations in life, thanksgiving to God, Psalms on how to live godly lives, Psalms that describe the life of Israel's kings, and Psalms to be used in formal liturgies. Of course, many Psalms can be described as fitting multiple categories. If you want support for almost any aspect of your life, and if you want it to be both holy and poetic, the Book of Psalms is the place to look. Our Psalm today, 94, is essentially a Psalm of thanksgiving.

I recently talked to a family member of a Covid-19 patient. He had been in the hospital for weeks and was currently in the ICU, intubated, with a ventilator breathing for him. His lungs were ravaged. He could live or he could die. I am, as usual, changing facts about this story to protect people's privacy. He had come to Colorado from New York, with his wife, so they could assist their son whose wife was very sick. This young woman was going to have major, risky open-heart surgery, and the in-laws were going to care for the couple's children so that their son could devote himself to his wife. As near as anyone could tell, this man, the father of the young man whose wife was sick, and who was about my age, became infected with the virus on the airplane. This man's wife became sick, too, but she had only mild symptoms. So, there they were, ironically not being able to help their son at all, because they were infected. The wife was isolated in a hotel room; the father was now in our ICU. The wife talked to the nurses daily, and the

chaplains called her almost daily, to offer emotional and spiritual support. I prayed with her on the phone, sometimes for a half hour at a time, for both her husband and their sick daughter-in-law. At one point she asked me to walk their son and daughter-in-law's pastor in to see her husband, even though Covid-19 patients were not allowed any visitors at all. I said that I was sure that a pastor would be let in. I can tell you that the policy at the hospital has now been changed, but when I brought that pastor into the hospital to see this very sick older man, I was overruled, and the pastor was sent home. He was not allowed in to pray with and bless the father of his congregation member. But yes, the policy now is to allow clergy in. What his wife, who was locked up in a hotel room 24/7, would tell me was that the biggest problem was the anxiety, the worry over her son and his wife, over her husband. The anxiety, she told me, would have driven her crazy if she hadn't been able to put her faith in God.

So, our Psalm. Here is a cut-down version of it. I've changed a couple of words to make it flow. I have not monkeyed with its meaning:

*⁸ Take notice, you senseless ones among the people;
you fools, when will you become wise?*

*⁹ Does he who fashioned the ear not hear?
Does he who formed the eye not see?*

God grants us relief from days of trouble.

*¹⁴ For the LORD will not reject his people;
he will never forsake his inheritance.*

*¹⁷ Unless the LORD had given me help,
I would soon have dwelt in the silence of death.*

¹⁸ *When I said, "My foot is slipping,"
your unfailing love, LORD, supported me.*

¹⁹ *When anxiety was great within me,
your consolation brought me joy.*

What I like the most is the last verse, and it's something that I try to remember whenever I feel stressed out. *When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy.* You know, the Hebrew word that is translated here as anxiety is, in other Bible translations, expressed as "cares of the heart". What the original Hebrew phrase really means is something like "disquieting thoughts". I like those words, disquieting thoughts – because that's what anxiety does to us. It makes it difficult to be calm, to be quiet and at peace. That's what we want in life, isn't it? To feel that all is calm within us – even if all that is outside of us is far from calm. It's God who can console us that way, who can relieve anxiety under seemingly impossible circumstances. This is why: handing over our anxiety to the most powerful entity in the cosmos, the God who created the cosmos, is radically more effective than trying to conquer anxiety ourselves. Many people, folks who are not believers, think this is a lot of B.S., that handing your worries off to God means pretending they don't exist. No. It means that we do all that we can to deal with our problems, but we don't get anxious about them. That's because we know that God, as our Psalm tells us, *knows all human plans; he knows that they*

are futile. That's why the world is in so much chaos right now. We cast aside emotional help from God. In a way, God is a micromanager, a helicopter mom. God wants to know what's going on with us every second. God doesn't just want to hear from us when the brakes on our car fail in the fast lane of the freeway or when the doctor sits us down to tell us the result of a biopsy. God wants to be with us every second. It's when we nurture that nonstop presence of God in our lives, that's when we see the truth in that incredible line in our Psalm: *When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy.*

I didn't tell you what happened with that man in the hospital, the man who was very sick with Covid-19, with a tube in his throat and his lungs horribly damaged by the virus. We'll call him Mike. He died. Mike died without ever having his son and daughter-in-law's pastor come and see him. I had to tell his wife that the pastor was denied entry to the hospital – just hours before Mike passed away. But I was able to tell her that I'm a reverend and that I stood at Mike's doorway and asked God to lift Mike up, to hold him close, to heal him if possible, but to take Mike to be with God forever, if healing was not possible. She was silent for a good thirty seconds after I said this, and I thought maybe the call had been dropped. But then she came back on the line and told me that she was very thankful that someone cared enough about Mike to talk to God for him. I

told her that it was my job, not as a chaplain, but as a pastor. By then, she had told me, over the course of numerous phone calls, about Mike's life. I told her that I knew he was a very good man, and that Mike was a true believer. She told me that it was very sad to lose him, but that she knew that he was just fine.

Anxiety is a monster that never stops chasing us. We cannot conquer it alone. Please don't try. Turn to God and do not be afraid to get medical help. God is both the Great Creator and the Personal Comforter. The universe is no accident. We are no accident. God created us in God's image and with a purpose – to walk in the Kingdom of God on Earth and for all of eternity. Our biggest burden along the way is anxiety. That's why we have to hand it off.

Mike's daughter-in-law had that heart surgery - and it went well. She's at home with her husband, her children, and her husband's mother – and doing great. Mike's wife has decided to stay and live in this area permanently. Please pray briefly with me.

God, our prayer for today is very simple. Reach into our minds, into our hearts and wrap your mighty hand around our anxiety. Crush it. Let us live every day with absolutely no fear of what is to come, or what has already come upon us. Let us live joyfully, with freedom, and with incredible confidence. Let us have absolutely no "disquieting thoughts." Amen.