

Matthew 6:31-34

Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Deal With It: Anxiety

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I want to tell you today what I need to hear, and if it is meaningful to anyone else, then our time is well spent. But as always is the truth for preachers, we simply tell what we’ve heard other people say. In fact as Ray said, it was Moses who said it to the people long ago who heard it first, but I need to hear, and Moses said “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses, choose life that you may live.” Choose life. The time has come to look at the future as if it were a friend. The time has come to see the sunrise at the end of the dark night and not the other way around. The time has come to take a chance that the bad news is rumor, and the good news is Gospel truth. The time has come that we not worry about tomorrow to the point that we’re afraid of it. And Jesus said, “Do not worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will bring worries of its own.” That’s what I’m talking about. Choose life. Blessed are those, Jesus said, pure in heart. Blessed are those who choose life. So we choose life, not death. What does that mean? We know that there are things that happen, things that have happened. Unexpected happenings, accidents have happened. They have in the past, and they will. The unexpected.

Sometimes the unexpected is good. James Moore tells a story of a little boy who loves going to church. He likes the preacher, he loves the music, the Scriptures, the sermons, the fellowship. What he doesn’t like is the prayers. The preacher prays too long, and that’s a long time for a little boy or a little girl to sit quiet. Sometimes it seemed the preacher would never stop praying. One Sunday his parents invited the minister home for Sunday lunch, and believe it or not, the boy’s mother asked the preacher to give the blessing. He thought, “Oh, no. We’re never going to get to eat. I’m hungry. He’s going to pray forever,” he thought. To everyone’s surprise, the prayer was short. The pastor closed his eyes and said, “Bless this house, bless this food, use us to your service, in Jesus’ name, Amen.” And the little boy sitting across from the clergy, other side of the table, looked at him and said, “Man, you don’t mess around when you’re hungry.”

The unexpected happens. Sometimes it’s good. Sometimes it’s not. Just ask Bill. Typical day, went out to check the livestock, to see that the loft door on the barn was closed, because sometimes it would come open. While he was in the loft, he heard a sound that sounded like a train. He knew a barn loft is not a good place to be in a storm, and this was not a storm, this was a tornado. He sprinted for the stairs. The storm hit his neighbor’s house and destroyed his neighbor’s garage. Bill was out the door and running for his life

toward a nearby irrigation ditch, and the wind began to pick him up off the ground. He dove under a pile of wood on his back, and the wind went directly over him. A suction line formed debris path that stretched out two miles. Buildings exploded. Barn timbers were driven two feet into the ground. A tumbling horse trailer nearly got him. A camper flew up into the air and was impaled on a fence post. Shredded fencing, snapped timbers, razor-sharp metal from roofs and siding swirled around him. Bill Emslie, a member of our church, he's sitting right here in the front row, this tornado came through on May the 22nd last year, and Bill and his family, it got their attention. It underscores how fragile life is. It reminds us all how precious the blessings of love. And it happened on a typical day. It was a day like any other, and there is the sense that the future will be different because of it.

Here at the church, because of that day, May 22nd, I know some of you live in Windsor and Wellington and other areas. We didn't know what was happening. We'd purchased a weather radio that warns us when bad weather comes and I don't know about the rest of you, but when that sky begins to look like it did that day, we get anxious, all of us. The unexpected makes us worry. The unexpected happens. Erma Bombeck understood that. Her New Years resolutions in the past had been written down, recorded. "I will not go to a doctor whose office plants die," one of her resolutions. "I'm going to apply for a hardship scholarship to Weight Watchers," another one. "And I will never loan my car to anyone to whom I have given birth." She wrote a book, *If Life is a Bowl of Cherries, What am I Doing in the Pits?* and that book begins with this sentence: "I've always worried a lot, and frankly, I'm good at it."

