

Children's Moment *What to do when we're anxious*

Good morning, boys and girls.

Do you know the story of Goldilocks and the three bears?

After our time together, maybe you can read it with your Mom and Dad.

If you remember the story, Goldilocks was lost. She was tired, afraid and hungry. That's when we found the home where the three bears lived. She was afraid to go into the bears' home, but she did. What Goldilocks found helped her. She didn't sit in the big, hard chair or the middle-sized, soft chair, but the little chair that was just right. She didn't eat the big bowl of porridge that was too hot or the middle-sized bowl of porridge that was too cold, but the small bowl that was just right. After that, she found just the right-sized bed and fell asleep – until the bears came home!

All of us are just like Goldilocks.

We're afraid of getting sick. But we don't know what to do to stay well.

After a while, we're tired, afraid and we're hungry for spiritual food.

We go to places that scare us. But we see people acting different ways.

Some people over-react. They buy too much stuff, like toilet paper.

They blame other people for their fear. They're hiding, not looking for what's just right. They're sitting on the hard chair eating the porridge that's too hot.

Some people under-react. They don't buy anything. They complain about people who take precautions and stay home. They ignore the rules that are in place to help everyone get better. They're sitting on the soft chair eating porridge that's too cold.

Some of us are like Goldilocks. They look for what's just right and then they do what's right. They stay home so everyone will be safe. They only buy what they need and share with others who don't have anything. They don't blame others. Most important, they pray to God, asking for everyone to get well together. That's the best way to be.

Who will you be?

Let's pray ...

Message: “What Would Jesus Pray?”

I invite you to pray for those who are sick and those who have died from the coronavirus. The latest count is 650,000 worldwide who are confirmed, 30,300 who have died.¹ Many healthcare professionals are ill. *Let us pray ...* Thank you for your prayers.

That may have been an uncomfortable moment for some of us, particularly if children are present. Paul tells us “*don’t be anxious about anything*” (Philippians 4:6). After teaching the disciples a prayer, Jesus asked a rhetorical question, “*Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life?*” (Matthew 6:27). Yet worry and anxiety aren’t easy to manage. We all have our ups and downs.

I changed the scriptures and focus of this message because it’s important for us to reflect theologically on what we’re feeling. Theological reflection is the process of looking to see how God is present in our human experience. God is present in our discomfort. Let’s spend this time reflecting on how God is present in our fear and anxiety and what that means to our life.

There’s one thing I need to say upfront: the discomfort we’re feeling is grief.² There’s an enlightening article posted on Facebook by the Harvard Business Review. Scott Berinato, the author, looked at what was going on and realized that everyone in the world is experiencing grief. So he talked to David Kessler, the world’s foremost expert on grief.³ We may not be experiencing grief to the same degree or intensity, but we are experiencing one of a number of griefs.

Normally, we associate grief with the death of a loved one. There are other kinds of grief. We grieve the loss of a job, a divorce, an accident or major illness, or when violence, abuse or crime occurs. There’s a strong, visceral response. Our whole being is affected – mind, body and spirit. Emotionally, we’re off balance. Mentally, we find ourselves replaying certain memories over and over. Physically, we may not be

¹ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

² Source: Harvard Business Review (hbr.org), Facebook post,

³ David Kessler and Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss*, ISBN-10 1476775559. Visit www.grief.com for more information.

caring for our appearance or health. Spiritually, we can find ourselves disconnected, asking “why?”.

There are other kinds of loss that we can grieve. Isolation, loneliness, boredom, frustration, shortage, finances and limited freedom are all forms of loss. The loss of normalcy, connection and economic impact is affecting us all at the same time. Kessler mentions “anticipatory grief.”⁴ Anticipatory grief is real. It’s the loss of what was and will be. It’s the coming storm. All of us are dealing with this kind of grief right now.

We’re all grieving for our loss of safety and security. The illusion has been shown to be false. We’re grieving for the failure of leaders around the world at all levels. We’re grieving for the constant upheaval and changes in our lives and the lives of our children. We’re grieving for our loss of freedom. It’s hard to stay at home, if you have one. And we know the changes we’re facing aren’t complete. We aren’t sure what the future will look like. And we’re all facing it at the same time.

There are steps we’ll all go through. The five steps are denial, anger, bargaining, sadness and acceptance. Kessler suggests a sixth step, meaning. We can find meaning in what comes out of our experience. We all respond differently. We don’t go through the steps in order. We can be good one moment, accepting what is, and then find ourselves back in denial over a small thing. That’s where the phrase “the straw that broke the camel’s back” comes from.

Now I’m here to offer spiritual advice, not to make anyone feel guilty. Don’t be ashamed if you’re sad, anxious or angry. Those are normal, God-given feelings and emotions. It’s healthy to acknowledge them and then work through the process. It’s not healthy when we get “stuck,” when we ignore our emotions or when we artificially try to force ourselves to respond in a certain way.

