

SERMON NOTES

First Sunday of Hisnag
(First Sunday of Advent)

Synaxis Gospel
Luke 12:13-31

ANXIETY AND SECURITY

INTRODUCTION

For the next four Sundays of Advent, our readings will be from Luke's account of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem. Luke has chosen special teachings and sayings from our Lord's ministry to present in this section. One should not expect that these represent the exact historical chronology in which these teachings and sayings were actually spoken. The other synoptics will present them in different contexts. Moreover, some of this material is unique to Luke. Each Gospel writer chose to arrange the available material of Jesus' life and teachings in certain ways for his own theological purposes. Luke's purpose is to present Jesus' careful preparation of His disciples before His Passion. Jesus "equips them for the mission of proclaiming Him and His message of salvation after His death and resurrection 'to the ends of the earth.'"¹

Luke relates Jesus' determination to accomplish His destiny in Jerusalem, and describes His training of not just twelve but seventy-two disciples for their own destiny as missionaries representing Him. After their first successful efforts, endowed with His power to heal and cast out demons, He began to teach them about the opposition and suffering they would face, as well as the need to obey God and to love their fellowman regardless of nationality. There are lessons on the importance of study, placed over excessive and showy activity. Jesus also emphasized the importance and efficacy of prayer.

Just preceding our reading, Jesus' teaching concentrated on the Holy Spirit's support of the disciples in the severe trials and persecution they would face as His emissaries, particularly before the magistrates. In this context they were encouraged to be fearless in their witness and are told "Do not be anxious!" This discussion prompted someone in the great crowd of interested bystanders to present his own personal legal problem for Jesus' adjudication. The extended response of Jesus to this man teaches us the source of true security that banishes anxiety.

SYNAXIS READING

Luke 12:13-31

*And someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher,
tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with*

¹Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke, I-IX*, The Anchor Bible, Vol.28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981) p. 826.

me." But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbiter over you?"

And He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions."

And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a certain rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?'

"And he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry."'

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; And now who will own what you have prepared? '

"So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

And He said to His disciples, "For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. For life is more than food, and the body than clothing.

"Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; and they have no storeroom nor barn; and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds!

"And which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to your life's span? If then you cannot do even a very little thing, why are you anxious about other matters?

"Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; but I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these.

"But if God so arrays the grass in the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace,

how much more will he clothe you, O men of little faith!

“And do not seek what you shall eat, and what you shall drink, and do not keep worrying. For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek; but your Father knows that you need these things.

“But seek for His kingdom, and these things shall be added to you.”

NOTES

And someone in the crowd said to Him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the *family* inheritance with me.”

In those days, the eldest son received a double portion of the estate.² This was to enable him, as the new head of the family, to fulfill his duties to care for the mother, unmarried sisters, and others of the household for whom he would be responsible. The other adult brothers who did not bear this burden participated in the estate with single portions.

This man is not asking Jesus to decide the right or wrong of his complaint against his brother; he is, rather, *telling* Jesus what pronouncement Jesus should make.³ By addressing Jesus as “Teacher” (διδασκαλε), in this context, the man is implying that Jesus was seen as someone *like* the Scribes whose occupation it was to analyze and interpret the fine points of the law.

But He said to him, “Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbiter over you?”

There were constituted authorities who handled such matters.

It is often noticed that Jesus’ response to the man’s demand echoed an event in the life of Moses.⁴ While still in Egypt, some 40 years before the burning bush experience, Moses had attempted to intervene in a fight between two Hebrews. But, the one striking the other had replied, “Who made you a prince or a judge over us?”⁵ The situation described by Luke is a reversal of the experience of Moses.

If this response does allude to the event in Exodus, Jesus may be hinting that someone who wishes Him to judge in the physical realm, like a new Moses, must be prepared to follow and obey His teachings in the spiritual realm.⁶ The apportioning of the land of their inheritance for the Israelites was a minor part of the legacy of Moses. It was his role as spiritual leader that had major impact on the people.

² The laws of inheritance were taken from the writings of Moses. Notices in Numbers 27:1-11 and 36:7-9 provided that daughters should inherit and divide their father’s estate if there were no sons, but they must not marry a man not of their own tribe. Deuteronomy 21:16-17 established the right of “The first-born” to inherit a double portion of the estate. The estate was divided into portions equaling the number of sons plus one. The eldest son received his portion plus the extra portion.

³ This was noticed also by Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1922) p. 322.

⁴ Plummer, p.488

⁵ Exodus 2:13-14

⁶ See also the suggestion by John Nolland, *Luke*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 35B (Dallas: Word Books, 1993) pp. 685 and 688.

