

**“Possessed”**  
**Text: Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Luke 12:22-34**  
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*“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Luke 12:32*

There is no indication in the New Testament that Jesus was a worried man. We are told he was lonely sometimes. Angry too. We know that like us, he got hungry and thirsty and frustrated on a regular basis. At times, he was sad, but we are never told that he was anxious or fearful. The disciples, on the other hand, were genuine worry warts. They worried about how to feed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. They were anxious about who would get the seat of honor in the kingdom of heaven. Then, there was the night when the wind was against them, and they were terrified that their little boat would sink in the storm.

That last worry puts me in mind of the oft-told bulletin blooper from the days when most churches had two worship services: “The sermon this morning is ‘Jesus Walks on Water’; the sermon tonight: ‘Searching for Jesus.’”

“Special church dinner tonight at 6 p.m.; prayer and medication to follow.”

Just one more: “This evening at 7 there will be hymn singing in the park across the street from the church. Bring a blanket and be prepared to sin.”

Enough already. The point I wanted to make is that the disciples who followed Jesus most closely and knew him most intimately, and you would think, would have the least reason to worry, were frequently riddled with anxiety. They were no more free of worry than you and I are free of worry. In today’s passage from Luke, Jesus’ words warning against worry was issued directly to his closest followers. Jesus spoke these words in the context of a genuine crisis that had already begun to unfold. Jesus was increasingly under suspicion by the authorities. Things were not going well in his ministry, and they would continue not to go well until that terrible, dark afternoon when he died on the cross. His disciples were beginning to understand that to follow him was not to take the road to glory. The road to discipleship would be a costly one.

Jesus was not a psychologist, though he thoroughly understood human psychology. He was not the Dr. Phil or the Oprah Winfrey of his day. He was among us in a unique way: fully human, fully God. He showed us what human life ought to look like and actually could look like with God’s help. He showed us the

very nature and will of God. His admonitions against worry came from his understanding, his inside knowledge of the utter trustworthiness of God. Whenever any of us who claim Jesus as Lord find ourselves living according to our fears, rather than in accordance with our trust in God, then we can be sure that the priorities of our lives are going to get out of whack, and our insides are going to be in turmoil on a regular basis.

Jesus, the good shepherd, assures his anxious apostles, “Be not afraid, little flock. It is your father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

I have a friend who is a Baptist minister, a very outstanding person named Bill Self, who is pastor of the John’s Creek Baptist Church in Alpharetta. Bill tells of growing up in a small town in south Florida during those idyllic days when kids could ride their bicycles everywhere. “Our bicycles were our ticket to freedom,” Dr. Self writes. “One day, after I had lubricated the chain and the sprocket, my friends and I took a shortcut on our bike ride through a building site that had nothing on it but sand and half-built houses. Now, sand in south Florida has a life of its own. If you get it on you, you’ll never get it off. This day, as we rode across the construction site, I hit a piece of wood and fell into a large pile of sand. I was okay, but the freshly greased sprocket of my bike was covered in sand. When I started to ride, the sand began to grind the gears, making a terrible noise. All I could hear was ‘grind, grind, grind’. I tried in vain to get the gears free of sand, but I couldn’t. I could ride, but it was a very unpleasant situation...”

Dr. Self goes on to say, “I see a lot of people for whom fear is the sand in their gears. They keep functioning, but anxiety is with them all the way. Fear robs them of the joy and peace and hope that God wants to give even in the midst of difficult and challenging times.”

Jesus saw this kind of thing eating away at the disciples’ quality of life. Fear was the sand in the gears of their discipleship. They were experiencing what you might call “anticipatory anxiety”. They were worried about what was going to happen tomorrow. They were worried that they would not have enough food to eat or clothes to cover their backs. It is ironic to hear this passage when you and I are mainly worried about whether we have eaten too much, or when we are going to find time to clean the clothes out of the closet.

The further irony is that many people on earth today have plenty of reason to be concerned about the basic necessities of life. Hunger and poverty are rampant in many parts of the world and a lot more prevalent than is often acknowledged in our affluent nation.

The disciples were about to face basic survival issues. “What are we going to eat tomorrow? What are we going to wear tomorrow?”

These were not metaphors, but real questions. The astonishing answer Jesus gave was this: The antidote to your worry is to “sell your possessions and give alms.” Take care of the needy. “Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out. . . for where your treasure is there your heart will be also.”

