

Message: "Worry's Worst Side Effect"

Scripture: Luke 24:13-35

¹³Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" ¹⁹He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." ²⁵Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. ²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

You've heard of Alcoholics Anonymous, Alanon, Alateen, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, and other such groups? We usually refer to such groups by their acronyms, such as AA for Alcoholics Anonymous or OA for Overeaters Anonymous or GA for Gamblers Anonymous. Well, it may surprise you to learn that I am a member of OTA, which stands for Over Thinkers Anonymous. Anyone here belong to that group? I know it's anonymous so you wouldn't want to tell.....but I'm willing to bet pretty much everyone here is a member of OTA, for you are people of faith, and faith often invites overthinking. It invites overthinking because of the mysterious nature of our God and the high expectations Jesus shared for living out our faith. It's easy for people of conscience to overthink things simply because we really don't want to mess things up in our own lives or in the lives of others.

So I'm a member of Over Thinkers Anonymous - and my overthinking was very much in effect as I dealt with a recent traumatic experience.

Many of you know that our house received significant damage on December 17th of last year after a violent windstorm blew our neighbor's tree onto our house

- I think I even showed you pictures of the damage (here they are again...). The journey to have that damage repaired was quite drawn out; six contractors stopped by to surmise the damage and give me an estimate for repair; initially they all said the same thing: "Looks pretty bad." What I heard them say was "Looks pretty expensive," and I was right - over the next month or so, we had estimates given for the repair that varied between \$8,100 and \$53,000; I need not tell you that my worry meter went off the scale several times. Added to this was the non-committal nature of the contractors' scheduling possibilities when asked about when they could get the work done - they mentioned possibly this summer (with emphasis upon "possibly") to sometime within the next decade, which, again, made my worry meter jump into the red zone. After a few months of this, I was worrying about the structural integrity of the garage trusses getting worse; I was worrying about the water seeping into the damaged areas from rain and snow causing further damage; I was worrying that each storm was causing more damage to the compromised areas; I was worrying about tariffs causing amplified costs for materials the longer this took; I was worrying about squirrels finding new homes in the damaged areas of exposed wood; I was worrying about my neighbors thinking I've decided to decorate my home in some new modernistic style.....my worries began to take on a life of their own.

This kind of thing ever happen to you? Have you ever found yourself on the worry Hamster wheel? It's not a good place to be.

Well, this went on until I finally decided to look into it myself. I reminded myself that I have a degree in Civil Engineering which should amount to something; I reminded myself that I'm fairly good with tools and haven't fallen off a ladder for a long time; I reminded myself that, often, when something has a lot of unknowns or variations about it, it is good to postpone judgement or assessment until further information and better information is acquired. And I reminded myself that I am as capable as anyone else in asking relevant questions that have the potential to lead to helpful answers. In short, I decided to pay fuller attention to the damage myself.

So I got up on a ladder myself and started peeling away at the damage to see just how bad things were - and discovered they weren't very bad at all. There was much less damage than the contractors had estimated. The trusses were intact, the plywood base under the shingles was unaffected, there had been no leakage and no further damage, and it became clear that the job was well within my capabilities to address. In other words, I discovered that 97.3% of my

worries were unfounded once I paid a fuller attention to what was before me. (And just to prove it, here's a before and after picture of my roof:)

Did you hear the truth that set me free from my worry? It has everything to do with paying a fuller attention to what is before us, seeing more deeply the reality surrounding us. For in truth, we sometimes do not go very far along that path; we let our fears fill in the gaps of our awareness, we give unsubstantiated pessimism a priority ear, and we allow ourselves to be blinded by anxiety as a result. But paying fuller attention has much power to expose the shadow nature of many fears. Moving from the condition of my roof to the condition of humanity in general, paying greater attention to our fears can give us greater control over them, to see them much more for what they are, and what can or cannot be done about them. But how we pay attention matters greatly. It's not just paying fuller visual attention or observational attention, what the eyes see or the mind registers, but paying a fuller spiritual attention and a fuller rational attention and a fuller conscientious attention and a fuller ethical attention to what's happening around us and within us. Until we look at our fears in these ways, we remain their hostage; we are very susceptible to life-controlling worry. But once we bring such attentions to bear, even if the fear remains, it loses the potency of remaining in darkness, where all monsters grow; paying fuller attention sheds the light of understanding and awareness upon what one has been blind to - key ingredients needed to effectively address what one worries about.

This places us directly into the setting of our passage today. The scriptural scene unfolds with two disciples who are walking the road to Emmaus after having experienced the trauma of the last several days which follow the trajectory of our Holy Week remembrances. They and many others had followed Jesus for some time; they had wrestled with his teachings and marveled at his healings and wondered at his wisdom and shuddered at his chastisements and celebrated his love; in all of this they recognized the unmistakable presence and activity of God, touching them corporately and personally, as God's presence always does. But then they had seen all of that come crashing down as he was apprehended and tortured and vilified by the authorities, finally crucified in horrendous agony and insulting humiliation, leaving those who followed in his wake lost, confused, and wondering what the hell happened. They felt deserted by God. It is no wonder they couldn't see God even when God showed up in person; so very much had gone wrong that they were blinded by worry.

We can relate to that, I believe, if we are human and paying attention to the wrongness of things in our world, for there are so very many things to worry about today. We have unhinged leadership running things in our country, with a president who posts an image of himself as Jesus, with a Secretary of Defense praying to God that every bullet finds its target in the illegal violence we started in Iran, we have a feud between our president and the Pope over whether or not war is a bad thing (and let me just say that I am with Pope Leo on this one!), we have escalating horrors happening at ICE detention facilities with documented beatings, tortures, suicides, and murders, we have continued obfuscation of truth with the Epstein files still being hidden from accountability entities.....who's not worried about these things? And, should we not be worried about these things?

Yes, but not to the point they cause us to lose our way; not to the point they blind us to what also lay before us - a God who simply won't leave us alone. And this is a good thing, the greatest of things, a God who stays with us even when we stray from him; even when we do not see God or feel God or sense God or hear God, God has never left our side. It is important to keep this in mind, for when we cannot feel or sense God is the exact time we need to trust that God is nonetheless present and waiting to be found. Now, that's not quite right; it's more the case that, when we cannot feel or sense God, it takes trust that God is wanting to help us feel or sense that presence, wanting to help us move from this distractive world of human limitation to a truer reality the world cannot comprehend on its own. It is God who patiently and lovingly waits for us to look up from our distracted worries to discover what God offers in Jesus - a different way of being in the world that does not count on the world for the things that matter. No worry can withstand such a revelation when it is taken to heart.

The good news Jesus came to share is that we need not become trapped by our worries; we need not give them control of our thinking or our believing or our living. We need not give them the power they do not possess nor deserve. Jesus came to the world to free us from the fear that would undo us, and replace it with a hope that will remake us, if we give it our fuller attention.

So then, is something worrying you? Are many things worrying you? That's alright; it is good to be aware of things that are wrong, and this naturally should worry us. But worry is meant to be a land traveled through, not lived in. Look both at and beyond the things that worry you; study, scrutinize, problem-solve, explore, test, and otherwise examine your worries; but at the same time, employ

all the forces at your disposal given by faith to meet those worries head on. Look up from the ground of your despair, and search for the presence of God around you, before you and behind you, above you and below you; look at the stranger who may embody grace; look at the situation from a different angle prompted by possibility; consider the things you took for granted, and reassess. Add God into the mix of all of these things; seek Jesus as if he is already before you. Do everything you can to meet your worry with faith, knowing that faith can always meet worry on its own ground. Keep on the road, aware of who travels with you, always.