And He said to them, “Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed;

Instead of complying with the man’s request, Jesus took the opportunity to expose the root of the problem, greed.⁷ Greed is the desire for more than is needful. It is destructive. The fall of our first parents came from their greed, their desire to have more than God had generously given to them. They wanted a higher state of being and sacrificed their relationship with God to get it.

For not *even* when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.”

Here “life” probably refers to the physical life. The animating force of a person is not the result of possessions nor is it defined by them. Excess does not change that.

And He told them a parable, saying,

Usually the parables of Jesus require a spiritual explanation. This one has no hidden meaning.

“The land of a rich man was very productive.

An already wealthy land owner had a windfall.

And he began reasoning to himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?’

The man did not consider other alternatives, such as sharing his excess with the poor or even selling it.

And he said, ‘This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.

The man’s decision would provide not only for the storage of the windfall from his crops but also for his other “goods.”⁸

And I will say to my soul,

The term, “soul” (*ψυχη*), can have several different meanings. The man here is addressing the seat and center of his inner life. He is addressing himself.

“Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years *to come*; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.”

Some scholars like to point out the business acumen of the man—that he was prudent in the preservation of his tillable land for the future, when he replaced the old barns rather than building additional new ones.⁹ But this observation seems to be incorrect when we notice that the man plans to take his “ease.” This sounds like retirement.

If life consists of possessions—even the abundance of possessions—this man would have calculated correctly. He was provided for. He was secure.

⁷ Plummer, p. 323

⁸ In the view of Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1985) p. 973, the addition of the words “and my goods”, makes the parable applicable to others as well as to farmers.

⁹ For example, Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997) p. 490

But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your soul is required of you;
Here God is using the term soul in the sense of earthly life. Life is on loan from God.¹⁰ To leave God out of one’s reckoning about life is very foolish.

And *now* who will own what you have prepared?’

Certainly not the man’s soul—the goods could not prolong his life and they would eventually go to another.

So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

The man who concentrates on providing richly for himself, instead of focusing on God, is a fool.

And He said to His disciples, “For this reason I say to you,

In order that His followers might not be fools, Jesus counsels them to adopt a different attitude about even the basic necessities of life.

do not be anxious for *your* life, *as to* what you shall eat; nor for your body, *as to* what you shall put on.

The term above translated “soul” (ψυκη □) is here translated “life.” We should probably again understand physical, earthly life.

The need of basic food and clothing to sustain our earthly life should not be something that worries us or causes us anxiety. Jesus supported this command with the following argument.¹¹

For life is more than food, and the body than clothing.

Reason 1) The goal of life is not to eat and the purpose of the body is not to be a coat hanger.

Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; and they have no storeroom nor barn; and *yet* God feeds them;

Reason 2) Jesus argues by pointing to the experience of birds and wild plants. The raven is an insignificant bird in comparison to man. Yet, without their effort or planning for the future their needs are met by God.

how much more valuable you are than the birds!

By implication, if God cares for the lesser creatures, how much more will He provide for humans.

And which of you by being anxious can add a *single* cubit to your life’s span?

Reason 3) No matter how much anxiety we may expend, the important issue of life’s prolongation is not within our control, as the rich fool discovered.

It is said that Elizabeth I would have given her kingdom for another moment of time, but she died.

If then you cannot do even a very little thing, why are you anxious about other matters?

Anxiety does not advance a person in the most important issue (a small thing for God); what makes us think it helps in other matters?

¹⁰ Green’s note 45 on p. 491 draws attention to the fact that the verb ‘required’ is a translation from a form of απαιτέω “that can refer to the collection of a loan.”

¹¹ Green’s outline of the argument (pp. 492-493) is followed below.

Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; but I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these.

Jesus returns to His second reason. Lilies are wild flowers that are not significant in the world of plants. However, even the clothing of the most fabulously wealthy men cannot match their delicate beauty.

But if God so arrays the grass in the field, which is *alive* today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace,

These insignificant and short lived plants were used for fuel because of the scarcity of wood.¹² Still, God covers them with gorgeous beauty.

how much more *will he clothe* you, O men of little faith!

If such insignificant plants are provided for by God, how much more generously will he bedeck His highly valued creature, man?

Those Jesus addressed are not completely faithless. However, “O men of little faith!” seems to be a criticism of the lack of trust in God displayed by those anxious about their basic needs.

And do not seek what you shall eat, and what you shall drink, and do not keep worrying.

Summing up His argument, Jesus commands His disciples to stop making these existence issues a priority.

For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek;

“The nations of the world,” in the Jewish context of the day, referred to those peoples who were not of the Jewish religion. They were the pagans. Jesus’ hearers would understand Him to say that those who do not know God concentrate their efforts on providing for themselves.

but your Father knows that you need these things.

