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## Propers 14 (Pentecost 12) Series C 2016

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## **Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 7**

*Anxiety, fear, worry, and other negative emotions occupy our readings today. Two weeks ago we urged people to pray. Last week we enjoined them not to covet. This week it is “don’t worry.” Are you seeing a pattern here? What is it?*

*Abram is worried that he will not have a child. Jesus speaks directly to the subject in Luke. Following upon the last two Sundays which spoke of prayer and covetousness, this is something of a natural progression, especially as the editors of our pericope system have compiled this, but I wonder if we are not on the edge of a preaching precipice here, a cliff over which we might just fall to the detriment of our hearers.*

*Worry, stress, and anxiety are real issues which truly confront our people. One worries about finances, another stresses about a family member deployed to Afghanistan, and still another, gripped by an anxiety disorder which is not particularly rational, is terrified to shake hands after the service lest she be infected with “germs.” Our editors and the readings today tend to lump all such anxiety under one heading and treat it as a faith malady. John says that God’s perfect love drives out fear, so if you have fear, the logical conclusion is...?*

*But there is a problem here, actually I believe that there are multiple problems here. There is anxiety and worry and then there is another sort of anxiety and worry. I believe that good pastoral preaching needs to take this into account. Or put another way, I am concerned that the easy answers which the text seems to give us might appear facile and worse to some. If my son were deployed to a war zone, I am not sure that my preacher telling me my worry was a faith problem would go over so well, nor am I so sure that it is what Jesus is saying here.*

*Now, please don’t get me wrong. It can be a tremendous comfort to a parent to commend their son or daughter to God’s care every night and be confident that God and His angels are looking over a loved one. I am just a little uncomfortable with calling that knot of anxiety or worry in their stomachs a faith problem. I think it probably has a lot to do with the healthy love which a parent has for a child. I would have a greater concern about a mother who was not worried about a daughter or son in a war zone.*

*This is only compounded if the person has a phobia or some sort of an anxiety disorder. Yes, it is a problem if you are obsessively washing your hands because you have an intense fear of germs. Every human interaction becomes for such a person no longer an occasion for love but for contamination. But that may not be a faith problem any more than being diagnosed with cancer is a faith problem for the person in chemotherapy. Indeed, as I have often seen with cancer, such a diagnosis may even be an occasion for God to increase one’s faith dramatically. For the cancer victim their disease is an indication of mortality and human frailty and need for the Savior God. Could we not preach a phobia the same way?*

*So what is the preacher to do? I believe we need to speak very carefully here and to acknowledge that there is some worry which is good or which is appropriate (think of the parent with a child*

*in a war zone.) What is more, there is some worry about which we have absolutely no control (think of a phobia here.)*

*That said, there is a sort of worry which is at its heart a fundamental faith problem sort of worry. This sort of anxiety forgets the promises of God and fixates on the problems we face to the exclusion of the blessings which God gives. It is akin to despair. Healthy worry and stress is an occasion for us to trust God more. It gets unhealthy when we stop trusting the promises and start to look for our own solutions (thus Abraham and Eliezar.)*

*But what promises of God should we trust? This is a fascinating exercise to put to a congregation. List the promises of God you count on. They often have not been asked to think about this, so they will initially be somewhat flummoxed, but when they get started, you and they will be surprised at how much they trust.*

*I think a careful read of these texts will speak a brutal word of law to many congregations and sweet Gospel as well. Are we too worried about paying bills, keeping up buildings, managing ourselves as a congregation? Are we less worried than we ought to be about the things God would have us be concerned about? Here is an interesting test. Is the treasurer's report the first item of business at the voters or council meeting? Does it come before the evangelism report? Have we lost sight of the promise that God will work salvation through us for world?*

*In the past we have wondered what the connection was between worry and fear. When does worry become fear? As a human being I may well have lots of things that I worry about. On a wet highway I might worry that I will be in a car accident. In a massive event surrounded by throngs of people I might be worried that I lose my child. The Christian in such a situation may well worry, but even if the thing for which I am worried does come to pass, it is never beyond God's loving care for me. In that relationship with God, I don't ever need to "fear." We thought this was a good distinction. Because such "fear" is a great deal of work, actually, people who are in its grips are often depressed and weary. We thought the preacher might proclaim a faith in which I can rest in the fact that He has the whole thing in his very capable hands.*

