

What's Essential: The Kingdom of God
By Pastor Daniel Dennison
Matthew 6:25-34
November 28, 2021

When I first saw the text for this morning's sermon, I was a little perplexed because I thought to myself, what does this have to do with Advent. I thought did Tom forget this was Advent since it's still November. Did he not realize that when the calendar falls just right Advent begins the Sunday after Thanksgiving!?! I mean surely the text was supposed to be about Mary and Joseph or the wisemen.

And as I was thinking about all of this it hit me: Oh my God, it's almost Christmas! **(SLIDE)** We've got decorating to do. We've got presents to buy. I mean, Mindy has presents to buy. We've gotta go visit the in-laws. We need to pick up snacks for the kids' class party. We need to buy teacher gifts. We've gotta plan Christmas Eve services. We've got leaves piling up in the yard that need raked. We've got to get the Family Christmas picture and letter done. There's a lot in front of us between now and Christmas!

It eventually hit me that this is the perfect text to kick off Advent because the Holidays are stressful and full of anxiety! If you break down the two Latin words that we get the word Advent from it literally means "Coming Toward." So it's supposed to mean Coming Toward Christmas, but let's be honest, for most of us it's more like Coming Toward a complete emotional breakdown!

If the Holidays are an anxiety ridden time for you, I am so glad that you are here this morning! And I am so glad the Holy Spirit prompted us to preach on this text today. Because instead of being a stress filled anxiety riddled season, Advent should be pointing us toward Jesus and reminding us that our call is to Follow Him. Matthew 6 is right smack dab in the middle of Jesus' sermon on the Mount where he is teaching about what it means and what it should look like to follow him. And so, my prayer for us this morning and this Advent season is that rather than being consumed with anxiety and stress, we would be consumed with the Holy Spirit, and we would be giving everything we have to follow Jesus. Because I believe it's when we are intentionally following Jesus, it's there that we will find anticipation, hope, love, and joy. Which coincidentally are the 4 themes for our 4 advent candles.

²⁵ "(SLIDE) Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even

Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

³⁴ "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

This may sound like a bit of an exaggeration, but I really believe that stress and anxiety is one of the largest problems our society faces. Two of the most popular selling drugs are antidepressants and antacids. Our bodies are so spun up and broken down from anxiety and stress that we now require regular medication to help us cope with the anxiety in our life and the problems that it causes such as heartburn. When you consider the kinds of pressure and expectations that are put on us in day-to-day life, it's not surprising that anxiety disorders are the most common form of mental health illness in our country. According to most statistics out there, approximately 18% of Americans suffer from anxiety disorders and those are just the ones that have been diagnosed! (SLIDE)

I also want to just say very quickly before we get going that I do believe there are those who for physical reasons cannot control their fear and anxiety without medicine and perhaps counseling, so if that's you I just want you to know that there is no shame or guilt in that. Just like God gave us antibiotics for infections, God has also given us medicine and counselors for those that suffer on a more serious level with anxiety disorders. According to statistics that's about 18% of you, but for the other 82% of us who don't necessarily have a disorder, we do generally have an unhealthy tendency to let fear and anxiety drive our lives and so that's what I want to talk about for a few minutes today.

We're in the 6th chapter of Matthew today, but before we get to that I want to start with a scriptural image. The image is one that we get from the first few books of the Bible and that is the image of the Israelites living in the wilderness for 40 years. They had been slaves for years and years in Egypt and they were living in this terrible bondage and so God sent them Moses to redeem them out of their slavery. They were redeemed from bondage in Egypt so that they could go and live in abundance in the Promised Land, but when it came time to enter in they were paralyzed by fear and anxiety of the unknown and so they spent 40 years living in the wilderness! This was God's chosen people, chosen to live in abundance in the promised land but they lived year after year in the wilderness. And I think that's just a good description for many of us. We have been saved and redeemed out of sin through Jesus Christ, God has redeemed us to live a life of

spiritual abundance and yet many of us are living in the wilderness of fear and anxiety. And I believe God would say to that: enough is enough.

As I was doing some research for this sermon, I came across some articles about phobias. A phobia is a form of an anxiety disorder and basically it is an irrational fear of an object or a situation. According to most research that I saw, there are 530 medically diagnosed known phobias. 530! I had no idea! I have to share a few that I discovered. Anthrophobia is the fear of flowers. There are people that stay up at night because they are legitimately afraid of flowers! Here's one that might be helpful for some of you, Bibliophobia is a fear of books. Students, maybe you could use this with your teachers: I wanted to do the assignment, I really did, but I have a doctor's note for my fear of books! Homilophobia is a fear of sermons. This was really helpful for me to find out about, because now I know why some of you have this glazed over look on your eyes when I preach or why some of you play on your iphones, it's because you have homilophobia! Pentheraphobia is a very real phobia, that is the fear of the mother-in-law.

I want to talk with you for a few minutes about Jesus' response to what I would say are the reasonable and normal fears and anxieties of our lives. **In verse 25 Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life."** And what this tells us right off the bat is that anxiety is not an emotion that God would ever will for our lives. I don't say that to lay guilt on you, but for me, I find this helpful because when I do have my moments of anxiousness or fear, I can say to myself, "this isn't from God and I don't care how bad the circumstances are, I'm not supposed to feel this way because I wasn't created to feel this way."

