

“In Times like These”

Trust in the Lord always, for the Lord God is the eternal Rock (Isaiah 26:4).

Psalm 91:1-2, 7-11; Habakkuk 3:17-19; **Matthew 6:25-34** ¹

Well, here we are on the far side of Resurrection Day, headed toward Pentecost. We're more than ninety days into COVID-19,² which as of this morning, had taken over 23,000 lives in the U.S. and over 125,000 lives worldwide. We've all been isolated and quarantined for nearly a month, and we're feeling the effects of that isolation.

Pretty much the whole planet has shut down in an attempt to control this pandemic, something unprecedented in human history. The resulting economic fallout began to be felt at once, but its extent may not be fully known for years. Nearly 20 million Americans have filed for unemployment as their employers reduce staff, shut down, or go broke.

Beyond this, as we share this time together this morning, America is nearing the twenty-year mark in our war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, the longest ongoing war in our history. North Korea continues the “saber rattling” of its nuclear missiles.

China continues to try to steal the entire South China Sea. Russia has stolen Crimea, half of Ukraine, and has other thefts in mind. The Philippines are being ruled by a tyrant who executes his countrymen and rejects the West. Syria's President continues to kill his own people and turn his nation into wasteland. Saudi Arabia continues to repress its women and is destroying Yemen.

Oil prices have tanked in a price war. China and the U.S. are in a trade war. The European Union and NATO are unravelling. Democracy is in trouble all over the globe.

Our country's transition from an industrial to an information society has created deep chasms in our social structure and deep, rancorous rifts among our citizens. It seems that nobody trusts anybody any more.

If this weren't enough, economic disparities between rich and poor continue to become ever wider, not just here, but around the world. Our retirement funds and investments, having never recovered from 2008, now face a global recession of unimagined magnitude.

Though you and I have spent almost every waking minute of our lives trying to conquer our feelings of finitude and vulnerability, in such times as these we're painfully and frighteningly aware of being overwhelmed. And in such fearful times as these, we gather in worship to ask, “**Is there any word from the Lord**” (Jeremiah 37:17)?

Thankfully, there is. In Psalm 91, the psalmist proclaimed that “*Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. This I declare about the LORD: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; he is my God, and I trust him.*”

And the LORD replies, “*I will rescue those who love me. I will protect those who trust in my name. When they call on me, I will answer; I will be with them in trouble. I will rescue them and honor them. I will reward them with a long life and give them my salvation*” (91:1-2, 14-16).

Well, so what does it mean to make God our refuge and shelter, to really trust God? What does that look like in real life? What does that look like during a pandemic? While what such

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on 4.19.20, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

² It was first recognized in Wuhan, China on December 31, 2019.

trust looks like for you may be a little different from what it looks like for me, the Bible does identify some central themes about trusting God.

On the national level, for example, trusting God means more than putting “In God We Trust” on our money. The psalmist wrote, “***Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God***” (Psalm 20:7).

That’s nice to say, but when I watch thousands of people lustily sing “I’m proud to be an American” at sporting events with fighter jets roaring overhead, I find myself wondering about the real nature of our boasting. It’s awfully easy to put our practical, gut-level trust in drones and GPS-guided bombs instead of God-guided prayer, even for church folks.

On a personal level, trusting God has a lot to do with what we usually call “worry,” and worry has a lot to do with fear. We don’t think about fear very much, because thinking about fear often causes us to feel it, and we don’t *like* to feel fear.

Fear, of course, is a God-given emotion. Fear is not a bad thing in itself . . . unless it begins to control our lives. And as is true with most of the “*sin that so easily entangles*” us (Hebrews 12:1), fear doesn’t usually control our lives at the level of obvious terror. Terror has an objective referent with which we can effectively grapple. It has a focus and a solution. That’s too easy.

No, the fear that undermines our lives and that is evidence of our trusting something besides God for our security usually takes the more subtle form of anxiety or worry. Worry has only a vague referent. It’s hard to get a grip on worry. Worry has no focus and no solution.

