

What do you call a dinosaur with an anxiety disorder? A NERVOUS Rex.

A friend of mine ride shares to work regularly in Pittsburgh, where they have a lot of tunnels. He said that if he is in the backseat when they go through a tunnel he has a massive anxiety attack. So he went to his doctor. He was diagnosed with Carpool Tunnel Syndrome.

Then his wife asked him one morning if he had any dark stuff. He admitted that he'd been feeling a mix of anxiety and depression. Then she said, "No, I'm putting a load of laundry in!"

Three lines practically leaped off the page when I initially read over this Sunday's readings: The first is from Jeremiah: "The days are coming when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and Judah." As our new AT HOME WITH THE WORD books remind us: A doomsday scenario is not the point of these readings, and that Advent provides a sense of hope.

The reality is that we live in anxious times. Climate change. Political polarization. Natural disasters. The economic and personal losses and stresses of the pandemic. There are also a lot of everyday things that make us anxious: news of shootings, not getting enough sleep, being overcommitted, an unbalanced diet. And, research indicates, SUNDAY NIGHTS!

Dr. Sanam Hafeez wrote "It's common for people to feel anxious as the weekend winds down. When your mind begins to focus on reports, kids' activities, and the long list of to-dos, it's easy to slip into an anxious state of mind." The flood of anxiety that many feel as the workweek approaches is called the 'Sunday scaries.' And Derek Thompson, writing in THE ATLANTIC, says that this anxiety is linked to "the modern psychology of time." We find Sunday to be scary because we embrace a distinctively modern view of time. Today, we have 2 modes of thinking, says Thompson: "productivity mind and leisure mind." Monday through Friday is when we use our productivity mind, working hard and showing our industriousness. On Saturday and Sunday, we activate our leisure mind, which allows us to rest and play. But on Sunday evening, the 2 enter into a tug-of-war. We fall into the Sunday scaries because we feel guilty about relaxing over the weekend and then apprehensive about the workweek that lies ahead.

But we need to realize that humans have not always had this experience. Research has found that hunter-gatherer groups have typically avoided anxiety about the future. They "rarely stored food for more than a few days," says Thompson. "Trusting in the abundance of their environment, they worked to meet their absolute needs, and then stopped to rest, rather than planning ahead." Hunter-gatherer groups lived in the gift of the day, like the Israelites in the wilderness. As they traveled to the promised land, the Israelites received the food they needed each day, bread-like manna from God, and avoided the struggle between productivity mind and leisure mind. Of course, the Israelites were not always faithful, and neither are we. "If only we had meat to eat" they complained in the desert.

Today we are not hunter-gatherers, nor are we Israelites in the wilderness. But we can overcome some of the struggle between productivity mind and leisure mind by trusting in the abundance of God. We can lower our anxiety about the future by believing that God will provide for us, that God keeps His promises.

Advent is the Church's yearly reminder that the heart of our faith is a promise, made once to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and fulfilled in the Christ of the Gospels. Jeremiah writes from a prison cell but says that the lineage of David, which at the time looked as dead as a chopped-down tree, would one day raise up a 'just shoot,' which we understand to be fulfilled in the birth of Christ, for He was born of the "house and lineage of

David,” as the scriptures remind us. All the longing of this Advent season is wrapped up in four words: The Messiah will come. And Jesus came. AND He will come again at the end of time. (help from GRACEWORKS, 28 Nov 2021, p. 1-2)

Second, “Stand erect and raise your heads because your REDMPTION is at hand.” We don’t seem to talk much about redemption anymore. In America, it’s easy to feel like we have no need of a redeemer if we are comfortably middle class. But the promise of a redeemer is at the heart of the entire bible. The beautiful, perfect garden of Eden that God gave us, we quickly screwed up. And left us in need of redemption. From the beginning of the revelation of God’s dealings with the human family, a twofold reality was recognized: the divine image and intimate communion with God as recounted in the creation story and the tale of Adam and Eve in the Garden (Gen 1-3). Alongside this reality, however – though clearly secondary to it – is the rupture of that relationship through sin, with its individual and corporate significance. The longed-for restoration of communion between human and divine was accomplished through Jesus Christ, the one we call REDEEMER. (help from NEW DICTIONARY OF CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY, “Redemption,” p. 807-808)

For us as Christians, all of history is redemptive, because God is behind it all. So our task is not to look away from the sin-scarred world and try to dwell in an ideal one, but to look for grace and redemption in the midst of the mess we have made. The novelist Reynolds Price says there is one sentence above all that people crave from stories: THE MAKER OF ALL THINGS LOVES ME – AND WANTS ME. Redemption is a reminder of that deep truth.

