

“Fearful Hesitation”

A Sermon Prepared by Guest Pastor Gary N. Nottis for
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Author Angeles Arrien tells the following story in her book, *Nourishing the Soul*.

Recently I witnessed a moment of deep soulfulness between two strangers. I was at a bus stop, sitting next to a woman reading a newspaper, but I was totally engrossed in the performance of a fourteen-year-old on a skateboard. He had his baseball cap turned around with the bill in the back, and he was skating beautifully and very fast. He buzzed by us once, then twice. When he came by a third time, he accidentally knocked the woman’s newspaper out of her hands. She said, “Oh, why don’t you grow up!”

I watched him glide down to the corner of the block, where he stood talking with his buddy. The two of them kept looking back over their shoulders at the woman. She hesitated for a moment, then rolled up her paper, tucked it under her arm, and walked into the street, motioning to him. “Won’t you come here?” she called. “I want to talk to you.”

Very reluctantly, he skated over to her, turned his cap around with the bill in front, and said, “Yeah?”

She said, “What I meant to say was that I was afraid that I might get hurt. I apologize for what I did say.”

His face lit up, and he said, “How cool!”¹

I am sure that nearly all of you can relate to what happened to the woman reading her newspaper. While the circumstances were probably different, I think each of you can remember one or more times when you were frightened by something or someone. During that past event, you might have become gradually or suddenly afraid. Either way, you likely reacted by trying to avoid what frightened you. You might have even lashed out with a degree of anger, just as the startled woman of our narrative did when she called out to the boy, “Oh, why don’t you grow up!”

As the woman of the story realized, her outburst was driven by fear. Fear is related to, but different from, anxiety, which is one of the few core emotions that we possess. Anxiety is a feeling we get when we anticipate that some sort of future event might cause us harm. Fear is something we experience from a specific and present threat.² We are born with the capacity to feel both anxiety and fear in particular situations. We also learn over time when to really pay attention to those feelings.

¹ This story by Angeles Arrien, and originally published in her book, *Nourishing the Soul*, is reproduced on page 493 of Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat’s book, *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life* (New York: Touchstone, Simon & Schuster, 1998).

² Lynn Clark, *SOS Help for Emotions: Managing Anxiety, Anger & Depression*, 2nd ed. (Bowling Green, Kentucky: SOS Programs & Parents Press, 2002).

Psychologists tell us that we actually live with only five kinds of fear or anxiety; concerns over death, harm to our minds and bodies, loss of freedom, abandonment, and humiliation. All of our other worries stem from these five.³ Healthy anxiety and fear serve to protect our wellbeing because they help us to avoid something dangerous or seek to force it away from us. However, fear and anxiety may also give rise to sadness and anger, which can harm us and others.⁴ Recall from our opening story that the woman's outburst hurt the feelings of the youth on the skateboard and probably caused him to distrust her. In addition, the woman felt guilt and remorse.

Why am I spending time talking about fear and anxiety? It is because those emotions are clearly evident in this morning's scripture reading from Acts 9. This text provides us with the well-known account of the conversion of a Pharisee named Saul, who would later become the apostle we know as Paul. Taking the story at face value, we can envision that Saul was very frightened by his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. Perhaps he feared for his life. Surely, he dreaded harm to his body and loss of freedom because he became blind during the experience. Saul had to be led to Damascus by the men who were travelling with him and was unable to eat or drink for three days (Acts 9:8-9). If that happened to me, I'd be pretty scared. Wouldn't you?

But, even though Saul had this frightening experience, I think the person to whom we can best relate is the man named Ananias. Let's consider that individual for a moment. Ananias was a member of a group of Jesus' Jewish followers who resided in Damascus. That assembly of believers constituted a church, not affiliated with any buildings other than a synagogue. This meant that they still saw themselves as Jews and worshipped among fellow Jews. That group of believers was probably established by missionaries from the Jerusalem church sometime between 30 and 35 CE.⁵ It was part of a network of other small groups of Jesus' followers spread throughout Judea and Galilee. Each of those faith communities functioned independently of each other, but was linked to the others by missionaries and messengers who facilitated the exchange of news and other information.⁶ Church members lived each day struggling to be faithful to God and Jesus in the face of hostile societies.

Those followers of Jesus in Damascus were certainly aware of the persecutions being carried out by Saul. Later in his life, Paul would say of that period, "I violently persecuted God's church. I did my best to destroy it. I was far ahead of my fellow Jews in my zeal for the traditions of my ancestors" (Galatians 1:13-14, New Living Translation). The Book of Acts notes that Saul gave his approval to the stoning and death of Stephen, a man of spirit and wisdom in the Jerusalem church (Acts 8:1). According to Acts 8:2 (New Living Translation), Saul "went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison." Then in Acts 9:2, which we heard earlier, Saul requested and received permission to identify and imprison any

³ Karl Albrecht, "The (Only) Five Basic Fears We All Live By," *Psychology Today*, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/brainsnacks/201203/the-only-five-basic-fears-we-all-live>

⁴ Ibid; and Clark, *SOS Help for Emotions*.