### **Collect of the Day**

Almighty and merciful God, it is by Your grace that we live as Your people who offer acceptable service. Grant that we may walk by faith, and not by sight, in the way that leads to eternal life; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*I hope my comments above will help us here.*

*This prayer is predicated on people being worried about their status and standing with God. But are we really worried if our service is acceptable to God? I have run into a few sturdy Lutheran souls who might have expressed that. But I think there are other issues brewing in most of our parishioners. Is theirs a misplaced worry? Do we need to preach the right sort of worry for these text, the faith denying worry of the man or woman who is seeking to please God with deeds?*

*The prayer starts off with a statement of God's power and mercy. God has all the power here and he is full of mercy. Power is easy to understand, but I am not sure we really get the fact that God really is almighty. I am not sure that many people really fear that power.*

*Mercy is another misunderstood and misbelieved thing. Innocent people never get mercy from a judge, only guilty people can get mercy. These two statements side by side, God's power and mercy, are important touchstones for this prayer. We are making no claim to getting this whole worry thing right. It is important that these two elements of God are connected. Without power, mercy is pretty meaningless. Without mercy, power simply crushes us.*

*The prayer also acknowledges that we only offer acceptable service by God's grace and thereby live as His people. This is not that some of us get the faith thing down and others don't. This is all a gift of God. But this then demands another question to be asked: What is this acceptable service? What makes it acceptable? I think that is answered in the next phrase. We walk by the light of faith, not by the things we perceive with these physical eyes of ours, and this journey leads to eternal life.*

*The prayer gets something right to which I want to draw your attention. We imagine that we have done the catechizing thing when we have made an argument, discussed the content of faith, and gotten our charges to agree with us. But what we notice today is that something like 7% of those confirmands are active in a Lutheran parish when they are 25 or 30 years old. This is not working. But it seems to me that what the prayer gets right is that faith is a walk, not a thought. We are shaped by what we do, not by what we think so much. Is proper catechesis really praying with and getting children to pray with us? Is the theological reflection we are used to doing with children really only possibly after they have walked in faith? I am increasingly thinking this way.*

*The prayer says this in a strange way. We would walk by faith and not by sight. What is up with this? The prayer acknowledges that this walking by faith leads to eternal life – so we are talking about the very Christian sort of faith through which God saves people. You can read more about this walk by faith and not by sight in the letters of Paul, particularly II Corinthians. It seems to be that we embody a reality which is not discernible by the senses but by the relationship we have with God in which he promises a great deal to us and we trust/expect those promises to be true.*

*There is a strange thing that happens to us when we believe. There are things we are given to believe which are contrary to what we see. When we assert them, the world things we are a little daft. God has said that the world is his creation yet even a simple look at the world suggest great age and the product of natural process that seem to stretch back billions of years. God has said we are his perfect children yet the old sinner is always staring back at me when I shave in the morning. The person in the pew next to me is also a precious child of God, as least he says so, yet I know that they cheat on their taxes or at least yell at their kids too much. There are things we must believe to be so, we cannot point to them. These in fact reside at the very heart of our faith. To say that the death of a Galilean peasant two thousand years ago makes a difference for*

*this world today is not something that is demonstrably provable. To say that he has risen from the dead is not something that I can submit to any sort of scientific (by sight) verification.*

*Yes this is the way that leads to eternal life, it is the way of the Christian. This is not easy. I long for the day when God will sweep away this old world and all that will remain are the truths that he has established in Christ and they will be truly lived out in the whole reality which is creation. (Romans 8) But that day has not come for me, at least not yet. For now I live in the strange world of faith but not by sight. I must see the world through his eyes, as much as He gives me to see and trust that this road leads to a bright and beautiful place.*

## **Readings**

Genesis 15:1-6

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”<sup>2</sup> But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”<sup>3</sup> And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.”<sup>4</sup> And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.”<sup>5</sup> And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”<sup>6</sup> And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

