

Cold Comfort

Isaiah 40: 1-11, Jeremiah 6: 13-14

Ask Jack Question: How do we deal with issues and needs around security and stability while trusting that the only real permanence in this world is God?

In light of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the United States has become obsessed with security, but are we more secure now? We live in a society in which security is usually measured by military might, political power, length of prison sentences, high technology, a prestigious career, a prestigious paycheck, and a fully-funded retirement account. Do these status symbols really make us more secure? Do they give us comfort or are they only cold comfort?

Cold Comfort is “quite limited sympathy, consolation, or encouragement; not really comfort at all.” (dictionary definition) The *Ask Jack* question prompting this message is, “How can we deal with issues and needs around security and stability while trusting that the only real permanence in the world is God?” The short answer is, “It depends. What security and stability do we want? What’s really available to us? What difference will it make to “trust that the only real permanence in this world is God?”

Comfort feels good. There are words of comfort such as the 23rd Psalm. We often need comfort because life has sharp edges. But the pursuit of comfort cuts two ways. A steady diet of comfort will move any of us toward an attitude of dependence. The same is true of seeking security and stability. Good feelings feel good. Children need security and stability for healthy growth and development. They are pretty fundamental for adults as well.

After basic needs for food, water, and shelter are met, human beings require a sense of security and relative safety in order to meet higher needs for “social acceptance, self-esteem, and self-actualization.” (Mazlow, *Hierarchy of Needs*) At the same time, to be fixated on security and stability usually results in your seldom feeling safe enough. It may even thwart your ability to participate in genuine community, to love yourself deeply, or to live into a higher meaning for your life.

How can we distinguish a healthy desire security and stability and pursue what really makes us secure? Jesus’ parable tells of a man who had more stuff than he knew what to do with. There was not enough room to store it all so he tore down his barns and built bigger barns. Then he felt secure. His life was stable enough to meet all his future needs. He felt safe until one night when his life ended suddenly. Jesus left the question, “Who gets all the stuff?”

Security and stability don’t come along with more stuff despite commercial claims! Eventually all of us face loss and death. Enneagram experts identify nine basic life energies applying to all of us. Each person fundamentally acts out of one of the basic life energies. Each energy effectively makes a deal with the abyss of all being, the unknowable mystery at the heart of life. If I can be perfect, loving enough, knowledgeable enough, avoid enough pain, or be liked enough, then I’ll be safe. At some level, most of us try this, but it never works – not in the long run.

Our nation is engaged in an anxious process of seeking security. We try to be safe by accumulating more and more destructive weapons and by building better defenses against deadly weapons. It is an endless process of escalation and anxiety. Our homeland security raises fear of foreigners in the interest of security. It fosters the elimination of many civil rights in the interest of security. True national security will not come through getting rid of everyone who is different

or controversial. That will only come when nations and their leaders believe that cooperation and mutual support is more beneficial than armed conflict and the struggle for power. Only then can we discover true security for this world.

Life is not a safe proposition. Certain risks come with breathing or leaving the house. True security comes in seeing the world honestly, with open eyes, and choosing to love yourself and others. True stability come from always growing and changing based on the consistent values of mutual respect and not fearing to find truth.

Jeremiah was a prophet when the Jewish nation was on the brink of ruin (ca. 600BCE). Jeremiah saw it coming. He saw the overwhelming might and lust for conquest of the armies of Babylon. He saw it coming and challenged the king, court prophets, and Temple leadership to see reality clearly and help the people prepare themselves for the end.

Jeremiah's words were collected and written down by Jewish scribes during the exile in Babylon. The words spoke afresh to the people reminding them of their preoccupation with security and stability in the form of wealth and power. That preoccupation blinded them to the realities of life. They were *saying, 'Shalom, peace', when there is no shalom [no peace]*. Jeremiah 6: 14 (NRSV)

A modern translation speaks clearly about our own time, our own society:

Everyone's after the dishonest dollar, little people and big people alike.

Prophets and priests and everyone in between twist words and doctor truth.

My people are broken—shattered and they put on Band-Aids,

Saying, 'It's not so bad. You'll be just fine.'

