

SERMON TITLE: “Why Worry?”

TEXT: Luke 12:22-34

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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The word “gospel” means “good news” and one of the questions I ask myself often as I go about my days is this: What constitutes news that is genuinely good and why do we need it? I try to think about what the situations and circumstances that we face as human beings are that we need good news. What is the context out of which the need for good news is required and into which good news is delivered?

As Christians we believe that the gospel meets us in our weakness and need; it is good news for people who are in desperate need of good news. I think we’ve gotten a pretty good sense of this in our study of Genesis so far this fall. The world we live in has a mixture of overwhelming goodness and soul-crushing evil. And this mixture is nowhere more evident than in our own lives. We experience victories and defeats, conquests and setbacks, joys and sorrows because and these are all reminders that the world we live in is not yet as it was intended to be. We know very well our limitations and our weaknesses, and the uncertainty that is part and parcel of being human in a fallen world.

As a result, I think that one of the constant temptations that we face as human beings is the temptation to worry.

There are a lot of good reasons to worry. A casual glance at the daily newspaper provides ample fodder for fear, anxiety, and even outright despair. Aside from the usual subjects of human worry—war, health, wealth, family, the future of our children, the security of our jobs, and the inevitability of death—the last several weeks in particular have been dominated by ominous warnings from countless sources regarding the precarious state of the global economy.

We read of comparisons to the Great Depression of the 1930’s and of major world governments bailing out financial institutions; we see families losing their homes in the United States, and we possibly even feel the effects of the economic slowdown in our own lives.

Our historical moment, like all those that preceded it, provides ample cause for worry from a human perspective.

I would submit to you that most of us, at some point or another, and to varying degrees, are tempted to worry. We know it doesn’t change anything—indeed, we know that it often makes tough situations even worse! But still we worry. Well, today I want to look at Luke 12:22-34. You probably know this passage well—it is one of Jesus’ famous teachings on that most human of tendencies: worry.

But before we get to the text itself, I'd like to talk about the context in which Jesus' words on worry are located. Luke 11:37-13:9 is an ominous portion of Scripture which talks of watchfulness, readiness, and repentance in the face of dire threats, haphazard evil, and inevitable divine judgment. We are well aware that there are things to be afraid of in the world, of our experience here and now, but Jesus directs our attention to a whole new level of threat and judgment. Again, worry seems to be a perfectly appropriate response to the dire warnings and exhortations that Jesus dispenses.

Yet in the middle of this section (Luke 12:22-34) we find a tender, compassionate, pastoral passage which tells us *not* to worry. This passage, at first glance, sits awkwardly within its broader context. If we were to play the children's game, "which one of these is not like the others?" in Luke 11:37-13:9 it would certainly be this passage!

In this passage of Luke's gospel we find plenty of reasons to worry – let's take a quick tour (you can follow along in your bibles, maybe according to general chapter headings):

- *We can and ought to be worried about religious hypocrisy!* In Luke 11:37-54 Jesus pulls no punches in making clear his views about those who agonize over legal details while neglecting God's justice and love. The gap between the quality of our lives and our religious profession is taken seriously by Jesus! Woe is pronounced upon all who load people with burdens too heavy to bear, and who confuse people about what God requires.
- *We could worry about our ultimate destiny!* In Luke 12:1-13 we are brought face to face with the fact that God has the power to throw us into hell itself! Everything that we try to keep hidden and covered will be 'proclaimed from the housetops (12:3). God is simultaneously as one to be feared, for he alone holds our ultimate destiny in his hands, and as the one who knows the number of hairs on our head and who urges us to not be afraid.
- *We could worry about the fleeting and precarious nature of human life!* (12:13-21) The parable of the rich fool in Luke demonstrates the futility of acquiring and hoarding material goods in light of the fact that our lives could be demanded of us at any minute. Death is an ever-present reality for all human beings, regardless of whether or not we acknowledge it.
- *We could worry about the fact that much is demanded of us!* The nature of history and our place within it, and the finality of judgment require constant vigilance and attention. Our Lord has given us much and much is required of us. For those of us who know what our master wants (12:47) the option of ignoring his words does not exist.
- *We could worry about our interpretation of the times* (12:56-59)! Jesus makes it clear that his coming introduces a fundamental conflict at the heart of reality. He has come to bring division—even amongst members of the same family! The end goal of history and the conflict that ensues in the time before that goal is reached

require interpretation and appropriate action. Consistency between belief and action is demanded. Justice is to be upheld; repentance is demanded!

- *We could worry because the consequences of disobedience and unbelief are severe!* God has planted his ‘tree’ and he expects to find fruit (13:6-8). Human existence, again, is precarious and unpredictable. We cannot rest easy in blithe assertions that only the unjust meet untimely demises. Our fallen world is such that readiness and preparation is always necessary. Repentance is not an option to be exercised only when we anticipate our death; it is necessary for all, no matter how life’s circumstances are presently arranged!

That’s quite a laundry list of things to worry about! And yet, right in the middle, we find this wonderful, familiar passage...

[D]o not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing...can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?... Consider the lilies...if God so clothes the grass of the field which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith!... your father knows that you need all them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

What are we to make of these words of Christ, located as they are in the midst of a passage where worry and fear seem like the most appropriate, the most natural, the most *human* response? In Jesus’ day, as in ours, there were many things to worry about. On what basis are we commanded not to do so?

