

“Interrupting the Cycle”

A sermon given by Rev. Ian Gregory Cummins

to the congregation at

Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church of Denver

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Scripture: Luke 11: 1 - 9

This past week Americans sat glued to the screen, witnessing a spectacle unlike anything we’ve ever seen. It was a parade of chest beating, mono-syllabic grunting, and sexist overtones. I’m talking, of course, about the new *Legend of Tarzan* movie.

It’s just the latest failed summer blockbuster that would normally take our mind off our worries for a while. But this summer the task of distracting us from our troubles will not be accomplished so easily. As a country and as a world, we are stressed out, anxious and angry.

From Orlando to St. Paul; from Baton Rouge to Dallas. From Paris, to Nice, and now to Munich... the acts of violence are coming far too regularly. Are these terrible events an anomaly? A spike of horror that will soon return to a more acceptable level? Or is this the new normal? It’s hard to know. And that’s scary.

And the question I want to ponder this morning is what we can do about that fear. As people of faith, how can we best cope with a world that feels increasingly *more* hostile and *less* stable?

So let me start by asking: how are you doing? Really, how are you doing with all that’s going on? Each of us holds stress differently, but we’re all affected by what’s happening in the world. You may, for example, have noticed that you’re a little less patient these days. Maybe you’re a little quicker to get angry with your spouse or your kids. Or you might find yourself suddenly feeling sad for no obvious reason.

Maybe you tend to bottle things up – take more of a, “keep calm and carry on” approach. Or maybe you prefer one of the popular variations, like: Keep calm and smile on. Or Keep calm and ask Siri. Or my personal favorite: Keep calm and eat bacon. Any and all of these would be valid and reasonable responses to these far from reasonable days.

And of course, others are feeling all this stress too. So they are less patient with you. And a little quicker to get angry. If it feels like the drivers around you are a little more aggressive,

maybe honking a little more quickly...they probably are. If you feel like your spouse is a little more ready to start a fight...they just might be.

If you feel like your co-pastor thinks he's always right and insists on getting his way all the time... Well, that's clearly just your imagination. I'm sure he's a very reasonable guy.

And here's the thing. All this creates a kind of spiral that's hard for us to get out of. We take our stress out on others, which raises their stress level; so they take out their stress on us, and we all get caught in this spiral of escalating pressure that, on a global scale, sometimes tragically breaks out into violence.

Recent research on the brain sheds some fascinating light on all this. One of the key centers in the brain for dealing with our stress response is called the amygdala. And we've probably all experienced what Daniel Goleman, in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, called "amygdala high jacking".

You see, the amygdala, these two little almond shaped centers deep in the limbic center of our brain help us evaluate threats. It's our amygdala that helps to trigger our fight or flight response when we perceive that we're in danger. So the amygdala is normally your friend. Your wingman. He's there to keep you safe. But the problem is, he's not very good at telling the difference between a real threat and a perceived one.

So we've all experienced a time when we got into an argument with someone we love and things got so heated that something triggered in that very old part of our brain, and suddenly that person we adored a moment ago started to resemble a saber toothed tiger – our brain reverted back 10,000 years and could only see them as an enemy; something to defend ourselves against. And, surprisingly, after that happens, the conversation often doesn't go that well.

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/alicegwalton/2015/02/09/7-ways-meditation-can-actually-change-the-brain/#39ffa3b77023>

We're so prone to this powerful biological response that we have to be wary of others trying to use it against us. Politicians, the media, and basically anyone trying to sell something is likely to try to play on our fears.

Cosmetic companies play on our fear of getting old. Investment companies play on our fear of not having enough in retirement. News stations know that a robbery holds our attention much better than a story about a new highway project. And politicians know that promising to rid us of a perceived threat can be a remarkably effective way to garner votes.

Remember, for the amygdala, perception is everything. Its whole job is to keep us safe, and it would rather be safe than sorry. So a politician could be tempted to weave a picture of the world as a treacherous and nasty place, crawling with terrorists, rapists and murderers. And even if that picture exaggerated the truth, it could still be very compelling. Because to the degree that our amygdala has been high-jacked, it's very hard for us to evaluate what's real and what's not.

Once our fight or flight response is triggered - better, we think, just to wipe out any potential threat. And if our spouse can become a saber toothed tiger in that moment, how much easier for us to imagine a stranger in a headscarf is out to hurt us?

That's why this recent escalation in violence is so dangerous. As our anxiety rises, our ability to think with a level head and an open heart becomes more and more difficult. Every time another tragedy hits, the world's collective amygdala gets jacked a little higher. It becomes a little harder for us to accurately assess the true level of danger. And we become a little more susceptible to those who would manipulate our fears for their own gain.

So the question, it seems to me, is how do we, as people of faith, interrupt this cycle? How do we stop adding to this collective high-jacking that our country and world are currently experiencing. And how do we start playing our small part in *de*-escalating the level of stress we all feel?

When I first read the gospel option for today, which is all about Jesus teaching the disciples to pray, my first reaction was to move on. With all due respect to our Lord, I thought, right now our world needs action. This is not the time to go into our closet and pray. But I've come around to think: that may be *just* what we need to be doing.

Prayer is a big subject and there are lots of kinds of prayer, ways to pray, and lots of perspectives on what exactly prayer is, and whether or not it really works.

But most of our talk of prayer, in my opinion, misses the mark. Even that question of whether it works or not is misguided. We shouldn't even ask does prayer work - it's not a car or a blender. Nor is God is not a giant gumball machine that we put our quarter in and hope the handle doesn't get stuck on the way around to getting our candy.

I prefer the definition of God from the 13th century anonymous writer who said God is like an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/funding/fundedprojects/studentperformance/addivinaola/

Which suggests first that God is bigger and more mysterious than anything we can imagine. AND that God is right here – present *within* us, and *all* around us, *all* of the time. God is the ocean we swim in and the air we breathe.

And to pray means simply to rest in that amazing reality. Prayer is better thought of as a state of being than anything we do. It's just our willingness to surrender ourselves to a larger reality, a deeper truth for a while - which then allows us to return to our smaller world with fresh perspective.

Most of us don't seem to be able to live in our day to day world with eyes that see God's larger reality, but when we pray, we rub up against that world. And some of it rubs off on us. So even when we pray and we don't feel much, and nothing much seems to be going on, our prayer is still working on us, still opening us, and softening us, and changing us in ways that we then bring back into our daily lives.

A lot of interesting studies have come out that seem to back this up. A study done at Yale University found that prayer's cousin, meditation, reduced what are called 'self referential' thoughts. In other words, it turns out we think about ourselves - *a lot* (big surprise I know). And that's not necessarily a good thing because it creates a lot of anxiety as we obsess over ourselves or worry about our future.

But when we pray, our attention is not just on us for a change. And studies show that this reduces anxiety, depression, and increases our overall sense of well-being. And in one of the more remarkable findings, a study at Harvard found that meditation actually reduced the size of the amygdala. Reduced its physical size! Shrank it. Think about the potential *that* has to 'interrupt the cycle' and change the direction our world is going.

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I know our world feels like it's slipping further and further out of control. And it's easy to feel helpless to know what we can do about it. The truth is there really isn't much that's within our grasp.

All we really have control over is ourselves and how, each day, we are going to treat those around us. All we can really do is decide whether we are going to be a part of the escalating spiral of worry and anger.

Or whether we will be among those trying to interrupt the cycle and bring an open heart and a level head to a world that so desperately needs them.

So today the message is a simple one, but maybe a more powerful one than we think: Keep calm Montview, and pray on.