



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Do Not Be Anxious

Luke 12:13-34

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Advent 1

From the day that humanity was cast out of the garden we've lived with ever-present anxiety: what am I going to eat, where am I going to sleep, what am I going to wear? And anxiety never goes away. Once one need is met, there's always some new need that takes its place—usually a need we didn't know we had until those lower-level needs were met. Think of the crowds of people who gathered to hear Jesus. Most of them had one or two changes of clothes, they lived hand to mouth, and all it took was for Dad to get injured so that he couldn't work and the family was destitute. Even the poorest of us is rich by comparison. And yet we haven't stopped being anxious. We still worry about our food and our homes and our clothes, but when we don't have to worry about those things we worry about our cars and our holidays and our kids. Instead of worry whether or not we'll have food, we worry about how Pinterest-perfect dinner will be. Instead of worry whether we'll have clothes to wear, we worry about looking stylish in them. When there's nothing important left to worry about, we find *unimportant* things to worry about. *Seinfeld* was a TV show that played on that. The creator said it was a show about nothing. What it really did was poke fun at our neuroses—at our anxiety over things that don't merit any anxiety. And yet most people identify with the show because we can see ourselves reflected in it. To top it off, when we're told that worry and anxiety are bad, what do we do? We get anxious about being anxious.

Brothers and sisters, anxiety is the lot of fallen humanity. It's the lot of people who have lost their knowledge of God. As Christians God has called us back to himself through Jesus Christ. He's reintroduced himself to us. He's given himself for us. And he's given us hope for a future in which we have been raised to life just as Jesus, a future in which Creation has been restored, and a future in which we've been restored to the tree of life—in which there's no more pain or tribulation and in which our God has wiped away every tear from our eyes. In the meantime, Jesus has given us his Spirit as a down payment on that future hope and he's called us to live our lives in the light of that hope—to pull back the veil to give the world a glimpse of what the Lord has in store for it.

This is what our Collect for this First Sunday in Advent gets at when we pray for the grace to cast away the works of darkness that we might instead clothe ourselves in the armour of light that when Jesus returns in glorious majesty to raise the living and the dead, we might find life immortal in him. The words of the Collect are taken from our Epistle lesson. St. Paul exhorts us saying,

You know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Paul lists such “works of darkness” as drunkenness, sexual immorality, and quarreling, but anxiety fits right in there with them. Anxiety is part of the old order. In fact, these others often grow out of our anxiety. Ultimately

sin is what happens when we try to meet our needs and our wants apart from God. Sin is what happens when we let our anxiety run wild—what happens when we refuse to wait on God and the provision he has promised us. Anxiety should be one of the first “works of darkness” to be set aside when we put on the “armour of light”. Think about this as we work our way through Jesus' next encounter.

Jesus has been using his trip to Jerusalem and the opposition he and his disciples have been encountering as opportunities to teach them what it means to be a disciple—what it means to really, truly, and whole-heartedly follow Jesus. We talk about “trusting Jesus” and this is just what he's getting at. In 12:13 we see Jesus still in the midst of a huge crowd when someone pushes his way through and interrupts. At first it looks like a complete change of subject, but Jesus had just told his disciples not to be anxious and this interruption is the perfect opportunity for Jesus to elaborate on anxiety.

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

This man is probably a younger brother. His father has died and his old brother has grabbed everything for himself. And so he comes to Jesus, wanting him to settle the dispute. This might seem odd to us, but remember that Jesus was seen as a rabbi and rabbis were the legal experts in Jewish society. But instead of settling the dispute, Jesus prophetically reveals this man's heart and rebukes him. Look at verses 14-15:

But he said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?” And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

How many families are torn apart by covetousness when it comes to inheritance? Jesus brings this man back to what really matters: “life” is a metaphor for salvation. When you stand before the eternal Judge, will it matter that you fought tooth and nail in the courts and got those extra few acres or those extra few dollars that Mom and Dad left behind? Or will it matter that you trusted God, sought peace, and maintained your relationship with your brother? And that’s what it comes down to: Do we trust God or do we trust in ourselves? Do we make our plans and live our lives with God and his promises and his character always in mind or do we chart our own course. The books of Proverbs and Sirach are full of descriptions of the wise and the foolish. The fool lives his life as if everything depends on him. The wise person depends on and trusts in God. Jesus describes this with a parable:

And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”” But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

The farmer was a good businessman. There was a plentiful year. He could sell his crop and do well, or he could store it up, wait out the glut in the market, and sell his crop some year down the road when the market price was higher. There’s nothing wrong with being a good businessman. God calls us to use our possessions and our wealth wisely. The man’s problem wasn’t his business sense, but his lack

of kingdom thinking. His plan was to benefit himself from his profit: “I’m set for life. I can retire and eat, drink, and be merry.” There’s no thought for the poor—other than the fact that when he does finally sell his crop at higher prices it’ll be his poor neighbours paying that higher price. He never stops to think that God may have other plans for him than making merry—that God may be enriching him not solely for his own benefit, but that he might use his riches to make known the kingdom of God.

