

What Keeps You Awake at Night

Luke 24:36-49

Have you ever laid awake in the middle of the night worrying? Watching the minutes tick away on the clock, thinking about your worries that consume your every waking thoughts. Thinking about if you only had not said those words, done that thing, maybe worrying about your kids, your parents, your finances, your illness, worry...worry...worry. The minutes tick by, and you think, "well if I can fall asleep now, I will get 6 hours of sleep before I have to get up".. and those thoughts continue to swim through your head. Before you know it, you are saying to yourself; "if I can fall asleep now, I will get 5 hours of sleep". And the night continues to drag on, and on. You wish you could turn off the thoughts of worry, like hitting the off button on the remote, but the worry, the guilt just won't let go. Has this ever happened to you? Some people are worriers. Have you ever noticed that?

Years ago when I was first married, I clearly remember my mom saying, "I used to worry about you kids all the time, and I couldn't wait until you grew up and got married and on your own, so I could stop all the worrying, but then you had kids of your own, and now I have so many more people to worry about. It just doesn't end."

Erma Bombeck tells about a worrier named Estelle. She is a mother from Path, Rhode Island; and as a parent she elevated worrying to an art form. Her child was a cancer patient, so some of her concerns were legitimate, but still, Estelle admits, she carried worrying a bit too far. She says that as a parent it was her duty to worry. And as the parent of an oncology patient, she perfected it. She kept lists of her worries in case she forgot one. Every time something happened in her life she would revise the list, developing intricate new worries. Within a six year period, she says she had a list of 142 things to worry about. Six actually happened, including two that were not even on her list. She eventually decided she wasn't as efficient as she thought she was, but she adds, "I keep practicing." (1)

Do you know anybody like that? Someone once said that, "Worry is an old man with a bended head carrying a load of feather which he thinks are lead." Someone else has quipped, "We used to take life with a grain of salt. Now we take it with 5 milligrams of valium." You see the problem is when we worry we build monsters in our head, which aren't even real. We waste so much of our life, so much time with fret and worry and guilt, that life can pass us by in the meantime. There is a great saying I've heard that we can't worry about the past...because it's over, it's behind us, and we can't change what has happened, we shouldn't worry about the future, because it is yet to be, all we have is the present, this very moment, which is a gift.

Studies show that a lot of people in our land are troubled, unhappy, and worried; and some with good reason. Jesus asked his disciples, "Why are you troubled?" That's a good question

for many of us as well.

Is it the future that troubles you? People are being laid off every day. Small businesses are failing, stock markets are like a rollercoaster. It's said that our children will not have the same standard of living that we enjoy. How about Social Security? And could the environmentalists be right? Will the earth soon be an uninhabitable greenhouse?

The disciples were troubled about the future, too. After all, they were confronted by powerful opponents in both the temple and the state. They were scared, they had locked themselves in a room, and were worrying about what was to be. Their leader had been crucified. Now it's one thing to talk about faith in the abstract, but where was God when they needed Him? That's exactly where the disciples were. Things looked pretty bleak. What could the future hold for them? Can you relate to that? If you can, I have some good news for you. It's a discovery that Sue Monk Kidd shared in Guideposts sometime back.

When Sue's husband was seriously ill and undergoing surgery, she was filled with anxiety. "Oh, I'm so afraid!" she cried to a friend. The friend nodded, gave her a knowing smile, and then asked her this: "Do you know how many times the Scriptures say, "Fear not, or Don't be afraid?" Sue shook her head, no. "It's a very curious number", her friend continued, "three hundred and sixty five times." Sue was surprised. "but that's...." "Yes, one for each day of the year," her friend said, finishing her sentence. (2)

There is one "Fear not", for every day of the year. A coincidence? Perhaps. Perhaps not. But God does not want His people to be afraid. "Why are you troubled? Jesus asked his disciples, "and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see... And when he had thus spoken, he showed them his hands and his feet." Jesus wanted his disciples to know that it was all real. He was alive. Death had been conquered. The Gospel is true.

Notice what comes next, though. Luke tells us, "They still believed not for joy, and wondered..." Their reaction was the same as yours and mine would be. It seems just too good to be true. We want to believe. We want to trust. But we can't let ourselves go. After all, we haven't seen his feet, his hands, and his side. And thus we are troubled about the future.

And some of us are troubled about the past. We may not even be aware of it. After all we are a liberated society. Everything is permitted to us. But some of us still don't sleep well. And we're moody and depressed and we don't even know why. The problem is as old as Adam and Eve. It's called GUILT.

One of the truly fascinating anthropological discoveries of the twentieth century occurred in

1935 when anthropologist Kilton Steward discovered an unusual tribe deep in the rain forests of Malaysia. At first these natives, called the Senoi, appeared to be no different from any other primitive group. Living in thatch and bamboo huts on large piles above the ground, they sustained themselves with simple farming, hunting, and fishing. In their social relations, however, they had developed a psychology "so astonishing" in Stewart's words, "that they might have come from another planet". What the Senoi did was to treat their guilt very seriously. Anytime a Senoi tribesman sensed that he needlessly harmed someone, he would begin thinking about the best way to make amends.

