

Sermon
March 29, 2020

Covenant Presbyterian Church
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A Way Through
Luke 12:22-34

As a church we are in uncharted territory. We are having to adapt to a new way of being. We miss worshipping in the same space with one another and yet we are grateful for technology that allows us to continue to worship God as a virtual community. We miss seeing and being with one another and yet we are finding new ways to stay connected to one another. We miss the normalcy of being able to go and come as we please but we know it is the way we love one another at this time.

In the midst of this uncharted territory we worry. We worry about our families. We worry about the health care workers and first responders who are on the front lines. We worry about those who are quarantined in assisted living homes and not allowed to see family. And we worry for their families who struggle with the new guidelines. We worry about the spread of the virus especially in places like prisons, aircraft carriers, and other close quarters where isolation is more difficult. We worry about the economy and all those who are out of work. We worry about the most vulnerable - the poor, the widow, the elderly, the homeless, the addicted. Believe me when I say I feel your anxiety. For I worry about each of you at the same time I worry about my own loved ones.

This week in the midst of all the anxiety and uncertainty I began to think back on Jesus' teaching on worry found in our passage today. In the gospel of Luke these words are right smack dab in the middle of Luke's gospel. Chapter 12 of 24 chapters. This week I reread the entire gospel of Luke at one sitting. Something I encourage you to do. As I read I found myself underlining the phrase "*do not fear*", "*do not be afraid*" and any mention of worry and anxiety. What I found was revealing.

Although there are several instances of angels saying "*Do not fear*" - in the first two chapters

of Luke - to Zechariah, to Mary and to the Shepherds - and Mary and Joseph's anxiety is noted when Jesus went missing as a young boy - there are only two times recorded before chapter 12 that Jesus said "*do not be afraid*" or "*do not fear.*" First to Simon Peter after the big catch of fish. And to Jairus when Jairus was told his daughter was dead before Jesus brought her back to life. And each time the words are followed by a challenge or instruction. To Simon Peter Jesus said "*for now you will be catching people.*" And to Jairus Jesus said "*only believe.*" The same is true here in Chapter 12 which contains the only instances of the use of the word worry in Luke. Jesus follows his words to not worry with instructions about actions to take.

The other thing I noticed was that up to this point Jesus had twice foretold of his death and resurrection to the disciples. In the second instance scripture said the disciples were afraid to ask Jesus about what he had said. We understand for often we too have been paralyzed by fear. The suspense builds until the final words of Chapter 11 say the scribes and Pharisees "*are lying in wait for Jesus, to catch him in something he might say.*" We can imagine the anxiety level of the disciples who loved Jesus and sensed the danger he was in. Jesus sensed their anxiety also and here provided guidance on a way through their anxiety.

And so my friends, in these words we too find guidance for a way through our anxiety in the midst of this pandemic. Jesus explained why we should not worry and provided specific guidance on what to do instead. Eugene Petersen in the Message paraphrases Jesus words this way:

"Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions."

Let's look closer at these three things we are called to steep ourselves in.

First, God-reality. The first and most important way through anxiety is to remember that God's got this! God knows what we need and will provide for it through this pandemic. God has given us doctors and nurses, scientists and researchers who have the knowledge and the ability to help

us through this. God has also provided the skills and the know how to make the equipment needed and given us people who have the expertise and the production capability to manufacture what is needed. God has even provided us the ability through the Internet to provide education for our children and youth in the midst of this crisis and a way for us to worship when we must stay home. Something we could not have imagined even a few years ago. Yes, God has give us what we need we just need to listen to them.

Earlier in Chapter 12 verse 7 Jesus told the disciples “...*even the hairs on your head are all counted. Do not be afraid, you are of more value than many sparrows.*” Friends, we matter to God. God’s desire is to provide for us. Remember the manna provided when the Israelites were hungry wandering in the wilderness. God provided food - enough for every day. Not enough to hoard but enough. God will provide us with enough also. When there was a famine in the land God provided for Elijah through the widow of Zarephath. And God came in a dream to Joseph leading him to prepare for a famine so the world could eat. God has provided helpers - to show us the way through. Over and over again in the Bible we find stories of how God provided for God’s people not necessarily without suffering and sacrifice but God does provide. And God will again for God values our lives. That is our God-reality. We are loved and cherished by God and will be taken care of in this life and in the next. That is God’s promise to us.