What can we do to work through our grief? I invite you to turn to God. Specifically, I invite you to go to God in prayer. I know, that’s one of the most misused phrases you may ever hear. But there’s real truth behind it. Jesus shows us the way. Let’s unpack it a bit and see.

⁴ *Ibid*

When the disciples asked Jesus how they were to deal with their grief he replied, “*This is what I want you to do: ask God for whatever is in keeping with the things I’ve revealed to you. Ask in my name, according to my will, and God will most certainly give it to you. And your joy will be a river overflowing its banks!*” (John 16:23-24, MSG).

How do we go to God? In prayer. That makes sense. Start with God. But there’s an important part we can’t miss, “*according to Jesus’ will*” (v23). It leads us to a question we need to consider when we go to God:

“What would Jesus pray?”

There’s a simple way to find out. Look at Jesus’ prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-46). We read it together earlier. Jesus has just come from his last meal with the disciples. Jesus, their rabbi, teacher and friend, gave them amazing lessons on humility and grace. He washed their feet, a job only the lowliest of servants would do. He made a new covenant - a new relationship, with them based on the bread and cup, the sacrament of communion. They shared a good meal and time together. Things were going so well.

Then Jesus showed them what was behind the curtain. He called out Judas, who was to betray him in a few hours. Jesus told Peter, the leader of the disciples, he would publicly deny him. Jesus tells the disciples to pack their bags, take their money and be prepared to flee. They’ll be considered criminals, as Jesus will be.

What’s their response? They’re all upset. Anticipatory grief sets in. Jesus is upset. Judas left. Peter is silent. The disciples follow Jesus but are “*overcome by grief*” (Luke 22:45).

What does Jesus do? He goes to the garden to pray. That’s what he always did. When the group gets there, Jesus gives what may seem to be strange advice. He says, “*Pray that you won’t give in to temptation*” (v40). Then he walks a short distance away, kneels down and prays. Jesus is showing us what to do.

What does “pray that you won’t give in to temptation” mean?

I believe Jesus is showing those who follow him a way to deal with grief. Those closest to him then and those of us who want to know Jesus and his way of life now need these words. There are unhealthy, me-first

ways to deal with the grief we share and there are healthy, God-first ways to deal with our common grief.

We all react in different ways. Psychologists tell us the responses fall into three broad categories:

- **Over-reaction:** we see this in people who are panicking. They need to do something, right now. A good example is those who bought enough toilet paper to last for years. You're stocking for any doomsday scenario. Bring on the zombie apocalypse!
- **Under-reaction:** we see this in people who are taking no action at all. They aren't willing to stay at home and just think they should be able to go about their regular lives. The Florida spring breakers are a good example of this. They were thinking of their own interests more than what it might mean for others.

Preparation is good, but you can see where over-reaction and under-reaction lead: no balance. That's not a healthy place for us to be. The temptation to horde or to ignore others isn't a loving, caring response to grief. Unhealthy anticipatory grief is really anxiety. That's what puts the dark, negative images in our minds, the worst-case scenarios.

The third type of response is called the Goldilocks response:

- We may not like the situation or feel like we're comfortable with it, but we can live with it and maintain our balance. Those who respond this way will stay at home, be thrifty and care for themselves and others. They understand that if they're unwell, they can't help others.

If your soul is healthy and well, it's more likely your mind and body are as healthy and well as they can be under the circumstances. You're ready and able to help others, to have empathy and show compassion.

Don't ignore the negative images – your mind won't let you do that and it can be painful to force it. The goal is to find balance in the things you're thinking. For example, to calm yourselves, come into the present. Name five things in the room. Breathe. Realize that nothing you're anticipating has happened yet. Trust God and let go of what you can't control. This is familiar advice for those who pray, meditate or

practice mindfulness, which is what Jesus' followers have been doing for 2,000 years. We have something to offer to other people.

Let's return to the garden. Jesus kneels down and prays, "*God, if it's your will, take this cup of suffering away from me*" (v42). Jesus doesn't want to suffer. He knows death is coming. Jesus has been telling the disciples about his death and resurrection for weeks. He knows that, after all, Jesus is divine. But Jesus is also human. He knows what the Romans do to prisoners. He's seen people who have been crucified. It's a terrible way to die that takes days.

Jesus is fully aware of what he's facing in less than 24 hours.

Yet notice what he prays. Jesus doesn't pray, "God, send an angel army to save me." He doesn't pray, "God, get rid of those who oppose me." He doesn't even pray, "God, make me numb to my pain."

Jesus prays, "... not my will but your will must be done" (v42).

Luke, the Gentile physician, tells us what happens next. A heavenly angel appeared to Jesus and strengthened him. God won't leave us, even when things are difficult, particularly during prayer. God will strengthen you through the Holy Spirit so you can continue to pray for God's will to be done in your life and in the lives of others.