*Abraham is our father in faith, and this can be really good news. He is not particularly good at it sometimes. Abram has been given a promise but he seems to be trying to make the promise come true himself. He has an heir but it is not according to the promise. This heir, Eliezar, seems to have been a trusted servant, a member of his household or he may have been some distant nephew. Many have pointed out that Abram on several occasions tries to make the promise come true on his own terms or seems to have been willing to let it go. He will also take Hagar and produce a son in an attempt to create the heir that Sarah seemed unable to give him. When he journeyed to Egypt he was willing to let Sarah go in the harem of Pharaoh. But God will have none of this. The promise of God is true and sure, even if the body is dead and the ability to produce an heir seems far-fetched if not impossible.*

*When God pushes the point, Abram believes and it is credited to him as righteousness, but I think it is important to notice that he doesn't start out in this passage as the exemplar of unshakeable faith we often make him out to be. He seems to be working the system to give God a little boost as though God might need such assistance. It is clear that God is not meeting Abram's expectations.*

*But the preacher will want to ask what promise does God make to us in this regard? I believe the Gospel lesson articulates it well for us, but it is here too. Descendants as numerous as the stars – we are those descendants of Abraham. And yet, as his children, we are also part of that promise of future heirs. Look around our congregations and many of them are gray. The young people*

*are notably absent. Will we have the spiritual heirs or have they run off seeking some greener pasture in a non-denominational church? Is God calling us to such radical faith as well? What does that look like for us?*

*What of that promise that his kingdom will prevail even against the gates of Hell. When an addict or an alcoholic sits in our office, their life in shambles and desperately reaching out for any straw, even God, and when that person stares into our eyes from across the desk, do we already know how this will end, even before it begins? Do we expect/trust only in failure? Do we believe that God could help this person or do we see only their weakness and inability sitting before us? Or perhaps the problem is not that we don't admit that God could help this person, we are not sure that God will. I can believe that the boat is going to New York, am I willing to buy the ticket and entrust my money and my life to that captain and his vessel? We probably all will admit that God can do it, but do we trust his mercy?*

*What is God challenging us to believe? What has God promised us that we find it a challenge to believe? We have asked the question before. Here are a few things we thought when we talked about this before. Can we add to this list?*

- 1. God's Word is the voice of God – He promises that this Eucharistic meal forgives my sins, gives me eternal life. Can I really yawn while I stand in line on the way to the rail?*
- 2. God does not count beans – he loves stinkers as much as the good guys.*
- 3. No one comes to the Father except through Jesus – yes, Christianity is important. There is no promise of salvation outside the faithful relationship. There is really a condemnation for the unbeliever. But the enemy has been saying “You shall not surely die...” for a very long time.*
- 4. Easter means the end of death and taxes.*
- 5. This world is not out of God's control/power. He is not impotent before the forces of nature, decay, death, and darkness. God might not do anything about it in our eyes, but that is not because he cannot. It often looks like the world is careening out of control. It looks like our lives are but pawns in the games of forces which seemingly control the world, but God says, “Don't be afraid, I am the Lord of heaven and earth.”*
- 6. Jesus the answer to sin – he is the Son of God and his death upon a cross makes a real and positive difference in my life and this whole world. I am afraid before my own self, my own sin, but God says, “don't be afraid – he has gone to that cross for you.)*

*Psalm 33:12-22 I have included a few of the verses prior. I think that starting with verse 12 can lend itself to a nationalistic theology. It is important to remember that God sometimes brings down nations as well.*

*The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;  
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.*

<sup>11</sup> *The counsel of the LORD stands forever,  
the plans of his heart to all generations.*

<sup>12</sup> Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,  
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!

<sup>13</sup> The LORD looks down from heaven;  
he sees all the children of man;

<sup>14</sup> from where he sits enthroned he looks out  
on all the inhabitants of the earth,

<sup>15</sup> he who fashions the hearts of them all  
and observes all their deeds.

<sup>16</sup> The king is not saved by his great army;  
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.