The place where they looked most carefully for ways to undo the harm they had done was their dreams. Even Senoi children were encouraged to examine their dreams and to carry out what amends they had imagined in real life. The result was that the Senoi experience no mental illness, no suicide, no truancy; in fact nothing even approaching what we would call depressed behavior. Stewart found this tribe to be the most serene and democratic group he had ever encountered, with a social system equal to modern man's achievements in communications and physics" all because they had learned to deal with the problem of guilt. (3)

We don't always deal as well with guilt as the Senoi. I read some fascinating research from WWII about cases of mental breakdown that were described as "battle fatigue." What, according to this research, do you think our soldiers feared most when they went into battle? It was not being killed. The greatest cause of stress for these soldiers was the fear of killing others. It was found that only one American soldier in six could be consistently relied on to open fire on the enemy, whatever the provocation. (4) The second greatest fear was the fear of failure.

Guilt is a very potent force in our lives. Someone in this room this morning has a great need to be relieved of guilt. And here again our Gospel for the day speaks to our needs. Jesus taught his disciples that it was necessary that he be put to death "that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." Repentance and remission of sins....

We do have one way of dealing with guilt that is as potent as that of the Senoi. It is called confession and repentance and acceptance of Christ's forgiveness. What is it that is troubling you? Is it the future? Is it the past? Believe the Gospel. That is Christ's answer to your need. Why are you troubled? The future is in His hands. The past has been blotted away with His blood. Why are you troubled? Let go and let God!

Right after I finished working on this sermon I went on FB, and I had to laugh, there was a post that said: "Brain at 3 am: I can see you're trying to sleep, so I would like to offer you a selection of every memory unresolved issue, or things you should have said, or done today as well as the

past 40 years." I saw another post about our emotions and how they harm the body. "Anger-weakens the liver, Grief - weakens our lungs, worry- weakens your heart and brain, and Fear- weakens the kidneys. You see our mind is like a garden. If we focus on the positive things, our gratuities, and blessings we grow flowers, but if we focus on all the worries, the things that go wrong in our life we grow weeds. What do you want to grow in your garden?

Perhaps it's because you feel powerless to deal with the present. Some of us are not troubled so much about the past or the future. We're overwhelmed with the here and now. I was interested to read a little tidbit about General Norman Schwarzkopf. Someone asked the General how he was adjusting to retirement. "One year ago", he answered "I could issue an order and 541,000 people would obey it. Today I can't get a plumber to come to my house."

General Schwarzkopf is finding out what it's like to be powerless, at least relative to his former post as commander of our troops. Many people today feel that way; not only with regards to getting a plumber, but in dealing with all of life. They feel overwhelmed, defeated, powerless. They are troubled by their inability to get control over their own lives. Here again, our scripture for the day brings us good news. Jesus says, "And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high."

Power from on high" is exactly what we need. And here is the grandest discovery of all: Power is available to us. In just a few weeks we will be celebrating the Day of Pentecost, the day when God poured out His power on the disciples. Jesus had made a promise that power would come, and it did. And Jesus makes the same promise to us.

Our power is little indeed compared to the circumstances we sometimes find ourselves in. But our circumstances have no strength at all compared to God's power and God's power is available to us. All we have to do is open ourselves to that power. "Ask and you shall receive", Christ promised. Of course, the greatest victory that the Spirit can give us is victory over ourselves. If we could be changed within, if all those destructive thought and habits (the weeds in the garden of our brain), could somehow be dispelled. If they could just disappear; go away, then we could handle our circumstances. If we could just get out of our own way, then we would be powerful indeed.

A former brother-in-law of mine was going through some difficult times. He was literally consumed with guilt and powerless from choices that he made. He would wear a rubber band around his wrist and every time his thoughts were riddled with guilt, he would snap that rubber band, which would stop the thought and bring him back to the present. We need to practice mindfulness, which is being present in this moment. Meditation and prayer are two examples of ways to be mindful, to be present in the moment.

Dwight L. Moody once demonstrated the principle like this: Tell me" he said to his audience, "how can I get the air out of the tumbler I have in my hand?" One man said, "Suck it out with a pump." The evangelist replied, "That would create a vacuum and shatter it." Finally, after many futile suggestions, Moody picked up a pitcher and filled the glass with water. "There", he said, "all the air is now removed."

He then explained that victory for the child of God does not come by working hard to eliminate destructive thoughts and habits, but rather by allowing the Holy Spirit to take full possession.

So what are you troubled about? The future? God has it under His control. The past? Our sins have been thrown into the deepest regions of the sea by the death of Christ on the cross never to be retrieved. The present? There is a power that is available to all who would call on His name. Fear not, do not let your heart be troubled, for I am always with you. Amen

1. Erma Bombeck, *I want to Grow Hair, I Want to Grow up, I Want to Go to Boise* (New York: Harper&Row, 1989), pp50-51.

2. *Daily Guideposts*. (New York: Guideposts 1983), p. 172.

3. Lewis M. Andrews, Ph.D., *To Thine Own Self Be True*, (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

4. John Costello, *Virtue Under Fire*, (New York: Fromm International Publishing Corporation, 1985), pp.90-91.