

**Sermon - August 11, 2019**  
**Luke 12:32-40**  
**Preached by Luana Uluave**

**Living in Anxious Times**

When I first read this lectionary passage, it made me laugh out loud because it seemed absurd. I called up my daughter, Emma, who is 25 and lives in New York City. She is used to me calling her up and telling her random things.

“Okay. Question.” I launched.

Um, okay, she replied.

I described the two halves of the scripture passage. “It literally says, you really need to be less anxious. Also, you need to be constantly vigilant. In the verse just beyond where the lectionary stops, it says you better stay alert or you might get hacked into little pieces.”

This struck me as hilarious.

“Mom, that’s weird.” Emma said.

“I know, right?”

“No it’s weird that you think that’s hilarious.”

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I want to be clear that I am not laughing at scripture, or at Jesus for his teaching. Anxiety is no laughing matter, and it currently affects 100 percent of us in some way, directly or indirectly, right now. We live in anxious times.

But I’m also coming to this topic with some hesitation: One of the worst things a preacher can do is substitute pop psychology for the Word of God. As Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it,

The job of a preacher is to find some kind of good news for people. And that good news really should be about who God is and how God works and what God has done and what God will do. (What passes for preaching in many cases is more here’s the problem, and here’s what you can do about it, which I myself have never once heard as being “good news.”)<sup>1</sup>

That said, there is good reason to talk about anxiety, prompted by these passages. Because the good news that we find in the Word of God is that--

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<sup>1</sup> Bolz-Weber, Nadia. *Pastrix* (p. 56). FaithWords. Kindle Edition.

- 1) God knows about anxiety;
- 2) Jesus lived in anxious times; and,
- 3) Luke's recounting of Jesus's words and actions can offer us comfort and insight as we navigate our own anxious times.

To start with, I want to explain why I say Jesus was living in anxious times. Their lives there were actually pretty simple - small-scale trade, fishing, short commutes, no internet, no Instagram. People tended to grow up in tribal groups, and a boy like Jesus would be raised by his village. People knew their roles and their responsibilities, ritual and traditions supported community life, and the weather was not half bad, at least most of the year.

But there were some tough things.

The long shadow of empire was one problem. Jesus was born while his home was under Roman rule. They were a conquered people, and their lands were occupied by Roman soldiers. We know, too, that Roman leaders were at times ruthless. Pontius Pilate was known for being a greedy and provocative leader who at one point killed some Galileans and mingled their blood with their sacrifices (Luke 13). It's startling to realize that Jesus would have known this story when he himself stood before Pilate.

Taxes were high, on grain, sales, travel, and temple worship. The people paid tribute to Rome, but also paid tribute to local leaders appointed by Rome like Herod. As the people became more impoverished, their family and tribal connections started to deteriorate and they faced hunger and debt. This was the world that Jesus was born into.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, these chapters by Luke describe freak accidents, such as the "eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them" (Luke 13:4). There is racial and ethnic tensions in the land, and family squabbles over inheritances and possessions. The chapter we focus on today, chapter 12, starts with incivility normalized as "the crowd gathered by the thousands, so that they trampled on one another" (12:1).

Poverty, violence, racial tension, political positioning, oppression, hunger, dissolution of relationships. Does any of this sound familiar? Of course, I haven't even mentioned the most anxiety-provoking element of this whole moment: Jesus *knows* he is on the road to Jerusalem to face his own end. He must feel the imminence of his own death, a burden his disciples cannot understand. He feels the love of his followers, yes, but as things get harder, he sees their inadequacies and ignorance. He sees those who hate him grow in power. These are anxious times.

And at this moment, Jesus starts to pep talk his disciples. In surrounding passages Jesus has stopped telling events and parables, and instead he is offering hypotheticals. "If this ever happens, don't worry," he says. This would make me worry even more.

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<sup>2</sup> Connolly, Peter. Living in the Time of Jesus of Nazareth. Steimatzky, 1999.

For a couple of chapters now, he has been telling them not to worry about their physical safety or material needs, such as what to eat or what to wear. He tells them repeatedly that God loves them and is aware of them. And at this particular moment, Jesus tells them, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom (Luke 12:32).

