

## Separation Anxieties

Job 23: 1-9    Matthew 26: 36-46

The sermon title is a term that gets used to describe the anxious states of infants and young children who are parted from their parent, usually mommy, for a period of time, sometimes even a very brief period like when mommy is simply not in sight. It's said that junior is experiencing "separation anxiety." In that mode, the child feels abandoned and alone, and the anxiety gets expressed with a big "waaah!"

There are plenty of other separation anxieties, like the parent who can't bear to leave their screaming child at the daycare. The parent gets paralyzed by the wailing of their 3 year old, assuring them everything will be okay, that mommy does love them, blah, blah, blah. Mommy (and daddies, too) seem to be utterly clueless to the reality that their three old totally *owns* them. That peewee knows – **knows** – that if she screams for her mommy, mommy will instantly appear. Being left alone at the daycare? Not so fast, mommy. In a flash, princess has mommy's full and undivided attention. When daycare staff insist that mommy cannot stay and spend the whole day with princess, that mommy **must** leave, two minutes later princess has made three new friends and has forgotten that mommy exists.

Sometimes the parent simply cannot break their sense of needing to be there for their child. In fact, they understand "being there for their child" in the literal sense of being **there** for their *college* student. They've named these the "helicopter parents" who hover and circle college campuses, who imagine that the expression "being there" for your child means being **right there on the spot** where the young adult is inhabiting, doing so in case the young adult needs the slightest thing, like a nail clipper or a roll of quarters to do laundry. This is separation anxiety for the adults. Frankly, most students want those parents out and away; it's the parents who can't separate and have anxiety.

Quite frankly, this whole notion of separation anxiety among little children is clearly appropriate to adults and their life situations. The same sentiments of loneliness and abandonment that afflict the child's emotional state are the same feelings that afflict us as adults in certain situations.

I read a blog post by someone who wrote that social anxiety was really the product of **other** people. I don't think that's quite right since we are the creators of our own emotions, whatever they may be. However, he did make the point that our relational experience of others can provoke anxiety in social settings, that our anxiety can be determined by the behavior of others.

Actually it **is** a type of separation anxiety when we fail to feel connected to others in social settings. If we are not welcomed, we know and we feel shunned and excluded, provoking that similar sense of loneliness and abandonment.

The whole issue of the flying the Confederate flag was simply to get folks to acknowledge that there is such a thing as black history in America and in our

community, and it's ugly as sin. Once you acknowledge that there is such a thing as black history, then the Confederate flag and all of the ways it has been used reveals it clearly and unequivocally as a symbol of hate. Not one commissioner made even the slightest recognition after hours of testimony over several months that black history even exists. That tells a big segment of our diverse community that you don't matter, indeed, **you** hardly exist. It is the public shunning of a race of people in favor of the claims of another race of people.

Generally, as adults, we find ways of coping with our anxieties generated in social situations. We seek out a place where we're welcome. Many in the black community did not engage this flag issue. They wanted to avoid the shunning that they expected from their neighbors. They wanted to address something else, perhaps believing that something else would break through the wall of separation that is so clear in our community. Perhaps it's easier to stay home and stay close to your own people when the majority of the community is telling you that you don't matter, only white history matters.

Digging down in this emotion, we discover we have a very basic sense of wanting to belong, to be included, to be made a part of something, because we understand ourselves to be dependent to a certain degree on the acceptance and positive experience of others. Separation anxieties can be commonplace and are most often overcome when we have a sense of belonging, caring, trust, and respect from others. But set us into a hostile, threatening environment, and strange things start happening as fear and anxiety take over. We begin to question all kinds of things that we had not considered before.

As we hear Job's words, we can hear his anxiety. You know Job's story, how he has lost everything, including his health, but still keeps his now-miserable life. Having been a good and righteous and faithful man throughout his life, he is at a complete loss to understand how the God of his life's faith and devotion could allow the series of tragic, ugly, life-sapping events to occur. Isn't God supposed to protect and save him? Is this punishment from God? If so, what caused this sentence to be imposed?

Let's listen to Job's pleading. Job identifies his troubles as coming directly from the hand of God.

*Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning.*

Job has never spoken directly to God, and feels that this is warranted. Job simply needs to get an audience with God, like you would seek an audience with an earthly royal to present your case, seeking justice. Realize that underlying Job's complaint is that the events that have beset him are unjust. Such tragedies could only be justified if Job himself was an evil and sinful man. He insists that he isn't. So he is saying:

*If only I knew where I might find him, if only I could go to his dwelling!  
I would state my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments.*

Job remains confident that this has all been some kind of horrible mistake. Someone must have gotten Job fingered for someone else's sinfulness, or maybe it was someone else named Job. If Job can plead his case, he's certain that God is just and God will make things right once again. But the way it stands now, God has made a serious bunch of mistakes as far as Job is concerned. Do you get the sense that accusing God of having goofed up is not such a great idea? Yeah.

*I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say to me. Would he oppose me with great power? No; he would not press charges against me.*

Job is very confident he would be held blameless once he made his case before God. He doesn't have much chance of that happening as he admits in the closing verses of today's passage:

*If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.*

Job is clearly anxious because he has hit the limit which leaves him ultimately separated from the God of his devotion, unable to learn what he has done wrong, and even more, with no opportunity to re-affirm the justice of God. You'll have to read the rest of Job to see how that comes out, but the point is to witness that Job's anxiety comes from his separation from God, and from the resultant belief that Job is actually quite alone, and feeling totally abandoned by his God.

Consider Jesus' plight in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is at this retreat location to pray, knowing that time is very short. He has already celebrated the last supper with his disciples. The hour is late and the rumors of the daylight anticipate a nighttime of foreboding. It is a time of tense anticipation, the kind of time when you want your friends nearby, the people on whom you can lean, get support, and keep perspective as you try to weather an approaching storm in your life. Jesus has his disciples, such as they are. Unfortunately, they're the best he can get. He urges them to stand by him, as his anxiety about the hour breaks forth like a flood.

Indeed, Jesus' words from this episode are the most human and most memorable expressions. Some complain that Jesus was God and truly had no fear. It is as much heresy to state that Jesus was God and deny his humanity as it to claim Jesus was human and deny his divinity; Jesus is to be known as fully divine and fully human. Here we see his humanity revealed in all of its frailty, vulnerability, and weakness.

He says, *My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.* He moves away from his disciples to be alone, likely still confident that they would be there for him in this time of his greatest concern. He needs this time to reassure himself of the presence of God; that God is there with him.

His prayer to God is heartfelt: *My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will but as you will.* Listen to that again.

How different this is from Job, right? Job feels that the evil that has befallen him is unjust punishment from God, and Job believes that God has made a mistake. In fact, Job is eager to point out God's mistake **to God**.

Jesus believes that the evil coming toward him arises from the tide of human evil, and while admitting he would rather not drink from that cup of human sinfulness, if it is God's will, then God's will must be done. Jesus ultimately accepts God's will as it is.

Job cannot seem to locate God; everywhere he would seek God, God cannot be found. If Job cannot find God, then Job cannot receive the justice that he feels is his due. Job feels alone, abandoned, and even betrayed.

However, Jesus knows **exactly** where God is. It isn't that God has landed in the Garden of Gethsemane; it is that Jesus knows God hears and responds to prayer. Jesus has been in relationship to God through prayer throughout his life and God is Jesus most intimate friend. Jesus' prayer shows the conviction that God has indeed been there with Jesus and heard his prayer.

Jesus goes back to his friends, the chief among his disciples, his most trusted and most worthy disciples – Peter, James and John – the fishermen, you'll recall. Are they standing with the one they call Messiah, Savior, Lord? They're asleep. They, too, have abandoned Jesus in his moment of greatest need. Jesus' disappointment is evident.

Jesus returns to prayer with God, further affirming that although the disciples have abandoned him, God has not. It is largely a repetition, and then we hear the sequence a third time as Jesus returns a third time to prayer to God as the disciples remain deep asleep. For Jesus, there is no separation anxiety.

My prayer for each of us would be that we, too, would not experience separation anxiety when we find our life's journey turned upside down by events, or if we feel that a tide of evil has begun to swamp us, or if we find enough discouragement in our lives that we feel abandoned, alone and begin despairing. May we trust faithfully and confidently in our God who loves, forgives, and makes all things new. May we know that our God is with us and goes with us always.