

September 22, 2019 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Luke 21:34–38](#)

TITLE: An Unburdened Heart

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

I always shake hands after the Sunday service as people are leaving. Someone recently stopped me and said, “I appreciate that when you are giving your benediction, you often say ‘Be not afraid.’ Those are words we need to hear today.” I don’t have a formal benediction I say every week, but I guess I do often repeat the phrase “Be not afraid.” It’s something Jesus often said and the angels said a lot when they were talking about Jesus. It is a phrase we need to hear today because many of us are living with fear and anxiety—with burdened hearts, which is precisely what Jesus wants us to be free of.

Luke 21:34 opens with these words—*Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with...the worries of this life*. Being overly preoccupied about the things of this life is one sure way to lose focus on the things related to God’s realm that includes both earth and heaven, right now and time yet to come. Remember the old parable Jesus told about the sower sowing seeds? Some wheat seeds were scattered broadly. Some landed on rocky soil and couldn’t put down roots; some landed on good soil and brought forth a rich harvest. Some landed among thorns and weeds, which represented the cares of the world that choked off the young plants so that couldn’t yield anything. What was true back then is still true today.

In Luke 21 Jesus mentioned three of these spiritual weeds: dissipation, drunkenness and worries of this life. Dissipation is a breaking down of things that matter—abandoning the virtues of life and descending into anarchy, debauchery and despair. Drunkenness is pretty self-explanatory. It stands for that tendency to deaden our minds and souls through alcohol, drugs, porn, mindless pursuits and distractions that cause us to waste away. Worries of the world: this category seems harder to avoid than the other two. We all have things we worry about: politics, war, the environment, the safety of ourselves and those we love. Jesus is not suggesting that simply by focusing on God’s kingdom we can walk through our days worry-free. But he does offer a message of hope that counters the fear, doubts and discouragement so prevalent around us.

First, a quick word study. Near the beginning of John’s gospel, John the Baptist looks up and sees Jesus walking by. He proclaims, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29) Sin is a bad thing, so taking it away is a good thing. But “take” is not a very vivid verb. You can take something bad and throw it away, like trash. You take something from a baby that might hurt her. But the Greek verb for “take away” can also be translated as “to lift.”¹ *Behold the Lamb of God who lifts from us the sin of the world.* That is much more vivid. Imagine being pinned to the ground by sin or despair and Christ lifts the burden off of you. Imagine being weighed down with fear and hopelessness and Jesus lifts that weight off you so you can stand up straight once more.

Back in Luke 13, we read about when Jesus healed a woman who'd been bent and crippled for 18 years. By laying hands on her, the woman could finally stand up straight and look people in the eye as an equal once more. To trust in Christ is to allow him to lift off whatever has been burdening you and weighing you down. This lets you breathe again - move and act again—think and choose that which brings you life, instead of always feeling burdened and hopeless.

Second, Presbyterians talk a lot about God's providence—God's desire to lift off our burdens and move us toward faithful, meaningful life together. Marilynne Robinson, in her last novel, describes God's providence this way. She wrote, "A parent holds out hands to a child who is learning to walk, and comforts the child with words [of encouragement]. The parent lets the child feel the risk it is taking, ...knowing it is in the nature of the child to walk. Just as it is its nature to want the attention and encouragement of the parent. And just as it is in the nature of the parent to give such comfort."² God in Christ lifts off the sin, the burdens that weigh us down. Then this providential, loving God extends arms to us to encourage us to walk by faith. Like an unsteady toddler, we feel the risk in every step—but it is in our nature to walk toward God. Unsure where to go, we listen for God's guidance, for built into us is this desire to want the encouragement of knowing we are leading a virtuous life. Just as it is God's nature to love us and want to give this love. Far surpassing the reality of this world's troubles and worries is a greater reality: God lifts our burdens and calls us to walk forward by faith.

