



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – October 19, 2008

Be Not Anxious

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Luke 12:22-34

22 He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. 23 For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. 24 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! 25 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?^d 26 If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? 27 Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin;^e yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 28 But 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! 29 And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. 30 For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. 31 Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. 32 “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell 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. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

We are, every one of us, anxious. We have planned so carefully, worked so hard, sacrificed so much just so that we might lay down a secure place to stand, and now it seems that hairline cracks are beginning to run from one end of our foundations to the other. After all our labor, after all our prudence, after all our playing by the rules; how are we to bear staring down these fresh uncertainties: Where will we find work? How will we make our mortgage payments? How will we afford tuition? How are we going to make it through retirement? I haven’t even been able to get

^d Or *add a cubit to your stature*

^e Other ancient authorities read *Consider the lilies; they neither spin nor weave*

^f Other ancient authorities read *God’s*

myself to open a single retirement account statement since last June, but I’m pretty sure the account title has changed from “401(k)” to “201(k).” We are, every one of us, anxious.

And just now, just this morning, in all our anxieties, Jesus calls to us: “Do not worry.” Actually, the literal translation would be: “Be not anxious.” As Karl Barth wrote, “no other word so precisely describes our actual condition . . . Jesus could not utter a word that so concerns all of us, that so commands our attention, as the word ‘anxiety.’”¹

“Be not anxious.” To we who are seized by anxiety, it is either the most preposterous, impossible demand or the most precious, desperately needed offer.

Can we admit that, at first, it appears to be the former? None of us would find any comfort in Jesus telling us that we are both weak and faithless, just because we can’t quiet our anxieties on our own. We are anxious precisely because we have burned through our resources of confidence and faith. And none of us would feel any stronger or more hopeful in Jesus telling us, “Buck up! Don’t worry! It’s not as bad as you think. Things will turn out all right.” We all have enough life experience to know for sure that, actually, material things don’t always turn out all right. Often they do; but sometimes they don’t.

A God may float untroubled above the pains and sorrows of human life; a God may counsel serenity from a detached perspective high above the mud and sweat and blood of life on earth. But we humans have no such option. Such peace as we may find must be found in spite of an existence where we all know that, sooner or later, our lives will end in death, our acquisitions will turn to dust, and our accomplishments will be lost to the tides of time. How can the Son of God demand that we mere mortals “be not anxious”?

How? Precisely because Jesus addresses us not as a God floating serenely above the push and pull of earth, but

rather as Emmanuel, the “God with us” who shares our anxieties and our death. Jesus was known as a man acquainted with suffering and sorrows. When he bids us, “Be not anxious,” he doesn’t mean, “do not worry, every material challenge will turn out all right.” After all, Jesus spoke the words to us while beset by his enemies, about to be deserted by his friends, and facing a death more miserable than any that confronts us. And yet, Jesus not only bids us, what is more, he shows us, he offers us, a way forward where we might find peace in the midst of any troubles that might come our way.

“Be not anxious,” Jesus cries. Be not anxious even though you are beset by material threats on all sides.

“But how?” we ask. How? By turning our attention to the very next words in Jesus’ cry: “Be not anxious about your life.” Actually, the literal translation of the Greek word we set out as “life” is really “soul.” Actually, Jesus is bidding us, “Be not anxious about your soul.”

What’s the difference? What’s the difference between “life” and “soul”? The difference turns on who “you” are. Let me explain.

Last Sunday night I was at a gathering to hear the world’s leading expert on Vedanta, an ancient Indian philosophy.² He turned to a member of the group and asked “who” he was. The young man answered, “I’m Greg.”

“You are not Greg,” responded the sage. “Greg is just an English name your parents gave you. If your name were Larry, you would still be you. Who are you?”

“Well, I’m Greg, I’m an energy trader who lives in Manhattan.”

“No, you are not an energy trader. Energy trading just happens to be what you are currently doing as a job. And Manhattan just happens to be where you are living this year. “You” would still be “you” if you were a school teacher in Kansas City. Who are you?”

Well, we were all breathing deep sighs of relief that *we* were not poor Greg, now squirming in his seat under this Vedantic cross-examination, but we all got the

teacher’s point. And just in case we didn’t, the sage continued, “I am not urging you to accept some esoteric Eastern philosophy, I am urging you to accept the teaching of your own Christ: *‘For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.’* [Luke 12:23.]”

The point in Christianity, as in Vedanta, as in virtually all great world religions, is that there is a “you” behind all your superficial names and roles. There is a true self beyond all the material attributes. It’s not that our earthly names and roles are not important. They are. It’s just that they are not our essence; they are not our core identity. They are more like jackets or sweaters that we wear for a while but might change without necessarily endangering or diminishing our essence, our core identity, the who “we” really are in the sight of God.