<sup>17</sup> The war horse is a false hope for salvation,  
and by its great might it cannot rescue.

<sup>18</sup> Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,  
on those who hope in his steadfast love,

<sup>19</sup> that he may deliver their soul from death  
and keep them alive in famine.

<sup>20</sup> Our soul waits for the LORD;  
he is our help and our shield.

<sup>21</sup> For our heart is glad in him,  
because we trust in his holy name.

<sup>22</sup> Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,  
even as we hope in you.

Hebrews 11:1-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. <sup>2</sup> For by it the people of old received their commendation. <sup>3</sup> By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

<sup>4</sup> By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. <sup>5</sup> By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. <sup>6</sup> And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw

near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. <sup>7</sup> By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup> For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. <sup>11</sup> By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. <sup>12</sup> Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

<sup>13</sup> These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. <sup>14</sup> For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. <sup>15</sup> If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup> But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

*Verse 6 – if you take “god” out of “good” all you have left is a zero*

*Here we pick up a series of readings from the letter to the Hebrews, and this is the good stuff that most of us are familiar with. Hebrews has an unfortunate fate among the people of God. Mark Powell says that it is a little like a movie that the critics raved about but the theater going public simply did not like. Hebrews is perhaps one of the most thoughtful and interesting explorations of Christology in the whole NT, but we pay very little attention to it.*

*Part of the problem is that the argumentation is so complex. Other than Romans, it is probably the longest single argument in the whole NT. It is not anything like the accessible stories of Jesus’ ministry or the briefer letters of Paul.*

*Here, at the end of the sermon, and that is really what the letter to the Hebrews reads like, the preacher is wrapping things up. Like all good preachers, he wants to leave them with something memorable, and this is very memorable. He has been discoursing on the superiority of Jesus over both the angels and Moses’ covenant.*

*The writer is cataloguing a number of OT characters and he is doing this with some references to popular religious literature of the day. It is a little like he is references some details from a Max Lucado book as he goes along, some of this material is not found in the OT but in the more popular literature that is found in Jewish circles in the first century and much of which has come*

*to light in the Dead Sea scrolls. This is especially true in the comments about Enoch and some of the really old characters therein.*

*The primary point of course is that all these folks are tied together by faith and we are also in the same faith. They died without having seen the things for which they were hoping, we also live by faith and not by sight. We too hear of a promised land and often are disappointed when the next curve in life does not reveal it to us, but only another stretch of dismally familiar highway. But we walk the same road as those saints of olden times. Abraham walked this very road, even characters like Enoch and Abel whose stories and names come down to us shrouded in the deepest mystery, they shared this same faith with us.*

*In short, we are not alone.*

*There are a couple of other things to which a preacher might pay fruitful attention here. The first is that each of the people commended were very different from one another. Noah condemned the world, he lived by faith. Abraham trusted; he lived by faith. Abel died but his righteous worship means he still lives. Enoch pleased God and Sarah conceived when she was old. They are all different. Faith is not a melting pot in which everyone comes out looking the same, rather it is much more of a stew pot – the potatoes are still potatoes, the carrots are still carrots, and the individuals within the kingdom are not homogenized into some human uniformity.*

*Another important element of this text is the idea that every one of these heroic figures died without seeing their faith completely fulfilled. Abraham was promised offspring as numerous as the stars. He had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. He believed until his dying day, and that means he was still looking toward God for promises yet to be fulfilled.*

*The other element which the preacher may want to access would be the image of pilgrim. It is not so powerfully lived in our age as it has been in prior generations, such as the medieval period. But no one wrote so powerfully about this image and developed it quite so fully as Augustine in the “City of God” a title he took from this very passage of Hebrews.*

*If you want a more accessible and somewhat shorter (OK much shorter) treatment of this motif you could read the classic Bunyan’s “The Pilgrim’s Progress.” When you are done with that, consider picking up Lewis’s reboot of that idea in “The Pilgrim’s Regress.”*

Luke 12:22-34 (35-40) I have appended the words from last week’s parable which are immediately prior to this reading.