We all worry a lot. Most of us are good at it, because we know the unexpected happens and sometimes the unexpected is the unexplained, and that even makes it worse. Jerry and Shirley Weise have left. Many of you know them. They have left. Every year, they go south for the winter. They will return and we're going to miss them, because they're such an asset to the church. Well, they sent a story, presumably a true story, I don't know, I can't verify it, but this is their story. It's about these people in Letcher County, Kentucky. They're hill people. If you know anything about hill people, they're very smart in some ways and not so much in other ways. She's about to have her first child, so she went into labor in the middle of the night and so the doctor was called out to assist in the delivery, and since there was no electricity, the doctor handed the husband a flashlight and said, "Now you hold the light right here so I can see what I'm doing" and soon a bay boy was brought into the world. "Hold it, don't put that light down. There's another one coming." And sure enough within minutes he delivered a baby girl. "Wait a minute, don't turn that light off, I think there's another one." In a few minutes he delivered a third baby. "Oh no, put the light on again, there's another one coming." And the father scratched his head and asked the doctor a very profound question. "Do you think it's the light that's attracting them?"

The unexpected happens, and a lot of it's unexplained. We don't know why it happened. They're still trying to figure out why that plane crashed at DIA a couple weeks ago. And why did that man in Nederland go to the ski lodge and kill the manager? And why did that man in Aspen put bombs all over the city on New Year's Eve, why? Why do some

things happen? The unexpected and the unexplained, and it makes us anxious, and Jesus said, “Don’t be anxious about tomorrow.” How can he say that? More to the point, the question is, how can we do it? Do not be anxious with the unexpected that becomes the unexplained.

Two things that we do when we’re anxious: First of all, we’ve got to know we can stand up to it, we don’t run from it. Jesus stood up to the events of his day every chance he got, and that ultimate sort of standing up to it was when he came into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday, to face the unknown and the unexplained. Some of you are aware that Pam and I have had this bet with David Dalke and Joe Winsett. Now, Joe’s a member of the church and David one of the ministers. The bet, a difference of opinion which involved money. It was on the West Virginia – North Carolina football game. It was a bowl game, both Pam and I really don’t care who wins as long as North Carolina loses. It’s a Duke thing. The game was close, and it came down to the final seconds, and West Virginia won, Carolina lost, and the West Virginia coach, a man named Stewart, walked over to the Carolina coach, a man named Davis, and they’re in the center of the field, and this isn’t widely reported, you had to listen carefully to hear this, but Coach Stewart said to Coach Davis, “I never want to play you again.”

What I want – I’m from there – what I want the West Virginia coach to say, I want him to say, “I’ll bet we meet again and I’m looking forward to it.” I wanted him to say, “Too bad we didn’t get to play overtime, this was so much fun.” And if you have any influence over Coach Fairchild, I hope he never adopts that approach, and I hope we don’t either. If we have to go up against the best, we will not be afraid to do it, and if we have to face the worst, we will not run from it. And if we are anxious about tomorrow, we find the courage to face it and the gumption to know that we can stand up to it. No need to back down.

When I walk my dog Toby, and he’s a cocker spaniel with a bad attitude, when that dog sees other dogs, especially those that are bigger than he, he grabs the leash in his mouth, and he shakes it like he’s killing a rat. And then he growls like a bear, and he looks back at me, as if to say to the other dogs, “You don’t want to mess with me. I am one tough animal. I even got control of the big dumb guy behind me, so don’t even think about starting anything.” I have seen people drag German Shepherds across the street to avoid contact with that dog. I have seen parents take their children on another path when they see us coming. And often, I’ll apologize. I’ll say to them, “It’s my wife’s dog.” Which isn’t true. Or “He failed at obedience school.” Or, “He must have been mistreated as a puppy.” Publicly, I’m embarrassed. Secretly, there’s something about that dog that I admire. He’s prepared to stand up to trouble before it even starts. And we all could use a little of that. We stand up to our anxiety. We have the courage to face it.