The Christian name for our essence, for our core identity, for “who” we really are in the sight of God, is our “soul.” So Jesus says, “Be not anxious.” He is saying, “Be not anxious about your soul.” And since, as Paul teaches, there is no power, no adversity, no difficulty that can separate our souls from the love of God, there is ultimately no reason for us to be anxious about our souls.

“Be not anxious.” These words are the very hand of Christ extended to lift us out of our daily worries. If only we could grasp Christ’s hand. If only we could take His words into our heart as healing balm. If only But it isn’t always that simple, is it? For our minds are so attached to the earthly plane; our habits of thought are such sturdy sentinels of worldly wisdom; our eyes are so accustomed to calculating material security or threat that we find it difficult to hear Christ’s promise, we find it difficult to take His hand.

It has always been so. Indeed, the more anxious our times, the more firmly we seem to fix on our material well being. And just because we are the way we are, and just because God is the way God is, God has given us additional gifts, spiritual gifts, to help us hear his words and take his hand.

One of these spiritual gifts is the gift of music. Music is a gift by which God’s heart speaks directly to our soul. Melody carries God’s reassurance past the dull witted sentinels of our human logic, stirring our hearts with God’s deeper truths. As Thomas Carlyle asked, “Who is there that, in logical words, can express the effect music

has on us? A kind of inarticulate, unfathomable speech, which leads us to the edge of the Infinite, and lets us for moments gaze into that!"

It should not surprise us, then, that God's people have been seeking God's peace and reassurance in song for over three thousand years. The Psalms were Israel's song book: songs of unconditional reassurance and trust that make no sense unless we hear them as speaking to our souls. You might just close your eyes as I read Psalm 121 and let its promise find its way to your hearts.

Psalm 121

¹ *I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.* ² *My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth.* ³ *He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber.* ⁴ *Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.* ⁵ *The LORD is thy keeper: the LORD is thy shade upon thy right hand.* ⁶ *The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.* ⁷ *The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul.* ⁸ *The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore. Amen.*

This Psalm 121 was Betsey Nissen's favorite Psalm. She asked me to read it for her every time I visited. She even asked for it last week when she was dying of leukemia. I was, for a moment, ambivalent. I wasn't sure how Betsey was understanding a promise that God would not suffer her foot to be moved when God didn't seem to be curing her leukemia.

Of course, as usual, Betsey was far wiser than I. She wasn't trusting that God would deliver a miracle cure, she was trusting that God would continue to preserve her soul, continue to provide her with peace and joy, in spite of her illness.

Betsey died a beautiful and peaceful death yesterday afternoon. Just five minutes before Betsey passed over the veil, her daughter Amy asked Patricia and me to read Psalm 121 for Betsey one more time. She knew that God had been preserving her mother's soul for years, and that God would be doing so for ages to come.

Sometimes, the very point of a psalm or hymn is that we need only still our souls to receive God's gift. It is not by chatty worry but only by silent trust that God's

gift of peace is found. Peace comes not because of who we are and what we have done or said, but because of who God is and what God has done and said. Please join us in singing just the first verse of Hymn 77, "Be Still My Soul."

*Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side;
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change he faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly friend
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

Calvin wrote that the human mind is a perpetual factory of anxieties and idols. The more anxious we are, the more we risk bowing before false Gods in our desperate search for peace. Psalm 46 counsels that we need only come to rest, we need only be still to know our true God. Perhaps you would like to close your eyes as the Choir sings one verse from Psalm 46.

*God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear,
though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult*

As God's people sing their faith, as God's truth breaks through our clouds of doubt, as we experience the unconditional assurance with which God warms our souls, so our souls respond naturally with trust, and then with peace, and then, ultimately, with joy. Please join us in singing the first verse of Hymn 8, "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee."

*Joyful, joyful, we adore thee,
God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flowers before thee,
Opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness,
Drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness,
Fill us with the light of day.
. . . . Amen.*

Perhaps you saw the *Money Magazine* assessment that New Canaan was the town in America with the highest average income. Which probably also means we are the

highest earning town in history. If our peace depends on our still being the highest income town today or in twenty years, we might have reason for anxiety, for I can't find a single passage in this Bible where God promises to maintain our income rank. But from the first page to the last, God *does* promise to preserve us from all evil, and God *does* promise to preserve our souls. My friends, in word, in prayer, in song, Christ is extending His hand to you personally this morning. Take His hand. Accept His peace. Be not anxious.
Amen.

1 The inspiration for this sermon derived, in part, from a discussion entitled "The Sloth and Misery of Man" by Karl Barth, *Christian Dogmatics* v.IV, Part 2, Sec. 65 at pp. 468-471, and "Be Not Anxious" by Karl Barth in *Come Holy Spirit; Sermons* by Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen. (1933). The integration of music into this sermon was inspired by "Panic," a sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Nancy Taylor.

2 A. Parthasarathy is the founder of the Vedanta Academy in Malavli Hills, India. He is the author of *The Eternities: Vedanta Treatise*; and *The Fall of the Human Intellect*.