

A Worry-Free Life; Is Peace Even Possible? Mt 6:24-34
 First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City
 Rev. Jamie White; Sept 3, 2023

Let's begin with a rhetorical question this morning (no need to raise your hands). How many of you are worried this morning? Something is weighing on you, causing you to stress, to worry? Maybe it's worry for someone you love, or something you care deeply about, or something you need to change but you don't know how. Maybe it's about your health, or about money, or a conflict you're in. Or maybe it's about the state of our nation, or climate change, or inflation and interest rates. Maybe your worry feels like a nagging thought in your mind, or maybe it's deeper and sits closer to your heart. Whatever it is, if you are worrying this morning, you're not alone. We live in a culture where worry is just a commonly accepted part of life.

Worry has become endemic in our society. In fact, the World Health Organization states that Americans have a bigger problem with worry than any other people in the world. We are the most affluent society in the world, and yet the most worried. Over 70% of folks report that they are worried and stressed daily. That's most of us, worrying every single day. And to be clear, worry and stress aren't neutral either... they don't just affect your thinking and headspace. Worry and stress cause a number of physical symptoms; worry leads to emotional issues, sleeping problems, heart failure, and mental illness. Studies definitively show that stress take years off your lifespan. Worry is literally killing us. It also sucks away our joy and creativity, keeps us from living in the present. Worry destroys our peace and is a huge time-sucker to boot.

One of the worst things about worry, is that it's especially effective in keeping us trapped in the rat race. I'm sure you've heard that term. The rat race is an endless, self-defeating, pointless pursuit. It conjures up the image **(SHOW RATRACE PIC)** of the futile effort of a lab rat trying to escape while running around in a wheel or in a maze without an exit. The wheel keeps turning, the race goes on and on... but we never actually get anywhere. Our stress and worry just continue to feed off each other, keeping us trapped. We desperately need peace in our lives, we all know it. But we don't know how to step off the wheel. I mean, is peace even possible in our world?

We're going to spend this next month digging into what God has to say about worry and thinking deeply about what it might mean for us to give up the rat race, to say goodbye to the worry-game... to embrace peace. Now, I want to mention, as a disclaimer... I am aware there are folks who struggle with clinical anxiety disorders, those that require medical care and treatment. If that is you, I just want you to know, this series is not intended to speak about severe medical conditions, but rather is focusing on our tendencies toward worry and stress. Please do not hear any critique of your diagnosis or treatment, as anxiety disorders of that nature are outside of what we're talking about this month. This morning we begin with the words of Jesus, taken from Matthew 6:24-34 (NIV) Hear the Word of the Lord: **"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, or what you will wear. Is not life more than**

food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? ²⁸ “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” The Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

I hope you noticed here that Jesus hits on some of the most common things we spend our energy worrying about. **Money. Basic needs** (like food and water). **Health/Body. Physical appearance. The future.** I regularly worry about all these things. I’m sure you do too. Now, Jesus isn’t trying to shame us when he tells us over and over in this text, not to worry. No, these are practical matters. Of course, we’re concerned about whether we can afford to pay rent, or if we’ll have enough to eat today, or if we’ll recover from illness, if we look okay, or what we might face in the future. We are humans, and our human needs matter; these things warrant our concern.

But allowing our thoughts and feelings to be dominated by worry, by stress, by overthinking and anxiety about these things, that is where we get into trouble. And this is what Jesus cautions us against here. Worrying is like concern on steroids. Worry traps us in fearful thinking, focuses on the things outside of our control, it’s propelled by anxiety and leads us to feeling paralyzed. And ultimately, worry is entirely ineffective. Not only does worrying distract us and steal our peace, but it doesn’t actually help us one single bit. Which is why Jesus says, “**Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?**” Has anything ever gotten better because of your worry? Has anything ever changed because you let nagging fear take over your thinking at 2AM? Jesus says, don’t do it, it doesn’t change anything. When you worry, nothing gets better... rather, everything seems to get worse.

So, let’s name a few of the dangerous things that keep us trapped in worry, endlessly stuck in the rat race.

Living in the future. Let me just illustrate the danger of living in the future by talking about what it’s like to be a kid today. By the time a child reaches the end of elementary school, they’ve been given a planner to learn to use. They’re graded on how well they use the planner, abide by the planner, and set goals by the planner. Once they hit middle school they add in personality profiles and career assessments to their planning responsibilities. These tools are supposed to help predict their future profession, goals for college, and a create a detailed plan of what will be required in high school in order to get in to said college and earn a scholarship. By the time this middle schooler gets to high school, they’ve created a plan that promises to build a resume that will illustrate how

well they've become an 'all-around' candidate. It's not enough to just be smart these days, you have to be good at a little bit of everything.

Which means these kids need to play at least one sport and an instrument. Oh, and I should mention, if you didn't start learning your sport or instrument by the time you're 6 or 7 years old, moving on to performing groups and competitive teams by middle school, well then, you won't have a chance of making the high school team that your resume requires. Beyond these extra curriculars, this teenager needs to complete hundreds of hours of community service work, be a leader in a club or two, get their eagle scout, go to church, travel abroad, speak at least one foreign language, take half a dozen AP classes, ace the SAT and get above a 3.7 GPA to prove they've got what it takes to be an adult. Oh, and be attractive, keep their social media profiles going, have a social life, and somehow be a good person.