Here's the big problem: Anxiety has become such a common emotion in our culture that we have conditioned ourselves to just assume this is a normal, healthy part of life, but I want to make the case this morning that fear and anxiety is not God's best for us.

When we're always anxious and stressed out and in a tizzy, we declare to the world that our God is not trustworthy and that he really doesn't make any difference in our life. The world will not be impressed when we talk about the prince of peace, but constantly live in this little ball of stress. So, here's the first thing we all, myself included, need to hear today: Anxiety is never Godly. That doesn't mean we're not supposed to care. You're meant to care about your grades and your future and your relationships, but that stomach turning, shoulder tensing, blood pressure escalating, pull your hair out kind of stress and worry that defines so many of us is not virtuous. If we were asked the question "How's it going" and you were NOT allowed to respond with the words busy or stressed, so many of us wouldn't know how to respond! Because we live in this culture where we think it's actually virtuous and good and it means we're hard working and important to have these feelings of stress and anxiety and so the first thing I want you to hear me say today is that while it is normal, anxiety is not healthy, and it is not Godly.

And if I ended the sermon right there, we'd all leave being like "Well dang, I guess I'm a failure at life." So that's not the end of the sermon, but I think a lot of us need to get out

of this mindset that always being busy and stressed and anxious is a normal, healthy part of life, because it's not. And it's not the life God has called us to live.

Jesus goes on in verse 26 and he says this: **(SLIDE) "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them."** Have you ever seen an anxious bird? Birds are very simplistic, they just live. They go about their day and then they rest at night and then they do it all over again the next day. Birds are daily dependent on God, they don't know where tomorrow's meal is going to come from, they just focus on today. Every day a bird wakes up hungry and every day God provides.

Jesus then asks this question: **Are you not of more value than a bird!?** The point is that if God is that faithful to a bird, how much more faithful will he be to you and me. If you are so valuable to God that he would create you in his own image, that he would send his own son to redeem you from your brokenness, that he would desire daily communion with you, if you mean that much to God then will not God who provides for a bird also provide for you? I think Jesus is trying to tell us in this verse that we just need to take a step back and trust and find rest in God from our weariness and our anxiety.

But the problem is that most of us are control freaks. Right? You need to know that you have every aspect of your life under control. Your appearance, your financial situation, your kids' and grandkids' situations, your retirement plans, your next career move. All these things you feel like you need to have under control. If this is you, I just need to fill you in on what your life is often going to feel like. If you're a control freak, you need to know that your life is often going to feel like carrying a big load of laundry.

Let me tell you what I mean. You all know what it's like to carry a big load of laundry. You go to the dryer to get your clothes out, but really, you've got the equivalent of 2 loads stuffed into that dryer. Now heaven forbid you make multiple trips from the dryer to your bed, and so instead you scrape every single article of clothing together. You think you have it all, but you realize there's still a few socks in there, so you reach around haphazardly and grab up the last few articles. Now you begin your trek to the bed and as you do so you have this gut feeling that you should look back over your shoulder. And when you do, what do you see?

Man down! You got a stray sock that has fallen from your pile. Now this is where you get smart. Instead of taking everything to your bed and going back for your sock, you have a motto of no sock left behind. So you back up. And here's where it gets even more brilliant. You try to balance this entire load of laundry on one arm, and you reach down with the other to get that stray sock. And just as you're standing up with the stray sock, what happens? A pair of underwear falls on the floor. This will be your life if you are a control freak! And it is rampant in our lives because most of us are control freaks. Always trying to grab control of one thing while something else falls between our fingers. Look at the birds of the air, they just float and soar in the wind not having to always be in control. I think we could learn something from that. Now let's look at the next verse.

In verse 27 Jesus says, (SLIDE) **“And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life.”** I don’t know about you, but this verse is particularly convicting for me, because I wrestle with anxiety. Just this past week as I was writing this sermon I was struggling with anxiety about whether I would actually finish this sermon. How’s that for some irony!

All anxiety ever does is sap us of joy and peace. It also generally robs us of productivity. Think about that one. How much more productive would you be as a spouse or parent or grandparent or employee if you weren’t so anxious about it? We will never do ourselves any good by being anxious and fearful. That’s why Jesus tells us that our anxiety will never add a single hour to our life span. The reality is that when we are consumed by anxiety we actually shorten our lifespans.

Jesus begins to bring this passage to a close by saying this: (SLIDE) **Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.** I want you all to stop and think for a moment about your childhood. When you were 5 years old and 10 years old, how often were you anxious?

I don’t ever remember a time as a child that I was anxious about whether I’d have food to eat. The only anxiety I may have had about food was when my mom served lima beans or peas. I was never anxious about whether I’d have clothes to wear because I knew that my mom had that covered. Now I probably should have been anxious about going to school in some of the clothes that I wore, but I was never anxious about whether I’d have clothes. And even though I know there were times as a child that money was tight and my parents probably stayed up late worrying about money, I never once was worried that I wouldn’t have adequate shelter or good healthcare coverage, I simply trusted that my parents had these things under control. And they did! Jesus says, our heavenly father knows our needs. If our parents know what our needs are and can provide them for us as children, how much more will our Father in heaven take care of our needs in life today?

