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Matthew 9:35-10:8

THE *REAL* GOOD NEWS

While it is only 10 o'clock in the morning, I imagine that a good many of us are already feeling fairly anxious today. It doesn't take much time for us to become anxious each day. All we have to do is wake up--and be confronted with our personal problems and challenges and issues in our lives. And before our feet hit the floor, we are already anxious. Or we read the paper or listen to the news and learn about stories of shootings, and terrorist attacks, and apartment buildings engulfed in flames, and global warming. Anxiety is a growing malady. Anxiety has surpassed depression as the most common ailment among college students, with one in six college students being diagnosed or treated for an anxiety condition. And the tentacles of anxiety reach even younger ages. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that 38 percent of girls between the ages of 13 and 17 and 26 percent of boys have an anxiety disorder.

Our political climate doesn't help either. If the frustration and anxiety of some voters contributed to the election of Donald Trump, his election to the presidency has fueled anxiety in a whole lot of other voters. Author of the book *Hi Anxiety*, Kat Kinsman notes that, "In addition to the normal chaos of being a human being, there is what almost feels like weaponized uncertainty thrown at us on a daily basis. It's coming so quickly and messily, some of it straight from the president's own fingers."

Indeed, technology is a contributing factor to our anxiety. Our always "on" culture means we feel compelled to check our devices every few minutes and to respond to every chime that sounds from our phones. News bombards us from all corners of the globe with little time to digest its contents or meaning. We experience news stories while they are still unfolding. And

so, it isn't just the first responders and the victims of some terrible calamity who experience the stress of the tragedy--now we all are brought into the tragedy while it is still taking place, and we all experience the stress and uncertainty and anxiety of the situation.

So, if we humans are anxiety prone, we have good reasons for being so--harassed and helpless as we are by the uncertainty of our age, by the circumstances of our lives, by the societal issues surrounding us, and by our own broken natures.

But we are not the only ones in human history to think of ourselves as living in an age of anxiety. People in other periods have also thought of their era as one of anxiety. Think of the two World Wars, the Civil War, think of the Cold War. Lots of people in other times of history have felt anxious. Maybe it is part of the human condition. It appears that even the folks living two thousand years ago in Palestine were plagued by this condition. Of course, a great many of them would have been living in tremendous poverty, which brings its own anxiety about simply having what is needed to stay alive. Where is your next meal coming from? How will you feed your children? The folks in ancient Palestine lived under the constant oppression of their Roman occupiers, who could arrest or kill at any moment, who demanded high taxes and imposed harsh laws. And then there was the precarious nature of one's health. In an era before modern medicine, you could die from something as simple as an infected scratch. Or go blind. Or become lame. And if you could not work, how would you feed yourself or your family. Life was full of uncertainties and dangers.

Jesus looked out at the crowds who gathered to hear him and he had compassion for them. He had compassion for them "because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." And so, out of compassion for the harassed and helpless people, Jesus goes about preaching the good news of the kingdom of God.

Now I wonder--what is this good news? What is the good news for us who live in an age of anxiety? What would be good news to you in your time of anxiety?

There has been a lot of attention lately in the media and by politicians to the difference between real news and *fake* news. In a similar way, there is a difference between *real* good news and *fake* good news. Fake good news tells us what we *want* to hear. Greed is good. That's fake good news. Or that having money will bring us happiness in life. That's fake good news. Or that we can know true security if we just build walls and prisons and put bars on our windows and ban people of other faiths. That's fake good news. Fake good news tells us that true freedom is found in fewer regulations or restrictions upon our activity. Fake good news makes us feel better about ourselves by telling us how bad or worthless other people are. Fake good news teaches us that people who suffer hardships are probably somehow to blame for their situation.

Jesus was not a preacher of fake good news. Instead he went about proclaiming the *real* good news, the good news of the kingdom of God. And that good news begins with compassion. He does not first look to blame or find fault. He does not first look to determine who is worthy and who is not. He looks at the crowd and sees that all of them, all of them are harassed and helpless to the forces in their lives and the forces from within. And so he proclaims the good news of the kingdom of God to the harassed and helpless people.

And the good news of the kingdom of God is that you are loved no matter what you have done or who you are. The good news of the kingdom of God is that while you may have messed up badly in life, you are forgiven. The good news of the kingdom of God is that you are worthwhile no matter what school you did or did not go to, or what job you have or maybe just lost, no matter the size of your bank account, or what others think of you. The good news of the

kingdom of God is that security is found in life by living God's ways in this world. Living God's ways won't guarantee you a problem-free life, but it will ensure a meaningful one. The good news of the kingdom of God is that in the face of all the forces of darkness at work in our world, and all the forces of chaos beyond your control, love is Lord of heaven and earth--to borrow a phrase from a well-known hymn. Love is Lord of heaven and earth. That is the good news for all of us in our age of anxiety.

And Jesus proclaimed this good news by what he said and what he did. We are told that he went about curing people of *every* disease and *every* sickness. Good news was proclaimed to address the needs of the body and the needs of the soul.

But Jesus can also see that the needs of the people are indeed great--too great for just him to meet by himself. And so he gathers together his twelve disciples for a meeting. You might think of it as sort of like a presidential cabinet meeting. Only, he doesn't gather them to hear praise and adulation for what a great leader he is. Instead, Jesus sits down with his cabinet of disciples to discuss the plight of the people. They are harassed and helpless. They are harassed and helpless by many of the same things that plague us today: by life's hardships, by illness and disease, by poverty and oppression, by their own lostness--which is another way of thinking about sin. All the same forces that harass us today harassed them: fear, hopelessness, insecurity, hatred, the desire for revenge, the allure of money and wealth. And Jesus commissions the twelve to go out to address this plight, not with judgment but with compassion. He sends them out to do the very same work he has been doing: to proclaim the kingdom of God by what they say and by what they do to make concrete differences in people's suffering. The twelve are to heal sicknesses and diseases of *every* kind--of body and of soul. He sends them out to be

ambassadors of the *real* good news of God, the only news that can make any true difference to those living in an age of anxiety.

And yet, so great is the need that even the twelve are not enough. And so Jesus prays. He prays and he tells his disciples to pray that God will find yet more folks who are willing to bring the *real* good news to a harassed and helpless people. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few," Jesus explains. "Therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

What this means is that Jesus is praying for us--for you and for me. He is praying for us because you and I are also among those harassed and helpless people. We too need to know the *real* good news for our lives. And he is praying for us because he needs us. He needs the good news to come alive within you so that it can be shared with others: shared with our neighbor, shared with the stranger, shared with our enemy, because they are also harassed and helpless to the forces at work around them and from within them. In an age of anxiety, the only way some people will receive the *real* good news that matters is by how it will be proclaimed by you and me.