If we hold onto this good news, it changes how we deal with the worries and woes of this world. It allows us to silence the voices that would convince us that we are worthless, that we are "less than" because we now trust in Christ who loves us unconditionally. This good news brings healing to women young and old too long held captive to memories of abuse, allowing them to tell their #metoo stories confident that the light of Christ is stronger than all darkness of sexual injustice. This good news pulls back the curtain on false powers that try to profit off of fear-mongering and blame-casting—the voices that insist more guns are needed to bring peace, more prisons are needed to create justice, more stuff needs to be bought and sold to create happiness for our capitalism-addicted souls. By opening our eyes each morning aware that Christ lifts the burdens from our spirit and is with us as we walk by faith, we are able to hold onto the gospel good news captured in the short phrase "Be not afraid."

A couple weeks ago the newspaper reported on an important effort underway in Seattle to correct the abuses of America's flawed war on drugs.³ We arrest Americans every 25 seconds for drug possession, yet our policies of mass incarceration have neither stopped the rising tide of narcotic abuse nor offered any grace or hope to those swept up by these punitive policies. Overdose deaths have surged and the drug crisis currently costs us over \$500 billion a year. And our drug laws unfairly target people of color and the poor. Seattle has moved to decriminalize possessing small amounts of illegal drugs, diverting those caught to social service programs. It is not cheap, but it is cheaper than prisons, court costs, and paying the toll violent crimes take on victims and perpetrators alike.

Progress came to Seattle when their new district attorney, Dan Satterberg, happened to be a man whose sister Shelley died from drug addiction. She'd never been arrested or jailed, since middle-class white youth often avoid police attention. But her addiction eventually destroyed her. Satterberg said, "What Shelley needed was not a jail cell or a judge wagging a finger at her, but more supportive services." Addicts need to stop being seen as weak people best swept off the streets and into jail, and recognized as sons and daughters deserving of treatment and help in order to get back some semblance of a normal life.

The weeds of this world are designed to choke off our spirits of trust, hope and forgiveness. The worries of this world try to burden us down, causing us to pull back into our own protective shells. We are falsely told that we are always at risk and things are ever getting worse. We become convinced we must pull back from others—especially those who are different or distant or in need. Jesus offers a correction for all this. He unburdens our hearts, just as he healed the woman bent over and lame so she could stand up straight and see a new horizon. Jesus replaces the nearsighted landscape of our personal life with the farsighted vision of the geography of God—stretching from this world to a coming world. And thankfully Jesus turns off the frantic voices on social media and cable TV for a moment, so we can hear his refrain of reassurance: "My child, be not afraid."

How shall we go forth into this world, knowing full well that it contains much that is broken and worrisome and contrary to God's loving will? Shall we gird ourselves with armor, with sword and shield, trusting in metal and military might to protect us? Are we to do battle against foes that seem to grow bigger and more intractable every day? There is work to be done—demons to be confronted. But I don't see us as soldiers for Christ. The image that sustains me is that of a midwife helping a new world that is yearning to be born. As Paul said in Romans 8, *creation is groaning in labor pains, longing to be set free from its bondage to decay and to obtain the freedom of the glory of God*. We are midwives—literally crouched beside those in pain, offering words of encouragement, partners in the birthing of a new world full of promise, hope and joy. The miracle ultimately is God's, but we are midwives called to wash these children, wrap them in blankets, feed and protect them, faithful and unafraid.

Sometimes these newborns are ideas—ideas that push back on the darkness of racism, violence, and dissipating waste. Often these newborns energize us—giving purpose to our days and correcting all drunkenness and despair that makes our days seem hopeless. And always these newborns directly counter the worries of the world—because each day, each newly unburdened heart is a gift of God freely given for one simple reason: that none of us might be afraid. We are midwives for Christ. We are set free for life-giving service for ourselves and one another. That's a job description worth taking to heart. AMEN.

¹ Cf. "The lifting of our sin," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, article by Jana Childers.

² Marilynne Robinson, *Lila*, 2014, p. 76. (adjusted for inclusivity)

³ Nicholas Kristof, "Ending the War on Drugs," *New York Times*, August 25, 2019, p. SR 7.