You see our problem is that we have taken God out of the equation. For some reason most of us in here had no problem trusting our parents when we were kids, but we don’t trust our heavenly Father. When we take trust out of the equation we will always suffer from fear and anxiety. Let me illustrate this for you with an equation:

When you take life and you add in trouble. Trouble with your significant other. Trouble at work. Trouble with finances. And then you add to that uncertainty. Uncertainty about your future. Uncertainty about your vocation. Uncertainty about your health. We have convinced ourselves that when we take life and add trouble and uncertainty to it that it must automatically equal fear and anxiety. For most of us this is as automatic as $1 + 1 = 2$. But God would say to that NO! God would say, there’s something missing from the equation.

Here's what the real equation should look like: LIFE + TROUBLE + UNCERTAINTY + FAITH =

Notice that having faith and following Jesus doesn't mean you won't have trouble and uncertainty. Scripture promises us: "In this world you will have trouble!" And notice that God has not taken away uncertainty. Some of you don't know where you will be living in 5 years. Some of you don't know what you will be doing vocationally next year. Some of you don't know who it is you might marry in the future or whether you will have kids or whether your grandkids will ever get their acts together.

We don't know how many of these things will pan out in our lives, but here's where we add God back into the equation. Life + trouble + uncertainty + TRUST = PEACE.

At this point we're talking about trusting God's faithfulness, God's goodness, and God's mercy and grace. That's one reason we do the communion liturgy every week, because it is a retelling of God's magnificent story of grace and redemption. We're talking about trusting in the fact that if our Father in heaven is faithful enough to provide for the bluejays and the sparrows, how much more is he going to take care of us? When we insert God back into the equation, even though there's trouble and uncertainty, we can live in peace. Life + Trouble + Uncertainty + Trust in God = PEACE.

Here's the deal, I can't explain it any simpler than I just did and yet trust me, trust me, I know it's way harder than it sounds. I know it sounds like a cookie cutter Sunday school answer, but I don't know any other way to explain it. When you can get to a point in your life in which you trust that God will care for you and provide for you just like he does for the birds of the air, you will have more contentment and peace than you could ever imagine.

One of the things that used to cause me a lot of anxiety and for the most part doesn't anymore was preparing sermons. It would go something like this: I would sit down to begin writing a sermon and as soon as I would get to a writer's block in which I wasn't sure what to say next, this fear would come over me. I would begin to think to myself: there's no way I can write this sermon. I don't know what I want to say. Oh my Gosh, this is the time in which I finally won't be able to get a sermon done. From these thoughts I would begin to wonder if maybe I was in the wrong profession. I would go from struggling to get a thought out for a sermon to believing I had missed my calling and wasn't supposed to be in ministry. It was completely irrational and ridiculous and yet that's what fear and anxiety causes us to do.

A few years ago I realized I didn't have the missing ingredient in the equation and so I earnestly prayed that God would give me the trust to believe he would guide me and provide for me when it came to sermon preparation. Now when I write sermons I always start off with a prayer and just say: God I'm putting this message in your hands and I trust that you will give me the words that I need. I still get writer's block, I still hit points in which I get frustrated and I don't know what to say next in a sermon, and sometimes I don't preach the best sermon in the world, but I rarely get anxious and fearful about it

now because I have learned to put my trust in God that if he has called me into ministry, if he has called me to preach the Word, then he will provide the words for me.

So I don't know what it is for you, but I suspect there is something or some things that is causing anxiety in your life this week and this Advent season. My prayer for you is that you would be reminded that you have a heavenly father who will care for you and provide for all of your needs. My prayer for you is that you would put trust back into the equation. **SO THAT... v.33 (SLIDE) You will be able to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.**

If you're asking: What is my take home Daniel? What do you want me to do with all of this? Yes, I'm saying I want you to release your anxiety to God, but not just so you can pat yourself on the back but so that you can more fully seek first the Kingdom of God. That is why we are alive, that is why we are following Jesus. That's why we pray it every week: may your Kingdom come, and your will be done. When we are full of anxiety we really can't go after God's Kingdom. If we're always stressed, we probably aren't going to be helping others follow Jesus. If we're always anxious, we're probably not going to be very generous with our time and our money.

If you've never given your life to Jesus, today is the perfect time. He's not going to remove every problem in your life, but he is the antidote to anxiety and fear. For most of you, I suspect you would call yourselves followers of Christ, but maybe you would say that you have felt distant from Christ this year. Maybe you would say that being a Christian doesn't seem to be helping your anxiety levels. To each of you, the new Christian, or the lukewarm Christian, I would say: it's time to come home. It's time to commit or re-commit your life to Jesus. Because following him and seeking first his Kingdom this Advent season and beyond will bring you far greater joy and fulfillment than anything else you can do.