

Refocusing on the Present Moment

Luke 12:32-33

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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³²“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is God’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.”

I

I had a friend who was afraid most of the time. When he and I strolled together on the sidewalk, he’d sometimes open up and tell me about all the things he was afraid of. One winter morning when we were out walking, he admitted he was afraid the cold temperatures would kill off all the buds on the trees, and that in the spring none of the trees would have leaves. He was afraid of living through a summer of barren, leafless trees.

My friend was also afraid of starving. A few years before I knew him, he had lived in a tiny intentional community down in Georgia. This intentional community didn’t have a lot of income, so the food budget was limited. That experience panicked him. Even when I knew him and he could eat as much food as he wanted, he was still in panic mode. What if the food ran out? What if there wasn’t enough? He admitted this was an irrational fear, but it still gripped him. So consequently he ate like a sumo wrestler, hoarding food in his belly against the improbable day when the food might possibly run out.

One day we were eating lunch at a Thai restaurant in Chicago, and he went on at length about how afraid of dying he was. Maybe not the moment of death itself, but the long process of dying that comes before: getting sick, feeling crappy, going to one doctor after another, watching the slow and inexorable trajectory of diminishment, enduring physical pain, losing mental sharpness. It terrified him.

What are you afraid of?

II

In this snippet of a passage from Luke, Jesus urges us to fear not. “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is God’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

In the gospel of Luke, God’s people are often advised to fear not. In 1:13, an angel calms Zechariah down and tells him not to be afraid. Gabriel tells Mary the same thing soon afterward, in verse 30. Another angel, or maybe the same one, admonishes a bunch of terrified shepherds on the Judean hillside to calm down, in 2:10. Jesus works to smooth Peter’s fears in 5:10, Jairus’ fears in 8:50, and the disciples’ fears in 12:4 and 7.

In other parts of the English Bible, the advice “do not be afraid” appears about 60 times, to the likes of Abraham, Hagar, Jacob, Rachel, Ruth, David, Mephibosheth (the son of Jonathan), the widow of Zarephath, Elijah, and many more. Sometimes this advice is given to women in childbirth, to people on their deathbeds, to people in dangerous situations, to hungry people, to people being attacked by enemies, to people who are too scared to take up the mission God is asking them to do, to people afraid of drowning in a boat, to people who have astonishing dreams and visions. Do not be afraid! God is with you!

III

The Bible—and Jesus—know our human condition quite well. After the destruction of the World Trade Center towers in New York City on September 11, 2001, Americans were afraid of other terrorist attacks. Then President George Bush capitalized on those fears to influence public opinion in favor of starting wars in Iraq and later, in Afghanistan. On the very day I prepared this sermon, an opinion piece appeared in *The New York Times* warning us all that a large and terrifying pandemic will appear somewhere in the world, perhaps a H7N9 influenza virus, or coronavirus, or some other nasty bug, and spread all over the globe in a few days. The author could very well be right, of course, but beyond his advice to be “informed” and his reminder that scientists are monitoring the situation, the article mostly sounded as if he’s trying to make people afraid.¹ But his purpose in doing so wasn’t clear.

We worry about large events like war and pandemics, but we also worry about smaller but still significant events.

- How can I finance my college education?
- What if I can't find a decent job when I graduate from college?
- Will I be able to find someone good and honest and trustworthy and dedicated enough to God whom I want to spend the rest of my life with?
- Will the baby now growing inside my womb be born healthy?
- How well will my child do in school?
- What if I get fired from my job and I can't find another one as good as this?
- How am I going to pay all these bills?
- What will happen if my spouse walks out on our marriage?
- Will I have enough money for retirement, and what if I don't?
- How painful will my own death be, and can I endure it?
- What will happen to me in the next life?