We have recently been blessed to dedicate two babies in our congregation, and young children frequently provide opportunity for worry. Consider this scenario. You’ve heard this before, but it makes the point well:

“My son seems a little slow taking his first steps. That means he’ll probably have a hard time playing with the other children when he goes to preschool. That means he won’t have many friends in elementary school, and he’ll be a wall flower in high school. School will be such a bad experience for him that he’ll certainly never go to college.

“That means he’ll be stuck working in fast food all his life, which means that he won’t ever make enough money to live on his own. That means that he’ll have to live with us, because no young woman is going to want to marry a guy like that. His living with us will be such a strain that our marriage will be damaged, and our retirement—if we ever get to retire—will be a disaster.”

Have you ever experienced a train of thought like that? I’m sure you realize that a similar scenario could be developed about just about anything imaginable.

As we continue our Journey through the Bible and arrive at the Gospel of Matthew, we should perhaps remind ourselves that Jesus didn’t mince words about worry. I’m sure you remember what He said about it: “*Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?*” (Matthew 6:25-27).

Jesus spoke about the flowers and the animals as one who knew them well and loved them deeply. And because He did, it’s easy for us to slip into thinking that Jesus was simply a

country bumpkin of a bygone age, with very little to say to a post-industrial, post-Christian, virus-plagued world. This is 2020, we say, and in times like these, in the middle of a financial collapse and a global pandemic, all that stuff about birds and flowers fails to come to grips with the real world!

But here's the thing: life in the Galilee of Jesus' day was no paradise. The people of that day had to live with burdens and dangers not unlike our own, and on top of those, they had to live under the calloused and cruel eyes of an occupying army. The death penalty was commonplace, and extra-judicial killings were the order of the day. Theirs was a time of terrorism, a time of hate, a time of uncertainty, a time of stalking death—a time that was actually quite like our own.

And so it was to a world not very unlike ours that Jesus said, "To be constantly worrying about food and clothes, even in times like these, is to miss the real meaning of life. If you'd only slow your frenzy, turn off your phone, and listen to the world of growing things, you could touch the pulse of eternity and discover the Secret of a Peaceful Heart. And that Secret is that you have a Father who is able, Who can be trusted to supply your needs! Your one concern should be His Kingdom. Leave everything else in His hands."

The sheer simplicity of Jesus' words challenges and perplexes us. Jesus unsettles our busy rules and regulations. Who will say that we don't need this teaching? We who take out insurance policies to cover almost every contingency—responsibility demands it—we who are so concerned about our livelihood that we have lost the art of living, we DO need to be reminded to trust God more.

At the same time, it's important to note that Jesus didn't tell us to quit work and wait for God to put bread in our mouths and clothes on our backs. He knew—had He not worked as a carpenter?—that human labor is needed to make God's gifts our own. Far from being idle, Jesus' life was full and active. Idleness is neither for the Christian nor for the birds.

The point Jesus made isn't that the birds don't work. His point is that they don't worry. His warning isn't against concern and effort with respect to legitimate problems and needs, but against going to pieces over them.

Animals do not seem to participate in our straining to see the unknowable future. Animals don't buy into our efforts to get all we can, can all we get, and sit on the can. They make provision for the winter, to be sure, but they don't go to pieces over it.

One of my favorite little ditties is this one: "Said the Robin to the Sparrow, 'I would really like to know, why these worried-looking humans rush about and hurry so.' Said the Sparrow to the Robin, 'Well, I think that it must be that they have no heavenly Father such as cares for you and me.'"

My friends, in times like these, you and I need to face the fact that our homes, our health, our families, our standard of living, and our nation cannot be made absolutely secure, and we must learn to trust that God will provide for us what is *necessary*. We are actually commanded to deploy such trust, but it's a difficult command to obey, isn't it? Let me suggest three principles for trusting God in times like these.

#1 Worry Doesn't Help. Jesus told those who followed Him that they should count the cost of the ventures they undertook in life. It's not ordinary, prudent foresight, such as is necessary for life, that Jesus forbids—it's worry.

Jesus told us that "*the cares of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for nice things*"

choke the Good News (Mark 4:19). Jesus didn't advocate a shiftless, thriftless, reckless, thoughtless approach to life. Jesus warned against a care-worn, worried fear, a nervous anxiety that takes all the joy out of life. Jesus was talking about being worried to distraction.

