

Advent 3: Fear Not and Trust Always!

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Are you a worrywart? a nervous Nelly? Maybe an anxious Alice?

We all worry. Some of us more than others.

We worry about our finances, our relationships, our kids, the maintenance on our homes, our health, and the world. And it's the Christmas season which means our nervous energy increases about 100 fold--where we worry about not forgetting to get anyone a present, or if we made enough food, or whether or not the house is decorated like a hallmark christmas card.

Truth is...We can and could worry about literally anything and everything.

And you could say it's normal to be concerned or anxious about things that we can't control-- it's human nature. But for many of us we worry too much to the point we don't trust anything to work out or to follow through and that even includes people and even God.

We hear people say all the time "don't worry about it." And even in Paul's letter to the Philippians today it says, " Do not worry about anything." Really, Paul? That's so easier said than done.

See, worry has a lot to do with fear. Fear of our inability to control an outcome and the uncertainty that is in all of that lack of control. So when we worry, we are essentially fearful because we can't control or fix anything and that's very unsettling. Plus there's always the indeterminate nature of life. And these are all parts of our human experience but it doesn't make it any less difficult for us to endure.

Why talk about worry and fear on the third Sunday of Advent that is Joy Sunday? A time of excitement as we edge closer to the birth of Jesus, and a time of happiness when we think about the gift of love that is coming to bring joy in this world for us?

Well, Advent is a time of preparation for receiving this great gift in Jesus and the hope he brings to our world. As humans, when we prepare for things 9 times out of 10 it's work. We have to work to get ready to appreciate the gift we will be given--and Christmas is no different. And I'm not talking about shopping or cooking as work which they are; but rather the work we need to do within our relationships with God and within ourselves to prepare for the Birth of God's son and what that holds for each of us. If we don't prepare ourselves to receive this gift than we might not think we're worthy of it or appreciate it or understand.

You may or maynot be surprised that one of the elements of preparation for advent is trust. We are being called to not worry and to do this we need trust in our heavenly creator. Trusting in God's love for us and believing that love calls God to be part of our lives--seeking to know us as and hold us in the joys of this season but also in the pain and anxiety that even this season can't take away.

But to simply trust is not a realistic expectation for us, as our fears and our worries challenge our trust in God. We find this when we try to fix or handle things on our own which can be pretty lonely. In that process we not only isolate ourselves from those around us but also isolate ourselves from God.

It's not that we expect God to fix things but sometimes it's challenging for us to trust that God is even with us in the messiness of our uncertainty. Especially, when we are going through a hard time and we don't feel God's presence like we would expect or want.

What do we do? How do we prepare for Advent by trusting and deepening our relationship with God? Where do we begin?

*The Message Bible* translation of today's text brings more clarity to Paul's words that may guide us on how we can be more faithful and trusting. He says, "Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life."

So, prayer is key to building a relationship of faith and not fear with our creator. To voice what is on our hearts and minds and keeps us up at night or makes us feel vulnerable. Prayer is what really allows us to let go of the things we can't control or attempt to carry alone by giving them up to God. Once those things are out of our mouths or spoken through our minds we have given them over not to our will but to God's will. And that takes trust.

And that's why prayer is an important part of our preparation for Advent--how can we accept the hope that is coming into the world when we struggle with finding hope and trust in our relationship with God now? How can we open our hearts and minds to God's unconditional and transformational love embodied in an infant? When we find it challenging to believe and trust in God's love for us?

The power of prayer is a real thing. Yes, prayers are answered and usually not as we would desire or expect. And sometimes, truthfully prayers might not seem answered. But the power of prayer goes beyond the outcome of what we pray for.

The power of prayer ultimately lies in our faith and the ways we trust and believe in God and God's love for us--that's how the power of prayer transforms who we are. It is in that moment when we let go of the fear that's holding us back from inviting God into our lives, and choosing to have faith that God is with us in the midst of it all and we open ourselves up to the transformational power of God's love.

And as Paul eloquently says, when we allow our worries to become prayers and trust that they are in good hands, we can then open ourselves up to receive the peace of God. And that's transformative too--where peace of heart and mind makes us better people and we can then be that peace in a room filled with worry.

What fears, worries and concerns are you holding onto this Advent?

When I think of fear and anxiety around this time of year I can't help but think about Charlie Brown's Christmas. I especially love the part when poor Charlie Brown becomes fed up with the commercialization of Christmas. You could say that he mentally cracks in the middle of a Christmas Pageant rehearsal, crying out "Isn't there anyone out there who knows what Christmas is all about?"

And it's good, old Linus, the quiet and thoughtful one, the friend who carries around his security blanket, never to be separated from the comfort it provides. It is he who comes to Charlie Brown's aid.

He tells him, "Sure Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about. Lights please?"

So, Linus with his security blanket walks to the center of the stage, the lights dim, and the spotlight shines down on him. And Linus holding tightly to his blue blanket begins to tell Charlie Brown what Christmas is all about by reciting a passage from the Gospel of Luke.

"And there were in the same country shepherds, abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night... And the angel said unto them, "Fear not! For, behold, I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to all my people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour."

Linus, recites it so much better than myself, but in his recitation of Luke for the last 30 or more years I have missed the most significant part of his storytelling.

Pastor and writer Jason Soroski, found this profound moment in Charlie Brown's Christmas that may have slipped past your attention as well.

For Soroski, Linus' big moment isn't that he knew what Christmas was all about (even though he's being helpful), or that he recites the Gospel of Luke by memory (which is pretty impressive) ...no it is when he drops his blanket.

Do you remember that part? I always thought it was for dramatic effect. But it's more meaningful than I thought. See, Linus drops the blanket when he says "Fear not!"

Remember? "Fear not! For, behold, I bring you tidings of great joy" and drops the blanket.

That blue blanket defined Linus' character. We know who he is by that security blanket he is always carrying around. It is what makes him feel safe and comfortable. And despite their best efforts his friends cannot separate him from it. This is the first time that he lets go. For Linus, for us, he's living out those words..."fear not."

And it's not that he's fearless or worry free but in that moment he trusts in God. He trusts that the Lord is with him in that vulnerable moment of being in front of everyone and sharing the Good News of Jesus. You could say he knew that the fear he carried, God also carried with him and there is comfort in that.

In order for us to drop our blankets of fear in our own lives, we too need to fear not. But "Fear not"--is NOT about being unafraid or fearless or worry free, but rather a call to trust, believe and rely on our heavenly creator through prayer. Believing that God is with us in our vulnerable moments bringing us strength and confidence just like he did with Linus on that stage.

That's why in Paul's letter before he even tells us to not worry he says, "The Lord is near." God is with us. And that is never more important and significant than this time of year where we wait for the joy of Christmas where God's love for us becomes incarnate in this world ever so near to remind us that God's love is not distant but present in each of our lives.

So let us prepare for this gift. Let us find time to share with God where we are right now. Maybe over a cup of coffee in morning. Or maybe you prefer the Benedictine practice where your work is prayer. Or maybe you're a writer and prefer to write your prayers in a journal. Or you're a runner and talk to God throughout each mile--whatever prayer looks like for you-- share and release your fears and anxieties.

There might not be immediate change in what you're praying for but there will be a change in you. Because by letting go of your blankets and letting God carry them for you or with you--that is a sign of love for yourself and of God's love for you.

During this season of preparation, release those blankets of fear and grab onto your faith to truly appreciate the joy of this season. And not let those things burdening your hearts distract you or make you feel like you're not enough for God's love. Fear not and trust always! Amen.

Jason Soroski Blog Post: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/just-drop-the-blanket/>