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I don't have any quick tips for an individual cure to anxiety. My main advice on this is - you should avoid people who tell you they have quick fixes, and, from my viewpoint, especially avoid them if they have quick fixes that require you to be more believing, pure, or obedient.

But I do want to go back to the initial scripture: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

I remember a time when I was deeply afraid. I'm telling you this story because I think it explains why this one little verse has been so nagging of me as to become the basis of this whole sermon. As Henri Nouwen, the Catholic theologian and Wise One put it, we all have within us a lamb and a lion, and part of the human task is helping them learn to lie down together within us.<sup>3</sup>

In my case, the timeline is fuzzy, in part because I just didn't feel well. But I remember the culmination was a day when I was lying down on my closet floor and wishing I could be dead so that Jason could get a nice wife and my kids could have a good mom. I don't want to overstate - the closet was carpeted and clean with a little window - and I also want to say that Jason and the kids were doing great; this was my own private anxiety. But it was real to me. I remember crying and being unable to move. This was more than 15 years ago, so my kids were little, and I know Jason was at work and the baby was probably in the wind-up swing. I remember being so deeply ashamed of who I was, and so very, very fearful and anxious.

Again, the events are fuzzy. I know I finally called my mom and called a doctor and that dark time ended. But one event I remember clearly involves my neighbor, Gayle. I didn't even know her that well. We had done some church service together, but she was 20 years older than I was. I remember a day when I was overwhelmed and unable to function and I called Gayle.

The decision to do that was impulsive, but looking back I think it might have also been divinely inspired. I told her I was having a lot of trouble and asked if she could come over.

And she did. She dropped her morning plans and she came and sat in my kitchen. I poured out my troubles and cleaned my kitchen (which I was completely unable to do before she showed up). She listened to me and she stayed for a few hours. She didn't bring anything. She didn't do anything in particular. She just showed up, and she didn't turn away when I offered her up my heart full of pain. She only came that once, because that was all I needed.

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<sup>3</sup> Nouwen, Henri J. M.. The Inner Voice of Love (pp. 78-79). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Gayle taught me something about what we can do as a body of God's people to succor those who suffer. We can show up. We can sit at a bar stool in each other's kitchens and listen to each other and maybe wipe off the counter. This is what it means to love your neighbor.

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During his life, Jesus shows what it means to be compassionate. To make fellow-citizens of strangers and foreigners. To eat with those others found unclean. To forgive those who reject him and move on, even if they won't let you stay overnight in their village. Jesus practiced radical hospitality in inviting all to his cause. He nourished others with kindness, and by giving them a sense of how much God loved them. Jesus gave others food. He gathered his followers around himself and taught them to love each other and to believe.

In scarcity he offers abundance, in rejection he embraces, in sorrow he blesses, when wronged he forgives. These are stories of extravagant love. These are stories about living in anxious times.

And what these stories tell us is we are not alone. What I'm telling you is that you are not alone. And what I'm telling you is that as a community, we can love and support each other, and we are more Christlike as we try.

But this passage has a paradox. The first part says relax, trust God, no worries. But the last part tells about how urgent it is that we stay constantly vigilant. Jesus is talking to his disciples, people who are already earnestly committed to his cause and wanting to do what's right. And he ups the ante about what is required from them with another hypothetical situation:

12:35 "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit;

12:36 be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks.

12:37 Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes.

The hilarious part, I think, the part that made me call up Emma and say isn't this weird, is that this cannot be done. That's the catch. It is not humanly possible to be constantly vigilant. Psychologists have studied those who try, and some recent studies on TSA are pretty interesting. It is the job of TSA to be constantly vigilant. They have to be continually watching for a rare anomaly - that one time in a million that someone tries to board a plane with a weapon. TSA agents are trained. They are clear on their mission, and they have technology to aid them. But it turns out that constant vigilance is a state the human brain is not wired to maintain. In a recent study, Homeland Security revealed that TSA missed weapons 70-95 percent of the time. Not because the workers didn't try - but because constant vigilance is not humanly possible.<sup>4</sup>

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<https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelgoldstein/2017/11/09/tsa-misses-70-of-fake-weapons-but-thats-an-improvement/#520ff82b2a38>

They are like those earnest servants, sitting at home and trying to stay alert for the master, only to discover that try as they might, they nod off and are not “dressed for action with lamps lit” when the master suddenly arrives.