It is not that we don’t need food and clothing, God knows that we do. By implication, then, in contrast to those who have no knowledge of God, we can be confident of our God’s fatherly care.

We must recognize that Jesus is speaking here of ordinary life. There are some times in the service of God, during which His followers are subject to extreme suffering. History has shown, as in the Armenian genocide, that followers of Christ have died of starvation and exposure. Earlier in His teachings, Jesus had warned that His disciples would suffer horrible persecution and be killed. We must expect that sometimes our witness for Him will result in this type of suffering.

Moreover, sometimes believers have suffered the results of natural disasters along with their communities among whom they were living. Those Christians are examples of Christ’s identification in the suffering of mankind, on an earth reeling from the effects of man’s sin.

None of the above circumstances are avoidable through worry and anxiety. Our position should be one of trust in God’s love and care for us even in the most difficult times of suffering.

But seek for His kingdom,

We are liberated from anxiety to be occupied with serving God and His goals.¹³

¹² Most commentators (Plummer, p. 327; Nolan, pp. 693 and 695; and Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1981) p. 345) note this custom.

and these things shall be added unto you.”

God will provide everything that we need.

APPLICATION

Times of crisis are nothing new to the Armenian people. From the beginning of our history, we have endured wars and pillage, economic oppressions and genocide. We have been scattered around the world in our efforts to find relief and safe haven. Sometimes, we have been successful, and, for a while, have established thriving communities in places like Lebanon and America. We begin to feel secure and pour our efforts into amassing as much material wealth as our abilities permit. Then, once again, war, or natural disaster, or the collapse of a once proud and envied economy, leaves us with nothing but ashes in our hands and anxiety in our hearts.

Our reading shows us two ways of living: the way of the world and the way counseled by our Lord. The first leads to eternal loss and the other to true and lasting security, peace, and reward. The first seeks its own physical well-being above all else; the second finds security and joy in the knowledge that we have a loving Father in Whom we can safely trust, Who carries us through the darkest valleys and shows us our true purpose in His Kingdom.

The story of the wealthy landowner is a story of greed. It could be a parable about America and all those who have adopted the materialism of her culture around the globe. Not satisfied with enormous natural wealth, the culture of materialism will even fight wars to protect its ‘economic interests’. It delights in excessive consumerism to the detriment of the less fortunate in the world and even to our own planet.

The excessiveness of this lifestyle is never more apparent than in this season of the year. Retailers know that Christmas sales will be the most economically significant of the entire year. Therefore they have tried and succeeded in extending the period. Christmas window dressing is now occurring as early as October. Sadly, the reason for Christmas is no longer to honor Christ, Who is outlawed in the public schools and squares, but rather to fill the tills of the merchants and the closets of their customers.

Many may object that their generous spending is for their family and friends in the spirit of giving. Most should admit that they generally receive as much as they give to other adults, and that Christmas has become a gigantic exchange of purchases. Like the rich landowner, we have become a nation of fools, who lay up treasures for ourselves, and are not rich towards God. At any moment, our souls may be required of us, and then . . .? The destructiveness of materialism is manifested not just in those of us who live for the accumulation of excess but in those of us who are anxious about providing for basic needs and future security—in normal times, but especially in times of national and world economic crisis. Not simply the cost of food and clothing, but the cost of housing and health insurance, gasoline, the education of our children, the long term care of elderly

¹³ This excellent observation is by Green, p. 494.

dependents, and taxes—all these worries destroy our peace of mind, rob us of rest and consume our energies. Our entire life revolves around providing for these needs, and the perceived demands of the Christmas season only exacerbates our situation.

Jesus calls us to see things as they really are. What is life really about? What is really needful? What should our life revolve around? Where does true security lie? Jesus calls us to see that the answer to all these questions is God. God is our reason for being. Our relationship with God is what we really need. Our life should revolve around Him; He must be at the center of our life. His goals should be our focus. He is our security.

When this is true of us we will realize that all anxiety about our needs is a waste of time and brands us as “men of little faith.” It is not that He is calling us to a life of irresponsibility and laziness. He is not calling us to forsake our work that earns our living and enables us to help others. That is definitely not the point. However, He is calling us to lay aside our anxiety and our preoccupation with our own needs. Our fears and worries over the future are needless because He loves us and will make sure we have everything that we truly need.

Freed from preoccupation with ourselves and the vulnerability to vain consumerism, we can focus on what is so important—now and for all eternity—the kingdom of God. From our abundance we can reach out to the disadvantaged and poor, both physically and spiritually. We can support the ministry of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ here and to all the nations. We can look forward to this wondrous season in thankfulness and joy remembering all the Good that our blessed Father has, with unbounded extravagance, heaped upon us.

“If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?”¹⁴

¹⁴Romans 8:31-32