

Have any of you seen the animated movie “Inside Out?” If you haven’t and if you like playfully exploring our internal emotional landscape, it is for you. The main character Riley is a happy, hockey-loving 11-year-old girl, but her world turns upside-down when she and her parents move to San Francisco. The story unfolds in two locations at the same time: the internal location of Riley’s mind and emotions, and the outside location of her life, her parents and her changing circumstances. Riley's emotions, which up until the big move were led by Joy, try to guide her through this difficult, life-changing event and each emotion is personified. The stress of the big move brings Sadness to the forefront. When Joy and Sadness are inadvertently swept into the far reaches of Riley's mind, the only emotions left in Headquarters are Anger, Fear and Disgust. The first movie tells the beautiful way Joy and Sadness intertwine.

However, in the second movie, Riley has become a teenager, and that changes everything. We meet new characters in her internal world: Embarrassment, Nostalgia, Sarcasm, and Ennui, and the one that really gets things whipped up, Anxiety. Here’s the trailer...

<https://youtu.be/LEjhY15eCx0?feature=shared>

Today we are invited in our Lenten practice to lay down the burden of anxiety and that is easier said than done. Because anxiety starts out small, but the more you look at it, the bigger it gets. Which means it takes up more of your focus, which makes it bigger... Anxiety is a wind that whips itself up. Anxiety is a huge topic with emotional, mental, physical and spiritual elements, and I will only scratch the surface. And I need to say that sometimes we need help because it can kind of take over, and no sermon is a replacement for good help. Anxiety is a big deal as has been shown by many recent studies. For young people especially anxiety is one of the biggest and most immobilizing burdens we carry.

For the people in exile to whom Isaiah was writing, anxiety weighed heavy on their shoulders and I think there was also depression mixed in there too. They are in Babylon having lost everything and could see no way out, cut off from everything they had ever held precious. Holy Land. Holy City, Holy Temple. They felt disconnected from God and from themselves. Who are we now? How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? Nothing will ever be what it was. And to them Isaiah writes: Thus says the Lord. Behold, I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it? And of course they don't, because they are disconnected from everything that reminds them of who they are and what they are here for. They are looking back on all that has been lost and that's all they can see. Anxiety fills their view, and when you are in the grip of it, that's all you can see. Isaiah is trying to help them see beyond, and it is hard. And so they are immobilized and disconnected from what is deeply true, from their essence- their true identity in God.

By contrast in our gospel reading, if ever there is a circumstance in which Mary should be immobilized by anxiety this is it. Mary, amazing Mary somehow has the presence of mind to act in a situation from a place of confidence and not out of anxiety. Her actions appear irrational to those around her, totally unexpected, totally uncharacteristic of a woman in those days. And yet she does it. She is at a public dinner with the local rabbi. Everyone who matters in society is there. It's intense. And right in the middle of it, she breaks open a jar of perfume, and breaks many taboos in the process. She let's down her hair, anoints his feet with the oil, and wipes them with her hair. It is outrageous, and intimate, and beautiful, and true, and daring. And yet she does it anyways.

Judas, the Treasurer, who always had his calculator handy, punches in some numbers and quickly figures out that the total value of the package is about \$30K,

a years wage for a labourer. No wonder he raises a stink about the perfume. What a waste! It is true that the poor could have used the 30 grand. Absolutely. But Judas overlooks one important fact. Mary has the presence of mind to know that now is not the time to calculate the cost. This is one of those once-in-a-lifetime moments and Mary has the presence of mind to seize it. This could be her last chance with him and she knows it. He had done so much for her. This was her chance to show her love in a way he would remember forever.

There are so many reasons for her to be immobilized by anxiety but somehow she is not. Somehow she sees through all that, breathes through all that, gathers her courage, and does what she is called to do, offers what she is called to offer. Somehow she is able to stay in touch with what is deeply true about her, about Jesus, and about the moment they are in. In that moment, Mary is unburdened by anxiety. She's free.

Broadly speaking we have two kinds of anxiety alive in us: specific anxiety about particular things in the world like public speaking and spiders and getting old, or particular circumstances like kids out late, and medical tests, and federal elections and so on. This kind of anxiety about specific things that we can point to and the feeling rises and falls related to those things. But the other kind of anxiety is often referred to as generalized anxiety. That is that feeling in the pit of your stomach related to the state of things in ourself or our life or in the world like a tangle of things leading us to a general sense that things are really not ok. The world is not trustworthy. The future feels ominous. But it is not specific. We can't pin it on something and say, that's why I feel this way.

Some have also called it existential anxiety, which is not a new thing but particularly for young people, it is the immobilizing feeling that comes when looking at the climate, the economy, housing, and the rise of polarized politics- that

whole cluster of things is popping off on your social media feed and tends to dominate.

Somehow the Hebrews in exile were in the grip of it, and somehow Mary was free of it.

Laying down our anxiety doesn't happen by looking at our anxiety. We have to acknowledge it, but focussing on it tends to make it bigger. Rather, we lay it down as we remember who we are, whose we are and what we are here for. And we do that by playing music we love, and walking in the woods, and picking up million year old stones on the beach, and by breathing and praying and playing games with children, and eating good food with people we love. Personally, I also lay it down a little when we choose not to pick up my phone when I first wake up but instead just lie there and listen to the morning unfurl around me. This is how we perceive the new thing God is doing today and the old deep and true thing God has already done in us. These are ways we connect, little by little, to the essence of God and life and our true selves. Moment by moment, one tender touch at a time, its grip loosens, and like Mary, we reconnect with what is true, with what is needed for now, with God's amazing grace which is available to us. It has been the whole time.

Amen.