<sup>16</sup>And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, <sup>17</sup>and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ <sup>18</sup>And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. <sup>19</sup>And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ <sup>20</sup>But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of

*you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’<sup>21</sup> So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”*

<sup>22</sup> And he said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. <sup>23</sup> For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. <sup>24</sup> Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! <sup>25</sup> And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? <sup>26</sup> If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? <sup>27</sup> Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. <sup>28</sup> But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! <sup>29</sup> And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. <sup>30</sup> For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. <sup>31</sup> Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you.

<sup>32</sup> “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. <sup>33</sup> Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. <sup>34</sup> For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

*How often don't I spend my time telling God and anyone else who will listen just how big the problem is? Should I not be telling the problem how big my God is?*

*I believe that the editors of the pericope system are deliberately trying to lead us away from a facile or shallow reading of this text. This is not a cookbook text giving us the recipe for a better life. (Many read this passage and its parallel the Sermon on the Mount that way.) It would be easy to proclaim a message of “don't worry, God has everything under control” here, but a thoughtful and faithful reading of this text may not allow for that.*

*Jesus says that life is more than the food which sustains our bodies and the clothes which we wear. There are more important things to be concerned about than the necessities of life. God knows you need those things so a life which dwells only on those issues has not heard his promise to care for his people.*

*On the contrary, we are to seek his kingdom, as a first priority. The good news here seems to be that God has decided to give it to us. The little flock need not fear that its task is too great, God gives the Kingdom and this transforms our lives. The possessions which we once were so concerned about may be sold and given to the needy. Our treasures are in heaven.*

*Then we get to the real kicker for this passage. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Yes, this could be a stewardship sort of theme, but I am thinking that this is more about where our priorities lay as a person and a congregation. If you are familiar with the language of*

*strategic planning, this might be a values discussion. That which is important to us is an indication of where our heart is. How many of our congregations don't have excellent mission statements that have absolutely nothing to do with how we behave and how we allocate our resources? We speak of loving communities and outreach and yet most of our attention at council meetings is paid to bills and budgets, leaky roofs and failing furnaces. Should our real mission statement be that we maintain a building? (Please note, I am not saying we should let the building fall apart, but when do we ever talk about the kingdom stuff?)*

*This is then coupled with an eschatological piece. Suddenly we are talking about the end of the world. Luke seems to be telling us that we cannot assume that things are always going to go on. This kingdom thing needs to be front burner for us. The servant who is ready, who is kingdom focused is the servant who receives the praise of the master upon his return. More than that, Jesus speaks of the master having the servants recline at table and being served by the returned master himself.*

*This is a strange kingdom, and this whole bizarre little section is, contrary to the way I think many of us read it, not given to us to make us feel badly about worry. It is genuinely given to help us not worry. Jesus really means it when he says we should not worry, but he also knows that we are helpless before our own human nature. If you look at the material which follows and surrounds those injunctions, they speak of a very different thing, they speak of the promises of God, that we are his flock, his servants, honored in his house. We have a job to do which he values and we are the lambs in his arms. We are important to him. He is watching out for us. Remember two weeks ago, when he said that the good father will give what we ask for, namely the Holy Spirit? That Spirit is the one who engenders the faith which believes these promises, and which faith can free us from this crippling sort of worry which would destroy our lives.*

*This really is Jesus coming to us because he cares for us, despite the fact that we have made a mess of our lives.*

## **Law and Gospel**

1. God is hard to see in this world, and I would really like to see him. He has told me some great things, but the world is in my face telling me other things, most of which I don't like and which often threaten me with pain and death. But God has established a relationship of faith with me in which I see those things also as the things from which God rescues me.
2. My natural inclination, like Abram's is to try to solve these problems myself or buy into the world's solutions which are little more than coping mechanisms. It is much easier sometimes to admit defeat and put up with it. After all, God helps those who help themselves, right!? But God's ways and thoughts are not my thoughts and ways. My

solutions are only temporary and often create as many problems as they solve. But despite my foolishness in this regard, God does not abandon me any more than he abandoned Abram.

