

# “The Anatomy of Angst”

sermon digest

October 26, 2008

Matthew 10:26-42

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Lucy has her sign out, “Psychiatric Help 5 ¢.” Linus appears, thumb in mouth, hugging his blanket, and says, “the only thing that keeps me going is this blanket. . . I need help!” Dr. Lucy moves immediately to identify the appropriate label for Linus’ fear, so she lists possible phobias that may be disturbing to Linus: *hypengyophobia*, fear of responsibility; *ailurophobia*, cats; *climacophobia*, climbing stairs; *thalassophobia*, the ocean; *gephyrophobia*, crossing bridges. Finally Lucy arrives at *pantophobia*. Linus wants to know, “What’s that?” And Dr. Lucy declares, “Everything!” The cartoon ends with a eureka moment; Linus yells, “That’s it!”

The cartoon in Robert Short’s *The Gospel According to Peanuts* is part of a bigger picture. The feature article appeared in *Time*, March 31, 1961, “The Anatomy of Angst,” and described the plague of anxiety for moderns a half-century ago: “It speaks of man’s dreaded loss of identity, of a desperate need to make contact with his fellow man with the world and with whatever may be beyond the world. Above all, it speaks of God grown silent.” The age of reason had taken away the crutch of religion, thus, the article concludes, “man is alone in a meaningless cosmos, subject only to the blind forces of evolution and responsible only to himself.” According to Short, Charles Schulz ran the *Peanuts* cartoon on the heels of the *Time* article providing Lucy’s interpretation of the “Angst” with a touch of tension-relieving humor.

**Terror is basic to human existence.** Halloween approaches as child’s play, scary costumes and the annual reruns of slasher movies, but the real fears of real life are far more threatening than the fiction that toys with our emotions. Human history is filled with terror. Jewish Zealots attempted to terrorize Romans, mostly soldiers in Palestine, at the time of Christ. In twelfth century Iran, a group of Ismailis (Shiite) Muslims conducted terrorist attacks on religious and political Sunni leaders; sound familiar? Terrorism has been called “the poor man’s atomic bomb” in the modern age. A succession of terrorist groups organized as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) have operated since the 1967 Six-Day War with Israel. Europe was terrorized by the Baader-Meinhoff Gang and the Sicilian Mafia in the 70’s and 80’s, often coordinating efforts with the PLO. The hijacking and destruction of U.S. airliners, and the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center introduced the age of terror to U.S. soil well before the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, and most of us remember the civil war at home that raged during the Vietnam War abroad. Known as the Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski was arrested in 1996 after killing three people and injuring 23, supposedly to save the environment. Timothy McVeigh attacked the Oklahoma City Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in 1995 on the anniversary of the federal attack on the Waco compound of David Koresh. The year 2000 approached with numerous warnings about the complete collapse of civilization at the change of the calendar due to a computer glitch. People left home, withdrew funds from banks, and stockpiled food and water in anticipation of a global disaster. The Y2K fear was a joke until we learned that a major attack on Seattle was thwarted by the FBI on New Year’s Eve, 1999. No doubt, September 11, 2001, will be remembered as the worst day in US history for the present generation, at least until the next disaster arrives.

And now, the lead story in every newscast is the global economic terror. Are we on the verge of another Great Depression? Will the “bail-out” work? Will I loose my job, my house? Will I ever be able to retire? Will we have to share the poverty of the Third World? Lucy may be right. The internal phobias we create and blow out of proportion may be bigger than the terrors that dominate the daily news, and the fortress we hide behind for protection may be no safer than a Linus security blanket.

Franklin Roosevelt is best remembered for one line in his 1932 inaugural speech in which he addressed the global economic collapse, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” On the threshold of war in 1941, he declared a global bill of rights: all people have a right to the freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. However noble and just the freedom from fear may appear, recorded human history does not know a time without terror. We cry out for something more substantial than platitudes and security blankets. The word of Christ to his disciples, “Fear not!” sounds a lot like the politician’s word of assurance offered to reduce the internal anxiety whether or not the external threat can be confronted. No doubt, the psychology of fear is always a part of our problem and may well be the only threat to our well-being, but where is the foundation for hope? Where is the substance behind the word that should call us to turn down the heat on our anxiety?

**Hope is eternal.** I was a seminary student in Fort Worth, Texas, when the Cuban Missile Crisis arrived. I had just become weekend pastor of the Chisholm Baptist Church east of Dallas. I was young and full of hope. We were expecting our first child. Life was good, except for the talk about a nuclear holocaust about to be released on the world to end it all. I recall seeing used car lots with ready-made fallout shelters that you could purchase and have delivered and buried in your backyard. Richard Dew and I compared experiences of the time. He was in medical school and swears that he was so absorbed in his studies that the crisis went right over his head. The crisis, however real, was short; Khrushchev blinked. But the real threat of the cold war to all living things suddenly became personal. I began to realize that hope is not found in fallout shelters, bigger bombs, and steel-eyed presidents. The only real hope for the earth is bigger than all of our security blankets.

A central event in the ministry of Jesus was the day when he commissioned disciples to go into the villages and cities following his example of healing the sick and proclaiming the good news. The commissioning of disciples contained warnings. They were going out into a hostile environment. They were being sent as sheep into the midst of wolves. They would be arrested, flogged, betrayed, and hated, and why not? Jesus faced persecution for the sake of the kingdom. Is the servant above the master? Three times Jesus said, “Do not fear.” *Do not fear* to bear witness in this hostile environment. The truth of the gospel must be revealed from the housetops. *Do not fear* people who can only end your physical life. God transcends life and death. *Do not fear* for your personal worth. God knows the count of the hairs of your head and the birds of the air. The God of grace sustains us in suffering.

The passage is apocalyptic; several verses are copied directly from the warnings about the end of the age in Mark 13. Jewish Apocalyptic

(revelation) literature, like Daniel, emerged in times of national crisis when all of the foundations for the future of Israel were shaking. The Promised Land, the theocratic kingdom, the historic reliance on memory of great moments in Jewish life were no longer valid. They appeared to be little more than security blankets offering promises that could not stand against armies of the enemies. The only hope in life and death had to be bigger than the things that surround us. The eternal vigilance of a loving God is the only ground that holds in times of real crisis.

Garrison Keillor tells the story about a Bible teacher at the Brethren church of Lake Wobegon, who came to class with elaborate charts defining the exact course of human history right down to the end of this evil world. Keillor said that the charts always gave him a sense of absolute certainty about the future. Keillor came out of a Brethren church and was telling his story about the time the *Left Behind* novels were raging. Truth is, some people find their security in certainty about predicting the events of the end time. The only problem is the long history of the failure of this idea of apocalyptic.

The Apocalyptic hope of Jesus' teaching offers two words for disciples in times of crisis. The first word is "Go!" Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Go, proclaim the good news, heal the sick, cleans lepers, raise the dead, cast our demons. We recall that the Great Commission is the final word of the risen Christ to the handful of disciples facing a monstrous world. Jesus does not sound a retreat or call for disciples to look for a place to hide from the threats to existence. When the threat is beyond human comprehension, it is not beyond the eternal wisdom of our God. The time of crisis is the time for positive action.

The other word is "Fear not!" "The Father in heaven" of Matthew's Gospel is the God who transcends every moment in life, the God who is bigger than Syria, Greece, and Rome all put together, the God who is bigger than time, perhaps this God is bigger than the present crisis of our time. "Fear not" stands on firmer ground than self-discipline and Stoic numbness. Trust in the eternal God trumps fear of temporal terrors and calls us to cast our vision to the beginnings and ends of things.