

No Time to Worry

Year C, Third Sunday of Advent

12 December 2021

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6, Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

I wonder what you worry about. What keeps you up at night? What causes you anxiety? A news headline featuring a recent poll by Ipsos states that Covid is “no longer the world’s top worry as it is overtaken by economic concerns”

(<https://www.ipsos.com/en/what-worries-world-october-2021>). Now, this report was for October 2021, so it’s possible that the arrival of Omicron would kick Covid right back up to the top of the worry list. But it’s worth noting that all over the world (28 countries were surveyed), in the middle of a global pandemic, economic issues are the most worrying, with Poverty & social inequality (33%) and Unemployment (30%) beating out Covid as more worrisome. In fact, Covid is tied for third place with worries about financial/political corruption (29%). Even in a pandemic, economics is the top worry of our time.

What about you? How do the world’s worries compare with your own? In this third week of advent, I would like to suggest that our worries can be opportunities for repentance as we prepare for Christmas. In other words, our worries signal to us concrete ways for us to repent as we ready ourselves to receive Christ this advent season.

My grandmother was known in our family as a worry wort. She was also extremely intelligent. It often seems the two go hand-in-hand. There are more dangers in this world than the average intellect can perceive, and so often our most anxious are also our most vigilant risk assessors. While my grandmother’s worrying was experienced as a minor annoyance by many in the family, I think our deeper response to her worry was one of gratitude for her care and concern – at least *someone* loves me enough to worry for me.

But today Paul tells us not to give worry a foothold in our lives. “Do not worry about anything,” he tells the church in Philippi, “but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil 4:6). Paul’s charge to stop worrying is rooted in a promise. And this promise is that God’s peace will surpass all our smart worries and guard not only our intellect, but also our hearts from being in the grip of worry.

What a promise. I have to confess that when I’ve been in the grip of worry this is easier said than done. I remember the first time I got skin cancer I ignored it and so refused to give it any energy. The second time I was diagnosed with skin cancer, I was a little troubled, but again, I paid it little attention. And then a year later I got my third diagnosis. And that one got to me. One night I found myself in a frenzied panic about the potency of the disease. As much as I prayed, I was unable to get free from the grip of my worry about losing my nose, and ears, and who knows what else.

Our lesson today from Zephaniah names several worries topping the list for God’s people. And the worries seem justified given the prophet’s warning of judgment due to their rampant corruption and injustice. But today’s reading turns toward renewal as the prophet announces

cause for rejoicing because the Lord has taken away the judgments against them, turned away their enemies, promised rescue from disaster and oppressors, as well as relief for the lame and the outcast. The heart of this good word, this promise for renewal, is nothing less than the presence of God. "The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst," Zephaniah assures them (Zephaniah 3:15). The prophet repeats this two verses later when he says, "The Lord, your God, is in your midst," and because of this, there is no need to worry about anything. I'm sure this came as a huge relief to God's people, who could see plenty of reasons for worry until Zephaniah's comforting announcement, which ends his prophetic book.

It's no accident that Paul gives the very same reason to the Christians in Philippi for why they should not worry. "The Lord is near," Paul says (Phil 4:5). Confidence in God's presence, God in our midst, is what makes nonsense of our worry. In this way, worry is a form of atheism. Maybe that's putting it too strongly, but I do think that worry exposes our disbelief that God is with us and will guard our hearts and minds.

Worry comes to us in many shapes and sizes and concerns. I suspect the particular worries we have reveal the ways we remain unconvinced that God is near. Some worries are selfish and embarrassing, like my worry about losing my nose and ears. Other worries appear rooted in neighbor love, like worrying about the health of loved ones in a pandemic. And then there are other worries that expose our own idolatry, which brings us to our lesson today from Luke.

We heard the first part of this story last week, when Pastor Ayebale helped us see that we need to repent in order to see Jesus, to receive Jesus this advent season. And what we see this week is that economics is the greatest threat to our receiving Jesus.