And Jesus was right (of course). The truth of the matter is that worry is useless. It doesn't improve our situation at all; in fact, by nearly any measure, worry makes things worse. The worry that wears out the mind wears out the body along with it. Worry degrades our judgment, increases mental stress and cardiovascular damage, and renders us progressively incapable of dealing with life.

While worry can't add even an hour to our lives, it is quite able to subtract hours, days, and even years from our lives. The first principle to hold onto is that **worry doesn't help**.

#2 God still guides the Cosmos. Psalm 91 records God's promise that "*I will rescue those who love me. I will protect those who trust in my name. When they call on me, I will answer; I will be with them in trouble. I will rescue them and honor them. I will reward them with a long life and give them my salvation*" (Psalm 91:14-16). That sounds good, and it is good; but the protection God promises to those who trust Him, the protection that frees us from worry and from fear, is actually quite different from what we expect.

The protection God offers us in these frightening times is a protection that focuses on the Main Story of Eternity, not on its Preface, which is what our life on earth actually is. Paul wrote that "*our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. . . . For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*"

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17-18). There's a New Creation coming, and as Jesus told His disciples, so He tells us, "**When everything is ready, I will come and get you**" (John 14:3, NLT).

Jesus told us in Matthew 6 that while worry might be expected of an unbeliever who believes in a jealous, capricious, angry, unpredictable God, or even in no God at all, such distrust is incomprehensible in one who has learned to know God as a loving, faithful and trustworthy Father.

Worry isn't caused by external circumstances, after all. In identical circumstances, one person can be absolutely serene, while another is "worried to death." Both worry and serenity come, not from circumstances, but from the heart.

Isaiah described our situation long ago, "*You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, whose thoughts are fixed on you. Trust in the Lord always, for the Lord God is the eternal Rock*" (26:3-4). The second principle to remember is that **God still guides the Cosmos**.

#3 Get Your Priorities Straight. Jesus offered us two ways to defeat worry in Matthew 6. First, He told us that worry can be conquered by developing the art of living one day at a time (v. 34). The basic idea is that, after taking reasonable care, we do well to face life trustingly, accepting each day as a gift from God, and leaving the unknown future in the care of a loving Father who guides the Cosmos to its appointed end.

The second, and perhaps more important, principle is to desire, above all else, that God's Kingdom come and that God's will be done. Jesus told us that to concentrate on doing God's will is to defeat worry.

We already know how a passionate, focused desire can drive out every other concern in our lives. Such a love, such a purpose, can inspire our work, intensify our study, clarify our priorities, and dominate our whole being. Jesus reminded us that it's much more difficult to experience worry when God's purposes become the central focus of our lives.

The Bible says, "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 4:6-7).

So, given these things, let me try my opening remarks once more: *Even though* China is trying to steal the entire South China Sea; *even though* Russia has stolen Crimea and half of Ukraine; *even though* the Philippines are being ruled by a tyrant who promises to execute thousands of his countrymen; *even though* North Korea brings the world to the edge of nuclear war; *even though* Iran continues to export trouble and to work on nuclear weapons; *even though* the EU and NATO are unravelling; *even though* COVID-19 has been set loose on the earth, **yet we will rejoice in the Lord**. We will be joyful in the God of our salvation. Our God will bring us through, not "somehow," but triumphantly!³

Ruth Caye Jones put it this way in 1944, even as World War II raged on long ago:

*In times like these you need a Savior,
In times like these you need an anchor.
Be very sure, be very sure,
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!*

*This Rock is Jesus, yes, He's the One:
The Rock is Jesus, the only One!
Be very sure, be very sure,
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!*

My friends, there may be greater sins than worry, but there is perhaps no more disabling sin. "*Don't worry about tomorrow.*" This is Jesus' command, and this is the way, not only to Peace, but also to Power.

*In times like these,
Worry Doesn't Help.
God still guides the Cosmos.
Get Your Priorities Straight!*

Faith, not Fear!

Pray on.

³ See Habakkuk 3:17-19.