

Covenant Word

A Time to Cast Away

Psalm 55:1-8, 12-14, 16-18; I Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11; Matthew 6:25-34

A Message by Philip Gulley in For Everything a Season tells a story about the family of...
The Reverend Sarah Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
May 4, 2008

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.**
Sarah Shelton

...Harley Jacobs. Harley was a keeper. He never threw anything away. In a neighborhood of serene people, Harley was an oddity, a man frantic with acquisition and on a constant quest for more. After Harley died, his son poked through his house, stacked and piled with forty years of buying, and decided not to get involved. He shut off the water, turned down the furnace, unplugged the toaster, and locked her tight. He is a religious man, so every Sunday morning he prays a tornado will swoop through town and carry his father's house away. His prayers are to no avail—the house still stands, full to the brim.

My wife, Joan, and I

move every three and a half years, so my sons won't have this problem with me. I like to tell myself that my ability to let go of things is due to my spiritual maturity, but the truth is that I can't stand clutter. While I can surrender my possessions, I find it hard to cast off my fears. I lie awake at night and worry about the mortgage payment and what will happen to me when I'm old. I used to stay awake because my children were afraid and needed comfort. Now they are older and much braver, and I am <also> older and so much more afraid. I long...to cast my fears away.

I think we can all identify with these feelings. Most of us can clean out a closet or re-organize a drawer to give away the things we no longer use without too much hesitation, but when we begin to talk about cleaning out our emotional closets that gets a bit tougher. We are not quite so eager to give away the

energy we gain from the anger we house or the comfort that comes from massaging old wounds or the satisfaction that comes from punishing a loved one again for a deed long ago transacted or the attention that others give us when we are distraught or the companionship of all the ways we have been mistreated. While it can become quite a prized collection, just like with any possession, our anxiety can also become burdensome, stunting, and paralyzing.

It is in this light that I ruminated on today's scripture from I Peter. Exiled, harassed, enslaved, we can understand why Peter needed to send encouragement to these early believers. But before we too easily dismiss his words as irrelevant to our day and time, perhaps we need to remember the ways we too are cut off from family and home; harassed for belief in an inclusive, grace-filled gospel; and enslaved by our own life-styles, addictions and cultural biases. We find that it is not so far a leap, after all, from Peter's audience to our congregation...all in need of casting off our anxieties and of being reminded that God cares for us.

Peter is encouraging us to cast all of our care on God so that we will know how to be humble. It is a visual image of casting a blanket onto a beast of burden. (J. Hampton Keathley, III, "Counsel Concerning Our Cares," http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=897) The objective is to move us from the sphere of trusting in our own resources and strategies to resting in God and the resources of the Divine.

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Interestingly, the text addresses anxiety not as a separate or isolated event like a doctor's report or an exam to take at

school or a deadline at work or an unexpected car repair that shoots the budget out of the water. No, anxiety here refers to the whole package...the whole dump truck's load...the whole of one's anxious life placed safely into God's care. (Keathley)

The verb, "cares," is in the present continuous tense, which doesn't mean that much to us except it helps us to understand a general truth about God. It reminds us that God always and constantly cares about us. It tells us that the faithfulness and love of God are unchanging. Not only is God's care consistent, but Lamentations 3:21-23 reminds us that God's care is new every morning.

It seems to me that we fail to understand and rely on God's care because there is too much clutter in our lives and no room for God's care to find a fertile, non-anxious place to germinate in order to encourage and minister to us. If this is the case,



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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and
for Bible study at 10:30 a.m.

then I am giving a rallying cry to get out our dust rags and polish, let us fill the trash bags and call the Goodwill to pick up our discards, let us cast away anxiety, in order to know completely and confidently that God cares for us.

Mary Oliver speaks to this in her poem “At Blackwater Woods.” She says:

To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

The formula that Mary Oliver and that our scripture proposes sounds easy enough: cast it away, let it go, throw it away, toss it as you would a pebble across some body of water, and get rid of the source of the anxiety that nags at your spirit. In reality, it is not as easy as it sounds. William Dols, former Minister of Education at Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, NC suggests some questions with which to sit and wrestle at these times of sifting and sorting in order to release our anxiety. He asks:

In what ways are we dis-eased and troubled—uneasy in spirit?
What is it that our anxiety waits, and even longs, to teach us?
How do we deny, conceal, keep private and secret what makes us anxious in the day and stalks us in the night?
What does our hidden-ness and silence do for us, for those around us, and for the ones who love us the most?
What do we gain and what do we give up by holding onto and hoarding our deepest frustrations and fears, concealing them from those who cherish us most and judge us the most gently?

Anxieties are usually easily named: the dissolving relationship, upcoming surgery, retirement, graduation, moving to a new city to name a few. Yet there are also those times when we can't quite put a name on the angst that rumbles around in our soul.

I have had such experiences. The one I wish to share with you occurred on an uneventful Sunday. There had been the usual activities at church and as the children climbed into their car seats, I noticed that each had artwork from their Bible lessons. I made a mental note to attach each to the refrigerator when we got home.

As the day progressed, however, I recognized a growing anxiety inside my spirit. Nothing was “wrong” that I could detect: no arguments had occurred, no one was sick or in the hospital, no one had acted out. There were no big decisions looming, and there was money in the bank to pay the bills and food in the

pantry. At the end of the day, we got everyone in bed. I fell asleep, but about two o'clock, I was startled into awakening with such urgency that there was no hope of returning to my dreams.

So I checked my calendar to be sure I knew what the week ahead held. I picked up a book to read, but put it back down. Too early for my daily dose of diet coke, I checked the refrigerator for fruit juice or if there was anything to eat. It was when I opened the refrigerator door that I remembered the children's artwork and my promise to hang it on the refrigerator. We had left it on the kitchen counter among the Sunday paper and other reminders. So I gathered the paper together, sorted through the various dentist cards and PTA reminders, and then, I uncovered the art work. It was the outcome of a well planned Sunday School lesson. It was simply a sheet of construction paper covered in band aids, and in childish scrawl was printed the words: “God cares for you.”

Now I know that my child's Sunday School teacher had no intention of ministering to me, but he did. That gnawing anxiety that had characterized my day and invaded my sleep, began to

slowly give way as I figuratively put a band-aid on my spirit. “God cares for you,” the paper said. I easily

recognized that I was not in need of a miracle, nor a bolt of lightning, nor the descending of some plague or insect infestation upon my enemies. I just needed to be reminded of and to know that God cared for me.

Perhaps you find yourself in need of this same reminder. So this morning, following the adult choir's anthem, we invite you to let go of whatever causes you anxiety. Bring the pebble from your bulletin and toss it into the urn to symbolically represent the casting of the totality of your worries. Joe Dean and I will be present to remind you of the promise that God's care is steadfast and unchanging. Then you will be set free to be nourished by the Lord's Supper, receiving unto yourself the sacrament that reminds us most of God's care, for God loves us enough to send his Son, Jesus Christ, that we might have abundant life in this world and eternally in the next. So may we continue our worship as the adult choir reminds us of God's promises to care for us.

I am giving a rallying cry to get out our dust rags and polish, let us fill the trash bags and call the Goodwill to pick up our discards, let us cast away anxiety, in order to know completely and confidently that God cares for us.

It is recognizing that all of God's children are our beloved relatives, and they are just waiting for the invitation to be a part of all that hugging and eating and breathing that we do together as the family of God.