3. Fear often overwhelms me and makes me feel like I am alone and helpless, which is true if I can only see myself. God has made me part of a mighty host of folks, whose heroes all have faced the same sorts of challenges and whose success stories all involve my God helping them as he has promised to help me. My problems are not bigger than Abel's, Abram's, or Noah's problems were.
4. OK, so I am not supposed to be afraid, God is on my side, but the truth is that I am worried about all sorts of things. Is this passage really about simply making me feel badly about feeling badly? Not at all, this is an expression of God's love for me. He knows what worry and anxiety do to a person, and while some of this is normal and even healthy, it also destroys lives as much as alcohol or drugs or another abuse can destroy a life. He comes today with promises, Spirit, and all the things I need to begin the process of becoming healthy in this regard, a responsibility which he ultimately takes. Thus he comes with the great promise to help me do what I cannot possibly do alone.

### **Sermon Ideas**

1. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be (Gospel: That the Holy Spirit give the hearer to consider his or her life in light of Scripture, repent of greed, and rejoice in the gifts of God.)

There is an oft-repeated sentiment that says that preachers should stick to spiritual things and avoid talking about temporal things. Jesus rather blows that up for us today. The spiritual (our hearts) life is seen in temporal (our treasures) things. He connects the two explicitly here.

The preacher needs to be aware that we live in a post-enlightenment society which has often so privatized religion that we are uncomfortable with the idea of a public religion. But the Enlightenment, which was trying to do something good, namely find a way out of a series of brutal religious wars fought in the 1550's-1650's, may have also created some issues with its solution. One of those issues is the privatization of religion. I am not advocating for a return to the confessional wars of that pre-Enlightenment time, but I do think we have pushed the privatization of religion too far.

The struggle for the preacher in this sermon may well be that his hearers have never actually thought about this, but simply think of the world with the enlightenment goggles firmly over their eyes. They have never taken them off. They are afraid to take them off. Those goggles interpret the world to mean that God really has no business in my bank

account. That is secular, that is my world, and I don't want some preacher telling me about what happens in that world.

But Jesus is taking those goggles off for us today. The preacher will want to plug into recent trends in culture which suggest that a religion which is wholly private is not really your religion. Statements of faith which are not lived are to be questioned. We are scrutinizing politicians and others on that basis. The culture is waking up to the idea that convictions which never leave the heart are not really held. If I believe that God loves me but behave as if I am the only one taking care of me, that pious assertion in the loving care of God needs to be examined in light of my life. I may actually believe that I am the only one who can take care of me and my pious recitation of the creed may be disingenuous or at least conflicted and contradicted by elements of my life.

Now, it needs to be said here that all of us are in that boat and we all, in some ways, contradict our confessions of faith. That is what it means to be a sinner and a saint always in need of God's gracious love.

All this leads us to the point Jesus seems to be making today. An honest appraisal of the way that we spend our money may reveal something about us which we would rather not like to see. The anxiety of which Jesus speaks earlier is but a symptom of a possible first commandment/idolatry issue. He uses our check book register as evidence.

The preacher will want to keep the doctrine of vocation at the ready here. It is not the case that money becomes more spiritual or worshipful when we put it in the collection plate at church. God has given us families and neighbors for which we are to care. Buying groceries for the kids is not to be put in some tension with giving money to the poor or contributing the building fund. All of them are valid and beautiful ways to serve God with our money.

Building on last week's message, this is much more about the attitude which we bring to our money than the accounting of every penny. Who is being served with this purchase? Who is being worshipped with this investment? There is nothing wrong with being prudent and funding your IRA. But is it a gift from God we are saving? Are we saving it so we can better serve him? Are we using our God given abilities to care for family and self?

The alternatives would be that we are neglecting all else to care for ourselves because we have no trust in God. Both individuals will be contributing to an IRA and other savings vehicles, but they will come to such investing from very different places. One invests from fear, the other in gratitude. One assumes that he must have all the answers and anticipate every contingency. The other wisely saves but also lives a life in this moment which God has given. He does not neglect his various vocations in order to protect himself. He knows that his future may hold many frighten and difficult things, but he also trusts that God will walk that road with him.