John Piper writes about this sort of thinking in his book *Don’t Waste Your Life*:

“I will tell you what a tragedy is. I will show you how to waste your life. Consider a story from the February 1998 edition of *Reader’s Digest*, which tells about a couple who “took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30 foot trawler, play softball and collect shells.” At first, when I read it I thought it might be a joke. A spoof on the American Dream. But it wasn’t. Tragically, this was the dream: Come to the end of your life—your one and only precious, God-given life—and let the last great work of your life, before you give an account to your Creator, be this: playing softball and collecting shells. Picture them before Christ at the great day of judgment: “Look, Lord. See my shells.” That is a tragedy. And people today are spending billions of dollars to persuade you to embrace that tragic dream. Over against that, I put my protest: Don’t buy it. Don’t waste your life.”¹

The man in Jesus’ parable didn’t even get a chance to build his shell collection. He laid up his hoarded grain in his new barn and died that very night. The farmer was a wise

man when it came to business, but Jesus calls him a fool. He was the epitome of the man in Proverbs or in Sirach who fails to account for God in his thinking, he has no knowledge or understanding of God’s character, and who plans for life in the devil’s kingdom rather than the kingdom of God. He was rich toward himself. It never occurred to him to rich toward God—toward the very one who had given him his wealth.

Now we might wonder what this has to do with anxiety. Here was a wealthy farmer with so much grain he had to build a bigger barn. Here was a rich man ready to spend the rest of his life making merry and never worrying about tomorrow. The disciples—and most of the rest of the crowd for that matter—had the clothes on their backs and not much else. They may have been wondering where the next meal would come from or where they’d sleep that night. But rich and poor aren’t all that different. We can all be anxious. The rich man is anxious about his wealth. The poor man can be just as anxious about his poverty. The question in poverty or prosperity is God’s place in life. Rich and poor alike need to live in faith. Look at verses 22-23:

And he said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.”

Here’s that talk about “life” again. Jesus told the man with the inheritance problem that life consists of more than an abundance of possessions. Now he says that life has more to do than even the things we think of as the basics of life like food and clothing. We were created for more than the things we can see and taste and touch. This is the mindset that took Jesus to the cross where he gave up his life. Life, real *Life* with a capital “L” is more than the life we know. Real life has to do with

¹ *Don’t Waste Your Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2007), p. 46.

our redemption and our hope for resurrection. Real life is grounded in the kingdom of God and in the gift and down payment we have in the Holy Spirit. That doesn't mean that food and clothing and shelter aren't important. What it means is that they're just one part of the big picture that kingdom-minded people need to have. This is a call to faith. And notice what Jesus says here. We don't trust blindly in God's provision. No. We trust in what we know of his character—character we see manifest all around us.

Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? (Luke 12:24-26)

I can picture Jesus pointing to a raven sitting on a rooftop. If God takes care of a lowly raven, won't he take care of you? And then he points out what we all know: Anxiety won't get you anywhere. You won't live any longer because you were anxious. In fact, we know that anxiety will ultimately shorten our lives. Jesus ben Sira was right when he counselled his students: "Jealousy and anger shorten life, and anxiety brings on old age too soon" (30:24). And so if we can't improve our lives by being anxious, why be anxious at all? Will anxiety put food on the table or a roof over our heads any more than it will add an hour to our lives? No.

Jesus goes on, working from the lesser to the greater, working from small things to big things:

Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass,

which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! (Luke 12:7-28)

Everyone loves the beauty of flowers. We all recognise it. Many of us even acknowledge that their beauty is a gift from our Creator and we thank him for it. But the man or woman who lives life by faith goes a step further and this is the step Jesus is calling us to take. Faith recognises that God is not only our Creator, but that he is also our Sustainer. When we recognise God as our Creator we give him thanks for the gifts he has given. When we recognise God as our Sustainer we walk in faithful, building our lives around his agenda and trusting in his care.

Solomon was clothed in the greatest splendour Israel had ever known, but because of his foolishness—because he came to trust in his own plans rather than living according to God's, his splendour didn't survive his own death. His sons started a civil war that split the kingdom. Israel was never the same. But to this day the lilies are still clothed in God's splendour. Even the grass, thrown into the oven and burned for fuel is clothed in splendour. If God bothers to clothe the grass, he will certainly clothe us!