Jesus was famous for saying counter-intuitive things like this. Remember how he said, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and to lose their lives?”

Years ago, I had the privilege working with some other people to open the first shelter for homeless people in downtown Atlanta. By the end of our first winter, we had been able to offer to an amazing number of women, men and children, a dry place to be warm, to eat and to sleep, to be safe and welcome. There had been a lot of publicity about our effort. More money than I would ever have imagined would come in had been donated. One day, I said excitedly to a friend and colleague on our steering committee, “We have enough money in the bank to run this shelter all next winter too!”

She said, “Oh, no we don’t.”

“Yes, we do. Here’s the bank statement.”

She said, “Well, it won’t be there for long. We are going to give everything we have in the bank to the smaller shelters and soup kitchens that have not been as fortunate as we by being on television every cold night this winter.”

“What if we don’t have enough to do the ministry next year?” I asked anxiously.

“We’ll have enough”, she said. “God has seen to it that we have had what we have needed to do the work this year, right?”

And so against my strong objection, we emptied the bank account and helped the littler guys, who were able to help more people than they ever had. The next winter there was more than enough funding to do what God was calling us to do in an unprecedented, interfaith movement of compassion and prevention that spread across the metropolitan area and into the surrounding counties.

“Consider the lilies,” Jesus said, “and how they grow.” I remember memorizing that Bible verse from when I was a little girl.

I remember another one too, the old King James Version: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God.” I had no idea what it meant, but it sounded grand to me. Over the years, it has gradually released some of its secrets to me. What I have learned thus far about it is that when you are the sole focus of your own concern, when you are the center of your own universe instead of letting God be the

center, then you are going to be out of alignment with God's saving purposes and with your own humanity. Worry gets you out of alignment.

What I have learned is that if you can keep your eye on that which is greater than you, if you can keep your eye on the goodness and greatness and constancy of God who is the ground beneath us and the future that is before us, you will be able to make a life out of what you have. I have learned that you make a living out of what you get, but you make a life out of what you give. I have learned that our attitudes and our practices toward money and toward the things that we own are finally and fundamentally a spiritual matter.

I loved last Sunday watching the scales fall off our eyes as we thought of what might be possible through the second phase of *Time of Promise*. We are giving up our anxiety and stepping out in faith, remembering that it is God's good pleasure to give us the kingdom. It is God's nature to make sure we have what we need. When we hold ourselves tightly and stand over in the corner, worried about whether or not we are going to have enough, we miss out on life at its very fullest.

I love the story of the uncle who was visiting the family of his young niece one day. He came upon her in the front room, leaning precariously out of the second story window of the house. As she leaned out of the window, about to fall, she held on to the neck of her dress from behind. He grabbed her and drew her back into the window. "What were you doing, honey?" he asked.

She said, "I was holding myself, so I wouldn't fall."

We must never fool ourselves into thinking that we hold ourselves. What matters in this world and in the world to come is not what we possess, but the glad reality that God holds us. The Heidelberg Catechism, written many hundreds of years ago, begins with this question: "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?"

"That I belong-body and soul in life and in death-not to myself, but to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ..."

There is a story from the Native American tradition about a Cherokee grandfather telling his grandson about a fight that was going on inside him. He said to his grandson, "The fight that inside me is a struggle between two wolves. One wolf is my envy, my greed, my self-pity, my false pride, my worry about myself. The other wolf is joy, peace, generosity, kindness, benevolence."

The grandson thought for a moment and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf wins, Grandfather?"

The grandfather answered, "The wolf I feed."

The great Jewish philosopher Hillel once said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" reminding us that we must care for ourselves and not be irresponsible or dependent upon others if we have a choice about it. And then the great philosopher went on to say, "If I am ONLY for myself, then who am I?" We who live in an age of excessive self-interest can never forget that self-interest alone never, ever will save.

I don't know how or why it is, but the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this earth is set up in such a way that to be truly human we have to get over ourselves and live a life that answers the needs of others and that is grounded in our faith and the trustworthiness of God. I do not know why life works that way, but I know that it does. I know that trust in God and a generous spirit are what will get the sand out of your sprocket so that you can pedal on, to the glorious kingdom of God.

We have not been promised that everything in life will be all right. We have been promised that God will be with us all the way. The basics we will never have to do without: promises on which to stand, providence to guide, and peace that passes human understanding.