IV

In today's text, Jesus hints that these fears distract us from the present reality of God's kingdom. Several times in Matthew and Mark, Jesus announces to fearful Jews that the kingdom of God they've been wanting and waiting for is "at hand" (Matt 3:2, 4:17, 10:7; Mark 1:15). Some translations say the kingdom of God is "near." However scholars choose to translate the Greek term *eggizō* (*eng-id'-zo*), the implication seems clear enough: the reign of God is partly here, now, in this present moment. The fullness of God's reign will come sometime in the future, yes. But that's not to deny it's also here in this moment, in this time and place: in Goshen, Indiana, on Sunday, August 11, 2013.

If you watch how fear affects your life, I think you'll realize that fear yanks you out of the present moment and makes you worried about all the bad things that might happen in the future. Suppose you're sitting at someone's dining room table enjoying a good meal with friends or erstwhile enemies. The food is excellent; the conversation is stimulating; the relationships are convivial. According to a number of Jesus' teachings,

the reign of God is like a banquet. So this particular meal in this particular dining room is quite probably the reign of God, at this particular moment in time.

Now suppose your mind strays from the food and conversation around the table. Let's say your mind starts fussing quietly about the bill coming due next week, or the threat of a coronavirus in the Arabian peninsula, or the suspicious lump in your breast. When that happens, your fears about the future have hijacked you from the present reality of God's reign, visibly and relationally expressed in the meal around the dining room table.

Another example. You're outside ambling around in nature. You encounter some canna lilies, varieties of which can grow in almost any country of the world. Yours are brilliant red and stunningly tall, maybe 6 feet, maybe 8 feet. All you do is simply stand there, in awe of the ravishing beauty staring you in the face. You're caught up in the delicate petals, the saturated colors, the artful shape of the leaves. Well, in that moment, you're experiencing the reign of God. A mere 5 verses before today's text, in Luke 12:27, Jesus advised his followers to "Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." In these canna lilies, a window to the reign of God has sprung open and you are granted a glimpse into the new reality of God.

Suppose further that while you're standing there considering the lilies, one of your many fears sneaks up on you. You have to make a presentation tomorrow at work, and you're scared spitless you're going to come off looking like a perfect fool. In your mind's eye, you imagine slinking back to your desk in shame after the presentation, scared of what your boss is going to say about *that* in your next performance evaluation. Well, there it is again: fear has distracted you from the present reality of the kingdom of God, which is growing right in front of your face.

A third example. You're serving someone for the sake of Jesus. It might be a student in your classroom, a patient in the hospital, a client in the office, a homeless person at IHN, one of your own children in your own home. This act of service, to this particular person in this particular moment, is a manifestation of the reign of God. Then

some fear niggles its way into your brain, and for a while you zone out of the present moment and effectively get whisked into some nebulous future where something terrible will happen to you—or so you suppose. The kingdom of God is still there with you in the classroom or hospital or office, but you are no longer present to it. The reign of God is always present to us. But we are not always present to it. Why? Often because our fears about the future distract us.

V

So what do we do about this? When fear about the future sidetracks our attention on God's reign in the present, what can we do?

Christians who have lived before us and have struggled with this same problem have a simple answer. Their wisdom is that you just refocus. Gently. When you realize your mind is wandering off to some future worry, gently bring your focus back to the present moment—to that wonderful dinner around the dining room table, to the stunning canna lilies in front of you, to the person you're in the process of serving.

Now you may have to gently refocus several times, even dozens of times. That's fine. Our minds are like flies on a window: they want to keep jumping around from one thing to another. Our minds need a little training. You train your body to play soccer, right? You train your fingers to play an instrument, yes? Well, this is similar. By gently refocusing your mind, hundreds of times if necessary, you're training it to play in the reign of God, here and now.

As you do this, remember the words of Jesus in Luke 12:32—"it is God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." That is, God *pleasures* in giving us the kingdom. God *delights* in this. God *wants* to do this. By refocusing on the present moment, we gently receive the gift.

¹ David Quammen, "The Next Pandemic: Not if, but When," *The New York Times*, May 9, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/10/opinion/the-next-pandemic-is-closer-than-you-think.html?hp&r=0>, accessed May 10, 2013.