It is worth pausing over what Jesus does *not* say, over the reasons he does *not* give for not worrying. We are not told, “Do not worry because if you believe in me everything will turn out alright for you” or “Do not worry because a life of discipleship will instantly usher in such tranquility and transcendence that you will no longer be touched by the troubles of the world.” We are not told, “Do not worry because the world isn’t really a scary place and you’re just making too much of it.”

What we *are* told is that we are not to worry because by worrying we cannot add a single hour to our lives, because life consists of more than the status of our present circumstances, because our Father knows what we need (and he knows our needs better than we do!), because the things that we cling to and worry about are corruptible and transient, and cannot satisfy us or provide the kind of security that we so desperately need.

We are told not to worry not because there aren’t things in the world worth worrying about, but because our confidence is to be located in the character of God himself.

Ultimately, worry represents an attempt to control. The human condition is uncertain and fraught with many dangers—it is natural to seek to protect ourselves and to control, to

whatever extent we are able, events that can and will impact us and those we care about. Luke's location of this passage on worry amidst a whole series of grim and threatening passages serves to dispel any illusions we may still harbour about our role in the cosmos.

We may be able to exercise a minimal amount of control over a minimal number of events for a minimal portion of the minimal time we enjoy on this planet. Maybe.

But there are huge, powerful, and cosmically significant things over which we have no control whatsoever, and which each of us will have to face at the appointed time. There *are* reasons to worry, Jesus seems to be saying, but they are far larger and have far greater consequences than the ones your limited vision allows you to see!

Luke gives us a window into the world of divine justice where it is made clear that human beings are accountable to God, that wisdom and interpretation are required, that repentance is necessary, that judgment will take place, that from our limited, sinful perspective, the only confidence appropriate to our species is in our Maker himself.

We've talked a lot in our series on Genesis about how the biblical worldview is radically different than many of the alternatives. For the Christian, the world is not the kind of thing that can be manipulated or aligned properly with to produce maximum prosperity, nor is it a blindly indifferent entity from which the best we can hope for is luck. For the Christian, the world does not operate on its own, but is upheld by a providential God who is free to bless and withhold blessing as he sees fit.

The world is accountable to a *person*, not a deterministic set of laws which have only to be figured out in order to secure the best possible outcomes from a human perspective. For the Christian, history is not an endless series of cycles, or an emanation of an impersonal deity or force, or a prison of evil to be escaped from; rather it is a process set in motion by a personal God who has *goals... desires... expectations...* and, most importantly is guiding it to a fixed destination.

In the passages clustered around this little passage which exhorts us not to worry, we find, repeatedly, themes of the inevitability of judgment, the necessity of proper interpretation of the times, the importance of avoiding religious hypocrisy, the certainty of conflict that discipleship will bring about, the futility of human attempts to manipulate and control... On and on it goes. We have a God who demands obedience, who expects the tree that he has planted to yield fruit.

And yet...

Do not worry. It is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

So what is the word of the Lord to his saints at Neighbourhood Church on Sunday October 26, 2008? How do these apocalyptic warnings and promises of future blessing apply to people of a wealthy twenty-first century urban centre, where so many of the

hopes of the generations that have gone before us—hopes for peace, comfort, wealth, reasonable security, health—are commonplace for us?

Perhaps, in our state of technological self-sufficiency and relative comfort, we need to be reminded of the simple truth that we serve a God who is guiding and directing history to an appointed goal. It is easy—too easy!—to get caught up in everyday concerns, and allow the seasons of life to ebb and flow without giving a second thought to the harsh, uncomfortable truth that death comes for us all.

In a culture that is so saturated with the glorification of youth, beauty, and self-sufficiency, and is so determined to master those elements of our environment which prevent human flourishing, perhaps we need to be faced, again, with the temporary nature of our lives, and of the simple truth that all of our actions either contribute or fail to contribute to God's vision of redemptive *shalom* for his creation.

An account will have to be given for the days we have spent on God's good earth. God's world *will* reach its appointed destination, its climax... And while the details of the when, the where, and the how remain hidden from us, Jesus will not let us doubt that we have a role to play...

...and that worry and fear are inappropriate responses to our situation. Our role to play is not one of control—as if we alone were responsible to guide history to its appointed destination. Human confidence was always meant to be grounded in our Creator alone.

Despite the harshness of Jesus' words to the religious leaders, the crowds, his disciples, despite the desperate state of the world, despite human weakness and evil, despite the suffering both warranted and unwarranted—that comes our way, our Father knows us. He knows our weakness, he knows what we need. He knows that the kingdom of God, alone, can satisfy every human longing, and he urges us to strive for *this* rather than grasping and hoarding whatever control we can attain during the brief span of our lives.

He commands us to honour the future he has prepared for us by relinquishing our hold on the present. And, paradoxically, he shows us that the present is precisely where we demonstrate, through our obedience, our repentance and the exercise of our wisdom and interpretation, the hope and confidence we have in the author and Lord of history.

I don't know the specific things that may be worrying you or tempting you to worry about today. But I know that you have things that you could worry about because you are human beings and because the world is the kind of place where worrying is the natural thing to do.

What Jesus says here in Luke is that he is willing and able to lift us above “the natural thing to do,” that he wants to open the door to an “unnatural” way of living, one in which trusting, hoping, persevering, suffering, and loving all in the confidence of God bear witness to a reality greater and more powerful than our worries.

Thanks be to God.