But things are not 'just fine'! Jeremiah 6: 13-14 (*The Message*)

The prophet Isaiah's words to ancient Israel came only after they were deep in their experience of exile. Band-Aids are good, but only after the wound is cleansed – after truth is seen and believed in depth, then. Only then, can words of comfort be heard and helpful.

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her

that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid (Isaiah 40: 1-3, NRSV)

Security will not come to us as a society until we confess the hopeless pursuit of security through might and wealth, selling weapons, and supporting corrupt governments. In our personal experiences of loss and grief, the exile of lost dreams, and disillusioned expectations, comfort comes in the presence of community. God is the force that binds community together over miles and distance. God is the force that gives unity to community with all our differences. God empowers community to heal and comfort. In that presence, hope becomes a tangible reality. But it is never an excuse to go back to business-as-usual. There is no security there. Stability is not the same thing as “we've always done it that way before.”

The Bible proclaims that real security and stability are not found in king and empire. They are simply not available from military might, political tradition, scientific investigation, and technological prowess. Security is not available even in Temple – from any religion's understanding of the relationship with God. I'm not so sure ancient Israel ever learned that lesson. The day Babylonian troops marched through the gates of Jerusalem, I suspect the residents did not believe total destruction was possible. Even then, they expected God to rescue them.

It's like this story.

There was a lone hiker foolishly climbing to Long's Peak in Colorado without companions. One misstep and he went falling over a cliff. In

desperation, he grabbed and clung to a branch growing out of the rock. Hanging there, he looked down at a sheer drop of 200 feet below him. In a panic, he started screaming, "Help me, someone!" There were no other hikers around. Again in desperation he looked up to the sky and shouted, "God, save me!" Much to his surprise a voice answered, "I'm here, my son. Don't be afraid." \

"O, thank God you're here!"

"Yes, I'm here. Just trust me and let go of the branch. you'll slide down the side of the cliff which will slow down your fall. Then you'll bounce off an outcropping of bushes and finally land in a big mud pit. You can't see it from here, but trust me. It'll hurt some, but you'll survive (probably). And I'll stay with you!"

The dangling man looked down at the apparently sheer drop. He looked around and then, looking up, called out, "Is there anyone else up there I can talk to?"

When we seek safety above all, asking our faith to provide a certainty and save us from the reality that Life is Mystery, then we are asking for voice other than that voice of God proclaimed in the biblical text whose only promise is, "Peace be with you. It is I. Don't be afraid." Is that good enough?

At first glance, the promise of presence instead of certainty seems a pretty flimsy justification to let go of the branch. But that is precisely the choice of faith: to trust that presence is absolutely sufficient. Faith is to choose to see life as God-permeated. It is to imagine God like a partner with us in the living of our lives and the fulfilling of our potential. It is to see God permeating community, connecting us with our various abilities and various disabilities.

Ultimately, security and stability do not come from outside ourselves once we've grown up. They are gifts that emerge within us and between us as we step out and take responsibility for how we live. I'm taking a *Discovering Your Potential* class here at church led by our own Alan Boyer. We've been learning about setting goals for key areas in our lives – the things that many of you probably do very well already. In the process, I've discovered some things about myself. One of them is that, as I've set my goals in life and work toward them, I realize that I'm waiting for someone else to give me what I want, to tell me I had accomplished my goal. I have been giving away my power to someone else and I'm not entirely sure why.

I now realize the importance of setting goals whose accomplishment lies in a direct line with my effort. Our congregation's goals and their accomplishment need to be a product of our own planning and effort. This is, in fact, the way to trust our God-given abilities. Three years ago, during our annual direction-setting retreat, I was in a small group discussing the possibility of our congregation doing a capital campaign and buying a building. One very thoughtful person, who has a financial background, expressed concern whether we could afford to buy a building. I said that I didn't think we could afford not to. Security lies with growth, with moving toward dreams. There is a proverb that says, "Deep in the sea are riches beyond compare, but if you seek safety, it is on the shore."

The Eternal calls us to plunge into the sea. True security and stability lie in trusting God's creative work in us and not letting fear call the shots. It is at that point we find the presence of God most clearly, permanently, and profoundly seen in each other – you and me. In us, in our living, God is glorified.