I am not exaggerating here. This is what we're doing to our kids. It is no wonder we have the most stressed, anxious, and depressed younger generations of all time. And as adults, we don't do any better. We too build our lives around what might happen tomorrow, constantly scheming, stressing, and saving for our future.

Too many of us have bought the lie that everything we do today is really about satisfying a dream of what might come tomorrow. We don't live in the present... because we've reduced the present to being all about what happens in the future. But Jesus says, **"Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."** Denying our present reality and living in the future keeps us trapped in worry. And it's not only this causing so much worry in our life... it's also the pace at which we're living.

Moving too fast. So fast. As a culture, we don't sleep enough, spend enough time outdoors, create space for quiet and alone-time. We don't have time for our families or friends. We don't have margin in our schedules. We fly from one thing to the next, just hoping that we don't hit traffic or encounter any unexpected emergencies along the way. I saw this hilarious meme last week (**SHOW OUTLOOK CALENDAR PIC**) and it's just so true.

It's no wonder that when we hear Jesus call us to "Seek first the kingdom of God"... we're left wondering where in our schedule we're going to fit that in. It's not so much that we don't want a relationship with God... it's that we don't have time for one. At least not one that offers us a deeply meaningful connection with God. I have to wonder if that's because so many folks try to insert Jesus like they do a dentist appointment or a piano lesson. Author Mike Yaconelli puts this well when he writes, **"We are going as fast as we can, living life at a dizzying speed, and God is nowhere to be found. We're not rejecting God; we just don't have time for him. We've lost him in the blurred landscape as we rush through our lives. We don't struggle with the Bible, but with the clock. It's not that we're too sinful; we're too busy. We don't feel guilty because of sin, but because we have no real time for our families, our friends, or our God. It's not sinning too much that's killing our souls, it's our schedule that's annihilating us. Most of us don't come home at night staggering drunk. Instead, we come home staggering tired, worn out,**

exhausted and drained because we live too fast." Friends, we're going to have to slow down if we want to get out of the worry game. But it's not just living in the future or moving fast that keeps us worrying, but it's also...

Getting our value from what we have and what we do. We all need meaning and purpose, but our culture, the American Dream, has sold us the lie that what you do and what you own, determines your value. The job title you have, the grades you get in school, the number of friends (or followers) you have, the car you own, the team you play for, the zip code you live in, the person you're dating, the clothes in your closet... these things tell everyone who you are and why you matter. But isn't it so blatantly obvious why this causes worry and stress in our lives? Keeping up on all of that is exhausting... doing, striving, performing, buying, and proving ourselves only leads to worry.

The Dalai Lama, when asked what surprised him most about humanity, answered **"Man. Because he sacrifices his health in order to make money. Then he sacrifices money to recuperate his health. And then he is so anxious about the future that he does not enjoy the present; the result being that he does not live in the present or in the future. He lives as if he is never going to die, and then dies having never really lived."**

Now here's the deal... it makes perfect sense to me why so many people live like this... always feverishly stressing about the future, moving faster and faster, trying to accumulate more and more... this is exactly what people do if they believe that they don't have anything but themselves to rely on. Worry is first and foremost born out of the lie that we have to figure out life on our own. If it's all up to you to take care of yourself... well then, of course you strive, and strive, and strive some more. It makes perfect sense. If you don't trust God to take care of you, worry and stress, they're your only option.

It is impossible to give up the rat race unless we really believe that God loves us and is trustworthy. Jesus calls us, not to rely on ourselves, but to trust God. Here's something to think about... **what you worry about the most clearly reveals where you trust God the least.** What is that for you this morning? What are you holding onto, that if you're honest, you just don't trust God with? But at the same time, you know that the worry, it's not serving you.

How do we stop worrying? What do we do when we find ourselves in this place? How do we learn to trust God? What is it that Jesus promises will get us out of the rat race and lead us to peace? Now, I know this might sound trite and a far too simplistic a solution for our worries... but hear me out here, because Jesus makes it pretty dang simple when he says in verse 33, **"Seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all the things you need will be given to you."** Proverbs 3:5-6 puts it this way, **"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to God, and God will make your paths straight."** 1 Peter 5:7 puts it this way, **"Cast all your anxiety on God because God cares for you."** James 4:8 like this; **"Draw near to God and God will draw near to you."**

The message for us... if you're worried, panicked, stuck in fear.... fix your eyes on Christ, seek first God's kingdom, draw near to God, trust in the Lord, cast every one of your anxieties onto the Lord... trusting that God can hold whatever worries you today. I know that sounds simple... but ask yourself this morning: When life hits the fan, when the bottom falls out, when fear comes knocking, is your instinct to turn to God with all that burdens you? Or are you so stuck in the rat race, moving so fast, so preoccupied with the future, so worried about what you have that it doesn't even occur to you to go to the Lord.

I mean, what if Jesus is telling the truth here? What if it really is that simple? What might it look like for you to step off that wheel, slow yourself down long enough to actually seek first God's kingdom? Because here's what I'm convinced of, and frankly have had to learn the hard way in my own life... if you spent as much time connecting with your God, as you spend worrying, I'd willing to bet anything that this would change the trajectory of your life. God's peace would be yours. It is simple, but it's sure not easy.

God is calling us to a worry-free life. Peace is not just possible; it is God's gift for all who would accept it... should we be willing to step off the wheel and take it. May it be so for you and for me.