Catholic theology reminds us that from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery, that our world, for all its horror, has been found by God to be worth dying for. We often do not perceive the world as worth God dying for. We are often hard-pressed to die to ourselves for anything but our own wants and desires. But we must demonstrate our willingness to die for our world as Christ did. Philip Yancey, in his book VANISHING GRACE, says “I have a hunch that as history looks back...., some Christian artists will endure for having hammered in a few firmly embedded nails. This world bears the stamp of genius, the stain of ruin, and the hint of redeemability.” (p. 138-139) We want to be among those few who hammered in a few firmly embedded nails of love, compassion, forgiveness and inclusivity.

Third and finally, “Be vigilant and pray....” Prayer is not something we do once in a while, like going to a movie. Or even something we do regularly, like taking a shower. Prayer is a special way of looking at the world, a different view of reality, a certain way of living. Prayer is a three-dimensional vision that sees through everyday appearances to get to their inner meaning. Prayer is a way of living that includes the imponderable mysteries of life, thereby giving ordinary things extraordinary significance. Prayer is a very personal communication with God. God speaks first; we learn to listen day by day. We must be attentive: ready to hear, to follow. Personal prayer is very demanding: attention, faith, consent. God does not love gently; God does not hide the truth about us from us.

And therein lies a lot of the problem. When we seriously pray, we have to look at ourselves – and we feel God’s gaze both tell us we are His beloved ones, and then we can feel small and petty for the ways we have acted. A book is titled: WHY AM I AFRAID TO TELL YOU WHO I AM? The answer is: “Because we may not like who we are.” That’s why we are afraid to let anyone look too deeply inside us, even God. And so we pray along with Augustine, “Make me chaste – or holy or honest or anything – but not yet!”

We lack the courage to face the searing contact of prayer. We sense that in prayer it is necessary to hand ourselves over, naked and unprotected. So we decide there is no hurry; better wait; death will be soon enough. But for the courageous people who try to pray, the tension between God and us lessens. As we

begin to realize who we are (not much), God reveals who He is (pretty much!). And when we see that open, defenseless God, we in turn become open. Just as we do all kind of crazy things with kids because we don't worry about looking foolish in front of them, so we can get carefree with God, knowing that we are safe no matter how dangerous the conversation may get.

It takes a while for us to really trust that God won't hurt us. It is only when we are completely honest and open with God that we can live what we believe. Because the Christian life is open-ended. There is no program, just infinite possibilities for good along the way. Along with infinite opportunities to deceive ourselves.

So it is necessary to have gazed long and lovingly on God in order to have our wavering way sustained in critical times. We have to be convinced that our happiness lies in being closely connected with God, from whom all good things come. (adapted from James Smith, in PREACHING RESOURCES, Sept 24, 2006)

Finally, a story to conclude, which reminds us that anyone – at any age – can pray and be in communion with God – even in extremely difficult circumstances. Ruby Bridges was just 6 years old when, in 1960, she was chosen as the first Black child to integrate the William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans. Photos show the incredible courage of this little girl who was escorted to school each morning by federal marshals to protect her from the angry white parents who screamed curses, insults and threats at her each day.

Dr. Robert Coles, a child psychiatrist from Harvard, interviewed Ruby Bridges in an effort to determine how young children could learn to cope with such frightening and dehumanizing abuse, day after day. In the interview, Ruby told Dr. Coles that she prayed for the people who threatened her, insulted her, spat at her. Her mother and her minister had told her that God was watching over her each day, and it was her duty to pray for and forgive the people who opposed her.

When Dr. Coles asked Ruby if she thought this advice was correct, she said, "I'm sure God knows what is happening....He may not do anything right now, but there will come a day, like they say in church, there will come a day. You can count on it. That's what they say in church."

"....there will come a day. You can count on it." The promise of God will be fulfilled. Remember the promise. A redeemer will come to save us. So we stand erect and claim our hope. Pray every day. There will come a day. We can count on it. AMEN. (last section adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, Sept-Dec 2021, p. 59-60)