⁵ Veselin Kesich, "The Church Before Paul," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1999): 3-36.

⁶ Loveday Alexander, "Mapping Early Christianity: Acts and the Shape of Early Church History," *Interpretation* 57, no. 2 (2003): 163-173.

of Jesus' followers who were associated with the synagogues in Damascus. It is likely that the members of the Damascus church, including Ananias, knew Saul was coming and were fearful of what was going to happen to them.

After Saul encountered the living Jesus, Ananias received a vision from the Lord commanding him to meet Saul in Damascus. In the passage of Acts 9:11-12 (New International Version), the Risen One declared to Ananias, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

But, Ananias responded to Jesus with fearful hesitation. He told the Lord, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name" (Acts 9:13-14, New International Version). However, Jesus firmly replied, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:15-16, New International Version).

Can you imagine how Ananias must have felt? He knew Saul's reputation as dangerous and fanatical. Contact with Saul meant loss of freedom, humiliation, and perhaps even death. It could result in the destruction of the church in Damascus! Ananias surely felt biased against Saul. But, the resurrected Jesus commanded him to go to Saul and accept him as a fellow believer. That must have really tested Ananias' faith! He had to be filled with great fear and anxiety, and perhaps even anger. No wonder he argued with Jesus!

Yet, as attested by today's text from Acts 9, Ananias was obedient to the Risen One and did as he was told to do, despite his misgivings (Acts 9:17-18). He went to Saul and laid his hands on him, saying, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:17, New International Version). Saul's sight returned and he was baptized. Afterwards, he was allowed to stay with the followers of Jesus in Damascus and began to eat and drink again (Acts 9:18-19). Ananias probably took part in those events.

I marvel at this story. How did Ananias overcome his fear to be obedient to Jesus? What gave him the ability to embrace someone who might have once persecuted him as a member of his church? The answer is that Ananias trusted in God and Jesus, and that trust helped him manage his fear.

Ananias knew that God could bring about the redemption of anyone, even someone like Saul. He may have even witnessed this before his experience with Saul. In reflecting on this truth, the words of Psalm 30 might have entered his mind. It is a hymn that celebrates personal transformation as a result of God's work in an individual's life. Verses 11-12 (New Living Translation) tell us, "You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy, that I might sing praises to you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever!"

I also think that Ananias' baptismal vows flooded back into his memory. He had embraced Jesus as his Lord and pledged to be faithful to him, not only in his words and thoughts, but in his deeds as well. No doubt, Ananias' anxiety and fear caused him to

wrestle with what his vows required of him in the case of Saul. Like the story contained in this morning's gospel reading from John 21, where Jesus questioned Peter, we can imagine Jesus asking Ananias repeatedly in his mind, "Do you love me?" And of course, Ananias had to respond, "Yes, Lord!" and do as he was told. How many of us could have done that?

The story of Ananias is an important one for us to think about as we look to bring new life to this congregation. We would like to see our pews filled with people, mostly just like us. However, as we are well aware, the population of our surrounding communities has changed. Many of our neighbors are quite different from us in terms of upbringing, worldviews, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and much more. Yet, in order for our congregation to increase, God and Jesus are calling us, like Ananias, to accept them as they are and to show them the promise of discipleship with our Lord. As Jesus said to Peter, "Take care of my sheep" and "Feed my sheep" (John 21:16-17, New International Version).

We will need to invite those living near our church to join with us, be open to whoever might come through our doors, and not hesitate to welcome them, even those who are different from us. Our recent declaration of being an Open and Affirming church is a big step in that direction. But, we must do much more. We will need to set about the task of drawing attention to our congregation, not just through publicity, but by the creation of a great local mission to serve the needs of others and that will make people think of St. John's. We will need to visit our neighbors, get to know them, listen to their hurts and hopes, and help them with those things as best as we can. And then, when it feels right, we will need to invite them to worship and to grow in faith with us.

Naturally, some of us will experience anxiety and fearful hesitation. But remember, Ananias was called to do things for Christ at far greater personal risk than you and I will face. Further, God and Jesus want us to stop and examine our anxieties and fears, as well as the anger and bias that can grow from them, just like the woman in our opening story did. Maybe what we fear or worry about involves personal preference that serves us more than God, Jesus, and our faith community.

We need to trust in God and know that the Holy One can redeem anyone, even someone like Saul, and call him or her into the fellowship of believers. If we will try, then the words of the psalmist can become our own. "You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy, that I might sing praises to you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever! (Psalm 30:11-12, New Living Translation). Amen.