This sermon must include important truths about God's love. He doesn't love us more for getting this right, but his love does work on our hearts, turning us from fear to a holy trust in him. The faith of Jesus is given to us, the faith which walked into Jerusalem and Gethsemane knowing full well what was about to happen, the trust which commended his spirit to his Father. He was dying because we struggle with this, because our lives frequently reflect a profound brokenness which causes us to fear and seek our own solutions. But he has died for such foolish people and he does give his Spirit to us, and he does calm our fears.

2. On the Road of Faith (From the Epistle Reading – that the hearer would delight to be united with God's people of every time and place and recognize that the life of faith is the life to which we are called.)

Not long ago Stephen Hawking, the famous astrophysicist suggested that it might not be such a good idea to broadcast our presence to the whole universe. The beings who are listening in might not be so friendly. If you haven't read this article, here it is from ABC News: <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/Space/stephen-hawking-alien-contact-risky/story?id=10478157>

I am thinking that this might be an interesting thing to juxtapose with the writer to the Hebrews who suggests that we take comfort and direction from our connection to some "extra-terrestrials" of another sort, the sort who have been welcomed into heavenly realms. Contrary to Mr. Hawking's fears, we welcome this contact. For we are on the same road as these folks, a road that leads to heavenly pleasure and joy.

Hebrews list of saints tells us a few things about our journey, some of which may surprise us.

- a. Abel – God remembers us, and even our martyred blood can speak from the grave and be heard by him. No one is unimportant.
- b. Enoch – victory is possible with God. Enoch pleased God and he was not found, but was translated to heaven.
- c. Noah – was right even when the whole world told him he was wrong. With God on our side, we can face down the whole rest of the world.
- d. Abraham – no situation is ever beyond God's ability to change it and turn it around.
- e. Sarah – even when we are utterly spent and our personal resources seem wholly inadequate, God is not.

All of these and more are examples of faith, the assurance and hope in the God whom we cannot see with our eyes, but whom we know as Father, Lord, and Savior.

We are on the same journey, the same path as these heroes. Like their path, our path of faith may well involve great challenges, much resistance, and overcoming insurmountable odds. But their examples give us hope, because through them God worked amazing things. Through us God is still at work. He is bestowing faith in a hundred thousand folks today or more. And that is just to maintain Christianity's numbers, forget the fact that in many parts of the world it is growing.

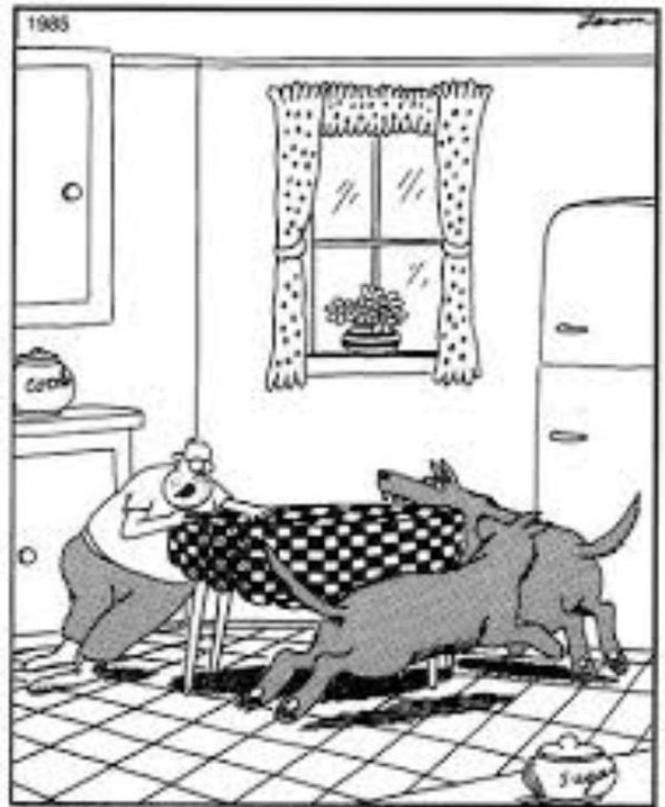
God asks us to believe in something which the world cannot see. That makes us pilgrims in this place. They can only see the motives of self-interest and gain, the natural forces which shape this world and its people. We on the other hand are given to see the Love of God in Jesus. We can therefore see the broken and the sinful folks around us very differently. I might even see the man or woman who has hurt me very differently, I might notice that Jesus has shed his blood for them too. The world does not understand these things, because it cannot see them. But you can see them. Thus, you are a stranger of sorts here, this is not your home, and that is a good thing. God has written your name in a book of life, made you a bit of an odd duck in this tired old sinful world. He has written eternity and his love on your heart. Don't worry about feeling a little odd or out of place. That is exactly what you should be feeling. It is, after all, the truth.