Jesus' prayer isn't done. Saying the words was important; that's how we name our pain. We need to acknowledge our grief. Jesus is the example. He doesn't deny his grief. Jesus admits he doesn't want to suffer and die. That's dealing with anger.

This emotional, mental, physical and spiritual process isn't easy.

It's hard work. Jesus is in anguish, even after the angel appears. He knows God is listening. Jesus prays even more earnestly. He prays so hard that Luke tells us "*his sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground*" (v45).

It took time for Jesus to work through the bargaining, sadness and acceptance of what was coming. But he did. Jesus shows us he's human when he gets a little snippy with the disciples, who have fallen asleep, overcome by their fears. But he was prepared and ready. Jesus knew the meaning of his life and what was to come. Accepting his grief, Jesus confidently went forward to what was to follow.

We aren't Jesus. Nor are we Goldilocks. We know the threats to our soul and life are real. The pandemic is real. It doesn't care about what we think. It doesn't respect boundaries. It doesn't care about politics, religion, ethnicity, geography, income or social status. We can't ignore it. We may not be able to avoid it. It requires us to do something we find very difficult.

We have to think of others. We have to be willing to give up what we hold onto in our self-interest to contribute to the health of the group, the health of the world. And that's hard. We can find understanding and meaning from our shared experience, but it will come at a cost. We'll agonize over it, but when we find the compassionate way Jesus shows us, then we'll be able to move forward. The way for each of us, as members of a global community, to get better is to come together. When we work for our common good, share our experiences and help one another, not only does everyone get better, we get better. That's why recovery groups like AA are so successful.

Trust God. Take your anxiety, grief and fear to Jesus. Accept his love and seek his will in prayer.

One last note: during this time of shared grief, it's a good time to stock up on compassion. Everyone has different levels of fear and grief. It manifests in different ways. If someone gets a little snippy or shows some unusual anger you can think, "that's not like this person. That's how they're dealing with this. I'm seeing their fear and anxiety." So be patient. Think about who others are and not who they seem to be in the moment.

Jesus did that all the time. He reminds us over and over again not to be afraid because we're God's beloved children. Nothing can separate us from God's love.

I encourage you to go to God in prayer. Your life will be better when you do.

Let us pray ...

Reflection & Prayer

For all those who faithfully announce your Word, Lord, we pray.

Enable us to recognize your presence in our neighbors; make us attentive to the poor and the unfortunate.

Lord, we pray for those who suffer in their workplace and for those who are without work, that their dignity may be respected.

For prisoners and those forgotten by society, keep us in solidarity with their suffering, O Source of comfort, we pray.

For abandoned children, that they may find peace with those who welcome them, Lord, we pray.

For scholars and researchers, that their work may benefit all humanity, Lord, we pray.

For those who have responsibilities in public life, that they may act with integrity and for the good of all, Lord, we pray.

God of all the living, enable us to surrender ourselves to you in silence and in love. Surrendering ourselves to you does not come easily to our human condition. But you intervene in the deepest recesses of our being and your will for us is the radiance of a hope. In Jesus' name we pray, amen

Sending with Blessing *Taize – Ordinary Time 3*

Bless us, Christ Jesus; you always come to us wherever we may be.

Psalm 77:1-9, 11-15 (CEB)

I cry out loud to God -

out loud to God so that he can hear me!

During the day when I'm in trouble I look for my Lord.

At night my hands are still outstretched and don't grow numb;
my whole being refuses to be comforted.

I remember God and I moan.

I complain, and my spirit grows tired. *Selah*

You've kept my eyelids from closing.

I'm so upset I can't even speak.

I think about days long past;

I remember years that seem an eternity in the past.

I meditate with my heart at night;

I complain, and my spirit keeps searching:

“Will my Lord reject me forever?

Will he never be pleased again?

Has his faithful love come to a complete end?

Is his promise over for future generations?

Has God forgotten how to be gracious?

Has he angrily stopped up his compassion?” *Selah*

But I will remember the Lord's deeds;

yes, I will remember your wondrous acts from times long past.

I will meditate on all your works;

I will ponder your deeds.

God, your way is holiness!

Who is as great a god as you, God?

You are the God who works wonders;

you have demonstrated your strength among all peoples.

With your mighty arm you redeemed your people;

redeemed the children of Jacob and Joseph. *Selah*

Luke 22:39-46 (CEB)

Jesus left and made his way to the Mount of Olives, as was his custom, and the disciples followed him. When he arrived, he said to them, “Pray that you won’t give in to temptation.” He withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed. He said, “Father, if it’s your will, take this cup of suffering away from me. However, not my will but your will must be done.” Then a heavenly angel appeared to him and strengthened him. He was in anguish and prayed even more earnestly. His sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground. When he got up from praying, he went to the disciples. He found them asleep, overcome by grief. He said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray so that you won’t give in to temptation.”