The movie *Valkyrie*, I think it’s a really fine movie. There’s this one line in it, that’s memorable. It’s Germany, the second World War, there’s a discussion about stopping Hitler. Tom Cruise is the one who hears it. “It only matters that we act now, before we lose this war. Otherwise, this will always be Hitler’s Germany. Look, we’ve got to show the world not all of us were like him.” We stand up. We face our fears. We stand up to

our anxieties. Robert Fulgham has written another book. The title of it is *What on Earth Have I Done?* His granddaughter Bree, twelve years old, she went with him to a wedding. You know, he was a pastor. He did a wedding. She went with him. He said, "They lived happily ever after, at least as far as the reception was concerned. A beautiful wedding." On the way home, she said to her grandfather, "I wonder where he is tonight? You know, him, the man I'll marry some day. He must be out there somewhere. Where is he? I worry about him. Is he okay? What if he got hit by a truck? What if he's hurt? He will be so sad without me." Well, this conversation went on. They got home. Robert's wife heard the discussion. "What's wrong with you two?" And Fulgham said to her, "Your granddaughter's husband was hit by a truck. And we don't even know where he is, or who's taking care of him." Then Fulgham goes on to say, "Somebody once asked me, if I could know everything that's going to happen to me in my life from now till the time I die, but I couldn't change it, would I want to know?" And he said, "Some days yes, mostly no." He said, "The trick is to look at the unexpected with an attitude that says, "Something wonderful will happen" and to look for it to happen. The trick is to know that when something terrible happens we can face it, and get through it, we always have, we always will. The trick is to be there and to do our best. The unexpected happens like it has in the past, so it will in the future, but we can face it when it comes.

The second thing Jesus did, he faced it... The second thing is, you notice, he faced the unexpected and the unexplained, he found the courage. He stood up to it, but he found community. He knew he didn't have to face it alone. God was with him. His community was with him. God was in his community of faith. He felt most abandoned by God when his friends left him, you know. "How much I have wanted to share with you this Passover meal," he said to them in Luke's Gospel. "This is my body, this is my blood." We must never underestimate the power of community.

Jerry Ellis once said, "We are all fragile threads, but what a beautiful tapestry we make." And Virginia Burden said, "Cooperation is the thorough conviction that nobody can get there unless everybody gets there." And even Henry Ford said, "Coming together is the beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success." The power of all of us. The presence of God in community. Leonard Sweet says, "There are many who would tie a white flag around the future. Voices of death, who would say, 'Nothing can be done. Things have progressed beyond our power to make any difference.'" And then Sweet says, "But there's the spirit. It struggles with the power of evil. It challenges us to grow and to join in the struggle to create communities of meaning and communities of covenant and communities of spirit. We do not have to stand alone. God is with us." And that is the message of Christmas. Emmanuel means "God is with us," and God is with us in the people who surround us with their caring.

The Emslies will tell you the two reasons they're grateful. One is, the animals weren't hurt, and neither was Bill, not even a scratch. The second reason is that seven months, for seven months, some 150 volunteers donating untold hours of work, cleaning up fields, repairing the buildings, and Bill and Tracy got the barn loft finished enough for an event. They called their friends together and they didn't have Communion, but it was communion in a way. They had a square dance, and a wonderful time was had by all.

And in their Christmas letter, the Emslies say to us, “This Christmas, this New Year, our hopes and prayers go out to you, and a toast to life. To life.” Isn’t that what Jesus meant when he said, “This is my body, broken for you. This cup is the new covenant, my blood.”? He’s saying to us, “A toast to life.”

Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. Do not be anxious about tomorrow. And as for the unexpected and the unexplained, we stand up to it, but knowing we don’t have to stand alone. And God said, “I set before you life and death. Choose life.” That’s what I need to hear. And so I’m telling you, because I’m guessing you need to hear it too. And there are others out there who need to hear it. And your job and mine, our job is to pass it on.