3. Have No Fear Little Flock (based on the Gospel lesson – That the hearer would discern healthy and unhealthy worry, not feeling guilty about the former, and be liberated by Christ to abandon the latter sort of apprehension.)

I would think you almost have to sing “Have No Fear Little Flock” this Sunday!

This sermon will seek to make a distinction between the healthy and the unhealthy sort of fear or anxiety. It is normal and simply part of being a mother or a father to worry about your child who is in a dangerous place. If my son had volunteered to be a wildfire fighter, I might be worried. I think the preacher who chastises such a parent for that worry deserves the anger he will receive for such a statement. There is a worry or apprehension which is the expression of godly duty, vocation, and responsibility. For the middle school coach to be “worried” about the whereabouts of his young athletes at basketball tournament is commendable. Jesus is not talking about this sort of worry.

There is another worry which Jesus does not really mean here, and in this I am talking about the uncontrolled fear or worry which is the result of a mind which is not working correctly. We might call this a phobia. The great Lutheran theologian Gary Larson once defined “Luposlipophobia” as the fear of being pursued by timber wolves around a kitchen table while wearing socks on a newly waxed floor. Irrational, but so is the fear of spiders, the fear of bridges, or the fear of open spaces and all of those are real fears and they can cripple a person’s life. This is a sign of our human frailty, just as my glasses tell me that my eyes don’t work right or my doctor may tell me that heart is not functioning very well. Jesus died for this sort of a malady, but this is not what Jesus has in mind here either. The preacher does not want to load up the phobic with more guilt than they already are feeling for their condition and its impact on their life and the lives of the people whom they love.



Luposlipophobia: The fear of being pursued by timber wolves around a kitchen table while wearing socks on a newly waxed floor.

Jesus has in mind another sort of worry which has taken its eyes off the promises God and can only see the problems which are endemic to this sinful world. This is the sort of worry to which anyone may fall prey, including the mother of the young person posted to a war zone or the middle school basketball coach or the phobic person, or even a congregation of folks like us and its individual members. This sort of worry is a sort of anti-faith. It is the expression of something which is the opposite of trust.

God has promised his presence and help throughout our lives. He has promised to make us into the agents of his grace and peace in this troubled world. He has promised that we cannot be plucked from his hand. He has promised ever to love us, no matter what we have done. He has promised that the grave does not have the last word on me, but He does, and it is a word of life.

The story of Peter walking on the water might be a good visual here. He sinks when he takes his eyes off of Jesus.

Jesus offers the antidote to this sort of fear, not proper counseling or therapy. We can no more keep this whole situation “straight” and “healthy” than I can keep myself from dying of some physical malady. I will exercise and keep my heart healthy only to succumb to cancer eventually. So too, emotionally speaking, it is simply too much for

me. I will get one thing right and stumble over another anxiety. But it is not too much for our Lord. He tells me not to worry, but immediately he gives the antidote to worry, not my own strength of will or mind, but his promise. I am worth something to God. I am a sheep of his flock, a lamb in his arms. He has a place and a purpose for me in his kingdom, a job for me to do, which he wants me to do.

The preacher of the Gospel this day will want to assure his people that God has this life and even my emotional flightiness in his very capable hands. His desire for my stability is also an expression of his love. Jesus wants us not to worry because he knows what it does to us. Even the injunction not to worry, which sounds like yet another demand from God I am helpless to obey, is an expression of his care for me.