

Faces of Discipleship: The Ready

*A sermon preached on Luke 12:32-40 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on August 11, 2019*

I.

The line drawing shows a man sitting in his living room, face etched in full-blown panic. He's dropped his book on the floor, and his hair stands straight up. Seemingly in his fear, he's clutching his legs as if they are steeling him somehow. And just before him sits a bomb on the floor that someone tossed through his window. Shattered glass covers the scene as the fuse burns to nothing. In the punch line, the man confesses to his wife: "It's my fault — I wasn't worrying enough."¹

With that punch line, the cartoon caption writers of the *New Yorker* just *get it*, don't they? For worrying seems to be the state of being these days, doesn't it? We worry about the state of our country, the disintegration of common life and common decency, climate change, and North Korea. We worry about the bills or the markets, the resale value of our house or how we're going to make ends meet. We worry if we'll ever shed those 15 pounds, what we'll do if the air conditioning breaks, or why that friend hasn't responded to our text from three days ago. We worry if our kids will ever be happy, if our parents will have enough saved at the end of life, if our jobs are stable in a volatile economy. Whether the topic is our lives, our families, or our

¹ As read in Dan Clendenin's lectionary essay, "Don't Worry About Your Life," from *Journey With Jesus*, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20100802JJ.shtml>.

careers, we worry about what we should be doing, and then we worry about what we think *other people* think about what we should be doing. And when something happens, we're like the man in the cartoon – perhaps we just didn't worry hard enough!

II.

It seems we're in good company, that company being those first followers of Jesus to whom he gives instructions about living as disciples amidst their worry. "Don't worry about your life," he tells them in Luke 12:22, "about what you'll eat or drink or wear. Consider the ravens, consider the lilies – neither have the tools to work or worry their way into bigger homes or better jobs, but God feeds them and clothes them. And you, dear ones, are of precious value! Can you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? So instead of worry, seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be given to you."

It's like balm for my ears, these words! This is what Jesus has just shared with the disciples when our passage for today begins right where the other left off: "so do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom!" "Do not be afraid," Jesus says, echoing the countless imperatives throughout Luke's gospel, where this exhortation came Zechariah and Mary and the shepherds upon the announcement of the coming Messiah, to Simon Peter upon Jesus' call to discipleship, to Jairus at the illness of his daughter, to the

disciples as they consider this life of faith.² And on the heels of all this worry-talk from Jesus, he connects the dots from low-grade anxiety about the ordinary things to high-grade fear about the extraordinary ones. “Do not be afraid, little flock,” he says, reminding them that they are part of a whole, led by a guide, dependent on another for their ultimate care, “for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” It’s the crux of this lesson, the punch line of this passage. For it is (and has been always) God’s good *pleasure* (not begrudging obligation, not fear-based reward, but joy and delight) to give (as gift) you (the sheep, the flock) the kingdom of God (not just the creature comforts that make things easier in this life, not just a heavenly life after this one, but a transformative invitation to the unfolding of God’s dream for this world.) It is God’s delight that we share in this dawning new day where mountains are made low and rough places plain, where good news comes to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, liberation to the oppressed, jubilee to all people, where death never has the final word because new life and fierce love are truer and bigger and more lasting than any death we may experience! So do not worry, do not fear, do not be anxious — no less than the kingdom of God awaits.

This context is so important to grasp firmly as we continue reading, because everything that Jesus says after this must be heard with this promise in mind. “Sell your possessions, give alms to the poor,

² With gratitude to Richard P. Carlson’s research in “Luke 12:32-40” from *Feasting on the Word*, p335 for this comprehensive list!

make purses that don't wear out, store treasures elsewhere." For *don't be afraid, little flock, for it is God's delight to give you the kingdom!* "Be dressed for action and ready, have your lamps lit." For *don't be afraid, little flock, for it is God's delight to give you the kingdom!* "Be like the servants waiting for their master to come home who, because they were ready, puts on an apron and serves them a feast." For *don't be afraid, little flock, for it is God's delight to give you the kingdom!* "Be prepared, be waiting, be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." For *don't be afraid, little flock, for it is God's delight to give you the kingdom!*

III.

Perhaps it was the lasting impact of the fictional *Left Behind* series from the 1990s, but for many Christians and even non-Christians, the idea that the Lord is coming again is one that strikes fear in our hearts. Frankly for some folks, even the idea that God is watching and aware of our daily activities is scary. And so what do we do? We worry about if we're doing enough or believing enough. We worry about if we've read enough scripture or understood enough theology. We worry if our Sunday attendance counts for our weekly check-in with God or why anyone is subject to suffering. Add these to our daily anxieties about food and clothes, body and soul, time and money, relationships and self, and we become the little flock desperate to hear Jesus's words: *don't be afraid, little flock, for it is God's delight to give you the kingdom!*

For when shopping ads and Pinterest and Amazon Prime days and the friend with the beautifully-renovated kitchen would cause us to pine for

newer clothes, better furniture, faster electronics, lovelier spaces, God gives us a kingdom where treasures are built up and stored in heaven, where your possessions don't possess you, where your hold on the things of this world is loose because of the joy you find in giving it away.

When the markets and interest rates and actions of the Fed and global trade would cause us to put our store in these storehouses, God gives us a kingdom where our hearts are set free to live and love without incessant worry about the size of our barns or our bank accounts.

When we have more tasks to complete with less time and energy and money, when overwhelm about the state of things causes us more paralysis than action, when we find ourselves confusing busyness with readiness, God gives us a kingdom where faith as small as a mustard seed has the power to change the world.

The writer of Hebrews understood that, giving space to those who believed despite all the odds – Abraham and Sarah and all of us, their descendants, who number as many as the stars. And as another writer said, “the opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is complacency, apathy, resignation, and cynicism. The opposite of faith is falling asleep. It's pie-in-the-sky, a disengaged acceptance of the status quo, a refusal to embrace holy restlessness as an incentive to work for a more just and loving world here and now. The opposite of faith is accepting anything less than the kingdom God wishes to give us. It's hanging back and holding still when the call of God on our lives is to *move*.”³

³ Debie Thomas, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2295>

So instead of worry, delight. Instead of fear, trust. Instead of holding still, moving. Instead of busyness, readiness.

Friends, this is the call of faith. This is the promise of God. This is the gift of the kingdom. This is the invitation to you and me, the little flock led by a Good Shepherd. *For don't be afraid, little flock, for it is God's delight to give you the kingdom!*

V.

As the old proverb goes: The first devil went around proclaiming the message, 'there is no God!' But even though some people acted as if there were no God, they knew in their hearts that this message was not true. The second devil announced, 'there is no sin!' And again, although many people acted as if that message were true, they knew deep down that it wasn't. The third devil was smarter than the other two. He didn't attempt to change people's beliefs. He made no attempt to argue against their deepest convictions. He simply said, 'there is no hurry!'"⁴

Will you be ready? Will you be ready?

⁴ Modern parable - as quoted by William E. Hull in *Harbingers of Hope*, p118.