On one occasion the famous English preacher, Charles H. Spurgeon, was greatly worried about his ministry in the city of London and if there were necessary resources to maintain this ministry. He became greatly depressed and filled with anxiety. Then God filled his mind with an image that made his anxieties and worries so insignificant. God gave him the image of a mouse in the large grain bins of Egypt under the leadership of Joseph. The mouse was worried about having enough to eat. Then in Spurgeon's mind came the image of a fish in the great river in London and how the fish worried about

having enough water to breath and survive. As the images sank deep inside of Spurgeon he began to laugh and said, "Eat away little mouse, swim away little fish. God will provide all we need and more." And then addressing himself, he said, "Stop worrying little man, God has enough and more!" Friends, our God-reality is that God has enough and more to get us through this pandemic. Stop worrying and let us all put our trust in God.

Second is God-initiative. Max Lucado, in his book *When God Whispers Your Name* (Nelson, 1999), notes that "The German word for worry means 'to strangle.' The Greek word for worry means 'to divide the mind.' Both are accurate. Worry is a noose on the neck and a distraction of the mind." Jesus knew the disciples were distracted by the heckling of the scribes and Pharisees and the animosity they sensed in them.

Earlier in chapter 12 Jesus said to the disciples "*Do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves, or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.*" Think about Peter who in the midst of the anxiety of Jesus' arrest denied knowing Jesus three times. And yet after discovering the empty tomb and reflecting on what had happened Peter was given the powerful words on the day of Pentecost that brought to life what Jesus had taught and set forth the road map of the way forward for the early disciples. The Holy Spirit taught him what to say. And the Holy Spirit continues to give us the words today.

Jesus went on to say "*sell your possessions and give alms.*" Giving alms is about giving to the poor and needy providing for the hungry and the naked. One of the powerful things about this pandemic is that it has brought into focus how much we need each other. Have you ever thought so much about the people who manufacture toilet paper, the truck drivers that deliver the toilet paper or the stock clerks who stock them on our shelves? What a lesson in economics for the thousands of children being home-schooled in the midst of this and a powerful reminder for us. Through this

pandemic we have become more aware of those who are hourly workers in our country. The thousands upon thousands who depend on tips to survive and who have families at home to provide for. And the thousands who depend on us to be consumers to provide for their livelihood. And how much we miss the conveniences they provide for us! One of my prayers as we seek a way through this pandemic is that when we come out on the other side we will have a greater sense of empathy for all workers in the supply chain. For we need one another.

This week a friend posted on Facebook some powerful words from Corrie ten Boom about worrying. “Worrying is carrying tomorrow’s load with today’s strength - carrying two days at once. It is moving into tomorrow ahead of time. Worrying does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow; it empties today of its strength.”

Friends, that was what Jesus was trying to tell the disciples. Jesus’ instructions - the instructions initiated by God the Father - were “*Strive for God’s kingdom, and these things will be given to you.*” The answer to their worries was to shift their focus from worrying about tomorrow to concentrating on striving for God’s kingdom. For Jesus knew that if all our energies are focused on striving for God’s kingdom we will develop a strength for today and for tomorrow that can change the world.

The final way through this pandemic comes through God-provisions. Jesus said “*Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom...*” And then these instructions: “*Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*”

Earlier in this chapter Jesus told a parable about not storing up your treasures on earth for those are not the treasures that matter. And here he used the image of a purse that does not wear out. A purse is

the place we put the things we need to take with us. In today's society that usually includes a wallet with identification, credit cards, and keys to our homes and automobiles along with many other things! But note this purse does not contain anything that can be stolen from us or destroyed by moths. Why? Because the purse contains something intangible but far more valuable - a relationship with Jesus Christ through God our Father. Through this relationship we have come to know the depth and breath, the power and height of God's love for us. It is a treasure that will always be there to give us strength for today for we hold it close to our hearts.

Friends, Jesus said these words to the disciples because he knew that what would provide the disciples a way through the events to come - the event we remember during Holy Week - was not found in material goods but only in the depth of their faith in God and their commitment to follow him. Their trust that God would provide them a way through the grief and pain of the crucifixion and open their hearts to the joy of resurrection and new life. Jesus prepared his disciples for what was to come by challenging them to steep themselves in God-reality, God-initiative and God provisions.

And friends, this too is our way through the current pandemic and any anxiety. So do not worry my friends....but strive for God's kingdom by sharing God's love and grace confident that God's got this and provides for us through the struggle.