Jesus addresses them as "you of little faith". That might be a rebuke, but I think, given the context, that it's actually an exhortation. In the past they were a faithless and wicked generation. Now they're people of faith—little faith, but still faith. They have the mustard seed and if they'll only listen to Jesus, that little seed will grow large—that little seed of faith will grow as they walk in faith, trusting Jesus, until it's the great tree of faith we see at Pentecost and that we see as the disciples carry the Good News to the world, even in the face of persecution and martyrdom. Trusting here that God will provide bread is the first step that will lead them to the cross and to trusting that in Jesus God

has provided redemption and eternal life.

And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. (Luke 12:29-31)

I like the New Revised Standard Version's translation a little better, it talks about *striving* rather than seeking. Striving captures the sense of Luke's Greek better. It's not that we shouldn't give thought to the things of life; it's that striving after these things should never consume us to the point that we become anxious about them. The nations—and to the Jews that meant the people who have no knowledge of God or of his character—those people strive after these things because they don't know better. They don't know to trust in God. They might thank him for the beauty of the lilies, but it doesn't occur to them to trust in his goodness and his generosity. In fact, the hallmark of pagan worship is the manipulation of God—an attempt to coerce him into give us the things we need or want. Jesus warns us against striving after these things. That's what pagans do. We know better. We know God. We know his character. We should instead be *striving* for his kingdom. If we pursue God's kingdom, he'll provide what we need. Sometimes that may mean that he gives us a material abundance and sometimes it may mean that he teaches us to be satisfied with less, but either way he will provide.

Finally, Jesus focuses us in on this eternal perspective in verses 32-34:

"Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the

heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Don't waste your life on anxiety. The God who feeds the ravens and clothes the lilies has given us the kingdom. Consider that. Marvel in that. And think back to the very beginning of the story—to the first chapters of Genesis. God gave us the kingdom and we responded to his love with rebellion. We tried to throw him out of his own temple. We tried to take control of his creation for ourselves. We committed cosmic treason. And yet in his love for us he sent his own Son to become a sacrifice for our sin. He sent his own Son to restore us to himself. He sent his Son to set the temple to rights. And now he calls us to walk in the new life his Son has given and to live in faith and hope, looking forward to the day when the kingdom comes in all its fullness—to the day when the temple is fully restored and when we his priests are resurrected to the life and service for which he created us. That's what Jesus calls us to here. This is the kingdom our heavenly Father has given to us. And this is where he calls us to lay up our treasure—not in the kingdom that is passing away where gold and silver, pride and selfishness are what matter, but to lay up treasure that will last for eternity in God's restored Creation.

How do we do that? It's interesting that Jesus tells a crowd of mostly poor people to sell their possessions and to give to the needy. These people were the needy, but in God's economy wealth has nothing to do with material possessions. The person rich in silver and gold can be impoverished while someone who doesn't have two pennies to rub together can be fabulously rich. It's about faith and about our willingness to follow Jesus and to strive after his kingdom. And so Jesus calls us to manifest that kingdom by helping to meet the material needs of others.

Have you ever considered that there's something sacramental in giving? Think about the Lord's Supper. When we come to the Table, Jesus feeds us with the simple and earthly elements of bread and wine, but those simple elements are signs and seals of a heavenly reality. Jesus lifts the veil here at the Table. He gives us a glimpse of the kingdom yet to come and in the bread and wine he pours his grace into us—grace that strengthens us for the battle and that gives us faith to follow. Our giving—to others in need and our giving back to God—are our own sacramental signs and seals in return, expressing our faith in the heavenly reality. We give to others as Jesus gives to us—bread, wine, clothing, shelter, money, whatever—that they might in those simple things see God's provision. We give not as “private citizens” as it were, but as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. As Jesus lifts the veil for us at the Table and reveals his kingdom, so in our almsgiving we lift the veil for those walking in darkness and for those in need of encouragement—those who need to know that God is not only Creator, but also Sustainer.

And, brothers and sisters, consider that when we give back to God—what was the tithe in the Old Testament, given to support the ministry of what was their “Church” and their “clergy”—we offer to God a sign and seal of our own “little faith”. We offer to him a tangible acknowledgement that all we have comes from his sustaining hand—from his providential provision. And so to give—to provide for the poor and to provide for the Church—is ultimately to express our trust. It's a tangible way to put behind us our anxiety—that foundational work of darkness from which so many other sins sprout—and to put on the armour of light—to take up the banner of Jesus and his kingdom and to strive after him and to strive after everything he has in store for us.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, as we begin another Advent season and recall that the night is far gone and that the day is at hand, teach us to prepare for your kingdom and to fight under your banner. Teach us to set aside anxiety, teach us to set aside striving after the things that do not last, and give us faith to strive after your kingdom and to make it known to the people of this world still lost in darkness. As you, Jesus, have been so generous in giving your life for our sake, let us be generous in giving our lives for yours. We ask this in your name. Amen.