Why would Jesus ask his most earnest and faithful disciples to do what could not actually be done?

I have a couple of theories, and maybe they will provoke you to come up with your own theory.

Option 1: if the servants in the hypothetical took seriously the task assigned - constant vigilance until the master came home - they would have to look at each other and realize they needed a Plan B. Look, they would have said. We can do this in shifts. Why don't you sleep now and I'll take first watch? Then when I'm sleeping, if the master shows up, you can quickly wake me up and we can both gain the reward. I will carry the load for both of us part of the time, and you can do the same for me.

Maybe the scenario lets Jesus teach us something about the possibility of carrying the impossible for and with someone for a little while.

Option 2: Jesus gives the disciples an impossible task. The certainty of failure would then force the disciples to face their own mortality and imperfection and go back to that first part of the scripture, where they are told “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). Trust God, it says. The kingdom is ours, it says. I don't know exactly what that means, but I do know that the kingdom of God is made up of people who show up for each other and do not turn away.

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The last thing I want to tell you is I think it's okay to believe in things that are not yet fully possible. God says don't worry, the kingdom is yours. But it's not fully mine yet, and I'm not even sure what receiving the kingdom even means or what that might look like. Today I am probably going to worry.

Some things require our hope and faith, even when the data is not looking promising. One of my favorite illustrations of this idea is the history of the dome on the cathedral in Florence, Italy. The Cathedral, named Santa Maria del Fiore, or The Duomo, was begun in 1296. The designers knew they wanted an enormous dome. They also knew they didn't have the technology to build one. Yet they expressed faith that in the future, architectural know-how would advance, and God would make a way.

Filippo Brunelleschi came along, 124 years later, and figured it out. This young clockmaker and goldsmith made possible the dream of builders who were willing to begin, not knowing how their project would end.

The anxieties we face sometimes feel impossible to overcome. It is rarely comforting to be told, “Everything will work out in the end.” But as Pastor Louie Giglio says, “If it hasn’t worked out, you are not at the end.”

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

Back to the questions posed by Nadia Bolz-Weber a few minutes ago.

### **Who is God?**

The divine presence who made us, male and female, in God’s own image. This means we are made to reflect God’s goodness, wisdom and love.<sup>5</sup>

### **How does God work?**

Well, she moves in mysterious ways, that’s for sure.

God asks us to respect our tradition and heritage, consider the present moment in light of God’s love, and confidently shape our future with God’s guidance.<sup>6</sup>

### **What has God done?**

God “became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). Through Jesus Christ, God was willing to suffer as a human, to feel all human infirmity, and to not turn away. God is not just aware of us in a mystical and omniscient sort of way, God has experienced - in a material, human form - the things we suffer now. Jesus is God with us.<sup>7</sup>

### **What will God do?**

Continue to offer each of us grace. Continue to see beyond our individual perspectives to horizons we cannot yet imagine.<sup>8</sup>

In the words of the PCUSA Brief Statement of Faith,

Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,  
we trust--<sup>9</sup>

Grace, love, and connection bring us to trust, even in the face of tasks we find impossible to deal with. This is how God helps us live in anxious times. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/catechism1.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> See Killen, Patricia O’Connell and John De Beer. The Art of Theological Reflection. “Searching for a Way to Be Faithful.” Crossroad Publishing, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/catechism1.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://directionjournal.org/36/2/perspective-seeing-with-eyes-of-god.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/brief-statement-of-faith/>

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**Luke 12:32-40**

12:32 "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

12:33 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.

12:34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

12:35 "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit;

12:36 be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks.

12:37 Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.

12:38 If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

12:39 "But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into.

12:40 You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."