At least, that's what Luke thinks. In Matthew's Gospel, John the Baptist snaps at the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism. The religious leaders are the ones that get called the brood of vipers in Matthew's story. But in Luke's Gospel, the brood of vipers are everyday people. People in a crowd. People who collect taxes. Soldiers. People like you and me. And the difference here is that these people don't want to be vipers. They want to repent. *We* want to repent. *I* want to repent. And so they ask John, "What should we do?" (Luke 3:10)

Here we see that the beginning of true repentance begins with a question. Asking questions is dangerous. It takes courage to ask questions because it's going to require humility to hear the answer and bravery to act on it. Sometimes we don't want to hear the truth, but we all know we need the truth to be set free. And that's what the people get from John the Baptist. The truth.

And the truth is economic all the way through. If you have extra clothes, give to people that don't. If you have food, share with those who are hungry. If you collect money for your job, don't steal or cheat. And if you protect people in your job, don't abuse your power to get rich. Repentance for Luke is all about economics, it's all about money and possessions. John the Baptist's preparing the way for the Lord is all about, in the words of our Ipsos survey, addressing poverty and social inequality, the number 1 worry of our world today. This was good news in Isaiah's time, Jesus's time, and it's good news today.

And doesn't it make sense that God would address our greatest worry, our greatest obstacle to receiving God's self in Jesus? This is what Isaiah and then John the Baptist are talking about when they speak of making paths straight, filling valleys, leveling mountains, straightening the crooked, and smoothing out the rough. The prophet Isaiah and John the Baptist with him, insist that salvation is all about using economics to love our neighbor. And by reversing the greediness of this world, Jesus brings a kingdom that casts down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly as Mary sings. Jesus is clear: you cannot serve God and Mammon; God and wealth.

Now I don't think Luke, or Isaiah, or Zephaniah would be surprised to hear that economics tops the world's worry list for 2021. And that's because they could see that our worry over economics exposes the ways we still serve Mammon. Mammon is what's on our mind, most of the time. Even for Christians. How else can we make sense of Christians' craze over the prosperity gospel, the American Dream, or Dave Ramsey?

Pastors are not exempt from the worry of money or the service to Mammon. Richard Neuhaus warns young pastors saying, "Most of us do not 'sell out' by making crooked deals, or even by consciously compromising principle in order to compromise financial security; we pay our tribute to Mammon in the minutes and hours spent in worrying about money and the things that money can get" (quoted by W. Willimon in *Calling and Character*, 103).

Neuhaus observes that the time we spend thinking about money reveals money's rule over our lives. It's strange then, how often we think we can follow Jesus and spend much of our time thinking about money, even though Jesus explicitly says we can only have one master.

Our song today from Isaiah is the great antidote to our worry and obsession with money. I love this song. We say it regularly at morning prayer. For Isaiah here and elsewhere, it is God who saves us and nothing else. Isaiah is clear: "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation" (Isaiah 12:2). Isaiah's conviction that God is his salvation brings into stark relief the ways in which our worries expose imposters who stand in as fake-saviors.

Money cannot save you. But much of the time we live as though we think it can. That's why money so often becomes an idol for us.

Money can certainly insulate you. It can protect you (kind of), heal you (kind of), preserve a semblance of independence (kind of). But often these things that money can buy become occasions for isolation from others more than insulation from the dangers of this world. Money tends to isolate more than insulate. What we can be sure of, Isaiah reminds us, is that money cannot save you. Only God can.

Our economic worries expose not only our idolatry, but more importantly, the ways in which money can keep us from receiving Christ. Maybe it is perfectly appropriate that Christian Christmas and secular Christmas go hand-in-hand: gift-giving is one way to repent, as John the Baptist reminds us today. Gift-giving – sharing our coats, food, and money – helps us become

people who show with our lives and not just our lips that Jesus is Lord and not our Bank account. God gives us everything we need. Generosity is a sign of our trust in God.

This advent season, we are invited to be people who do not have time to worry because God is near. God's nearness makes all the difference. When God is with us we have nothing to fear. Nothing. Because God is with us we do not need to worry about our noses, our jobs, our marriages, our kids, our lives, or our loved ones. Because God is our salvation, we can trust in God and not be afraid. Thanks be to God.