

Sermon 10.2.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

Joshua 1:1-9 | Philippians 4:8-13 | **Luke 12:22-31**

When I was in Middle School, our house caught on fire one night. My sister and I were being dropped off after Vacation Bible School, and my parents turned on the outside spotlights so we could see to get inside the house. We didn't know it, but there was a bird nest on top of one of the spotlights, and it got hot enough to smoke and smolder. By the time my mom and dad woke up, the living room was on fire.

My dad called 911 and then grabbed a garden hose to try to keep the flames from spreading. For some reason, one of our neighbors who lived about half a mile away was awake in the middle of the night – I don't know why – but he saw the fire and came to help. The fire fighters told us later that those two garden hoses kept the whole house from burning down.

It was terrifying as a kid to be woken up in the middle of the night because the house is on fire. We know that a lot of our core, fundamental beliefs about ourselves, about other people, and about *the world* are formed by the things we witness and experience when we're young. And the night our house caught on fire was the first time I realized how much of this world and my own life is outside of my control. That anything can happen at any time.

To this day, I can't go to sleep at night without checking the oven and every burner on the stove, without turning out every light and unplugging most of our appliances, and without checking every single candle in the house.

All of us, at some point, are confronted by the reality that life is outside of our control. And most of us *hate* not being in control. I know I do. Even though I know it's not true, there's

still a piece of me that believes that if I just try hard enough, stay aware enough, think deeply enough, plan ahead far enough, then I can keep anything bad or unintended from happening. As a result, I worry a lot. I'm not particularly proud of this, but I thought that maybe, at the beginning of a sermon about worry, the pastor could start with some honesty and confession.

All of us have worries, and all of us eventually have to confront the fact that we're not in control, that the world is wild and unpredictable, that we can't determine the future. Maybe it's the loss of a job, or the death of a loved one, or a medical diagnosis, or a situation we can't fix or make right that makes us realize we're not able to control everything. And that's hard, because as human beings, we like being in control.

We were confronted by this uncomfortable truth on September 11th. Most of us had never lived through that kind of attack on our country, and it was terrifying and made us feel vulnerable and afraid. And in response, wanting to feel some measure of control, some people became convinced that if we try hard enough, if we pour enough money and energy and resources and intelligence and planning into it, then we can make the world completely safe.

But the truth is that we can't control the world. No matter how hard we try – and *wow*, do we try! – we can't even control a lot that happens in our own lives. And since we're not in control, we tend to worry. I think we worry because it gives us the *illusion* of control.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus says that there are different ways we can respond to worry and anxiety. We can be consumed by it, or we can entrust our worries and anxieties to God. To be clear, he's not talking about medical conditions that produce anxiety and need treatment. And I don't think that Jesus is *condemning* people for feeling worry. After all, the worry we feel when a loved one is in need or at risk, the worry we feel when someone

we care for has experienced tragedy – that comes from a place of *love*, and love is never a bad thing. But Jesus *is* declaring that we have someone to come to with our worries, so that they don't consume or control us. That we don't *need* to worry. That trusting in God is the answer to our worries and fears.

Which is funny, because we tend to think *worrying* is the answer to our worries. But Jesus points out that worrying is almost *never* productive, and it rarely accomplishes anything. Worrying usually just creates more worrying! I mean, have you ever spent *lots of time* worrying about something, and then felt *better*? That's what worry does – it causes us to obsess and not let go, like a dog chewing on a toy, until it invades our minds and thoughts and takes over.

Jesus said it this way: “can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” (v. 26) He's asking if worrying helps, if it accomplishes anything. He's genuinely asking – where does worry get you? Does it help you to feel peace and strengthen your faith in God, or does it leave you stressed and picturing the worst-case scenario? If we're honest, worry doesn't make us feel better, and no matter how *hard* we worry and try, we *still* can't control this world or the future.

And so Jesus says there's another way to live when it comes to worry and anxiety. Since things are outside of our control, we can trust in God. We can trust God with our worries. We can turn them over to God rather than carrying them with us everywhere like a burden.

Jesus' point is simple: God knows what you need, so you don't have to keep worrying. You can trust your heavenly Father. Life *is* outside your control, and you can allow that to drive you crazy, to live in denial, to try to gain some illusion of control, or you can trust God to take care of you. The world *is* sometimes a scary place, and you can allow that to make you cower in

fear, to treat others with suspicion, to become paranoid, or you can trust God to watch over you. You can try to exert control until eventually life takes it away from you, or you can surrender that control willingly and have peace *given* to you. Jesus says that God is worthy of our trust, and that if we need proof, consider the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. Consider the cross, where Jesus offered his life to show how much God loves and cares for *you*.

You know, today I hear a lot of people say that religion, that *God* are things that human beings invented to bring ourselves comfort and peace, to deal with our mortality and a world that's outside our control. I have family members who tell me that faith is just a giant crutch that humanity created.

But here's the thing: Jesus really *does* bring comfort and peace. Faith in God *does* help us to deal with worry and the fact that life can't be controlled. We don't usually call God a *crutch* when we sing our hymns, but we do sing about the friend we have in Jesus, we sing about leaning on everlasting arms, and peace like a river, and grace leading us through toils and snares. Just this morning we sang that God is our shelter and high tower, that God's mercy brings comfort to our anxious souls, that we will fear no evil that may come tomorrow.

We sing these things because they're *true*. Having faith in God does work to silence our fears, it does give us peace, and it does quiet our worries. Our lives are proof of that. And this might make God a crutch, but it doesn't mean that faith or God aren't real. No, the opposite is true – the very fact that we experience such things is proof that God *is* real. And we don't need to feel shame or be embarrassed to admit that faith in God is what gets us through the day, gives meaning to life, and helps us to navigate our way through this world.

So I ask you – what worries and anxieties do *you* need to let go of this morning, to entrust to God in the sure confidence that he will take care of you and provide for you?

I thought about ending my sermon here this week, by simply telling you that you can trust God – which is true. But these verses aren't just a comfort, they're also a calling. Jesus spoke these words on his way to Jerusalem and the cross. He told his followers not to worry about their lives as he walked towards the end of his own. Even as the cross loomed, Jesus trusted that God would take care of him, that God's loving purpose and will would still be done. For Jesus, trusting in God came with a price, and sometimes it will for us too.

Right now there are children on the other side of City Avenue who are hungry. There are people just a few miles away who are homeless. There are people in our country suffering and dying from treatable illnesses because they can't afford health insurance or health care. Around the world, there are people fleeing violence and war, people who don't have access to food and water, people who have been struck by tragedy. They're praying and trusting that God will provide for them, that they'll be okay, that they'll have enough for tomorrow.

And as God's people, we must recognize that part of our purpose is to be the answer to those prayers and that trust. Following Jesus means that God wants to work through you in this world. Jesus is calling us to trust God with our worries, so that we can begin to be the answer to the worried prayers of others. We're being called to be attentive to the anxieties and the needs of other people – and then to do what we can to help, in Jesus' name. If you know that someone is worried, if you're aware that someone is struggling, if you see someone is in need, then you can help to do something about it.

That's the way God works – sometimes we're the *recipients* of God's peace and care and provision, and sometimes we help to be the *providers*. Sometimes it's our actions, our presence, our words, our sacrifice, our loving service that can help someone else to stop worrying and to trust that God will care for them. These words our Savior spoke this morning are not just comfort in *our* times of need and worry, they're also a call to see the needs and worries of others. And to respond in love, as God has done for us. Amen.