Sermon 02-23-20

Sickness, Growing Old and Death

John 11:25-26, I Corinthians 15:54 and Proverbs 19:23

**Sermon Starter**

Sometime around 2,500 years ago, Siddhartha Gautama was born. You know him as *the* Buddha. He was the son of a tribal chief, a part of the ruling class in what is today southern Nepal or northern India. He lived as a prince, sheltered from the world. But at the age of 29 he felt compelled to leave the palace and the protected life in order to meet the people over whom he was to rule. Upon leaving the palace he encountered a sick man. He’d never seen illness before, and it troubled him. He asked, “Is this the fate of all people?” Later he saw an old man, frail and bent over, and it troubled him, and he asked, “Is this, too, the fate of all people – are we all destined to grow old?” Later he saw a funeral procession with the body of the deceased. This troubled him greatly, and he asked, “Is this, too, the fate of all people?” He experienced the most fundamental of all anxieties, worries or fears and this sent him on a quest for answers.

The 19th century existentialist philosophers have a word for the deeply troubling feelings Siddhartha experienced, a German word, they called it **GRAPHIC: ANGST**. The German word comes from the Greek word **GRAPHIC: *ANGXO*** which means to strangle as if one can’t breathe. It is the Greek root of the words anxiety and anxious.

Like Siddhartha, most of us have moments when we struggle with anxiety about getting sick, growing old and dying. The Buddha’s philosophy for addressing these fears and suffering in life is called Buddhism, and I appreciate much of what the Buddha taught, parts are very similar to aspects of Christian spirituality. But the Christian gospel offers something else, an affirmation that utterly defeats death, and with it our fear of old age and sickness.

**I. Sickness**

Let’s begin by recognizing that what we’re really talking about, is not sickness, growing old and dying, but the fear of these things. We’re all going to get sick, grow old and die. There is no avoiding that. But when Siddhartha experienced anxiety upon seeing a sick man, an elderly man and a corpse he was in his late twenties and in good health. It was the fear of these things that troubled him so.

We’ve learned about the body’s early warning system, and how a specific part of the brain is constantly surveying inputs to make sure we’re okay and there is no sign of danger. When something happens to our body that is unexpected, it might tell the rest of the brain, “Hey, there’s something going on here, you’d better get it checked out.” But our imagination is a part of the early warning system – it typically helps by taking what our brain has flagged and imagining the worst. The fact that you have a fleeting thought that whatever you’re feeling might be something bad, is normal. That’s where our powers of reason are meant to step in, evaluate the threat, and either determine “It’s no big deal,” or “Well maybe, we better go see the doctor.” But in our health obsessed culture, we’re inclined to magnify the threat level.

In times past people went to the doctor only when they were really sick. People didn’t go for annual physicals or health “check-ups” until the 1920’s. Run enough tests, you’ll find something that is a little off – a bit like taking your car into the shop. We’re also encouraged daily to self-diagnose medical problems we would not have thought of when we see the television ads for drugs. The Nielson ratings organization estimates that 80 commercials for medications run on TV *every hour.[[1]](#footnote-1)* $4.5 billion is spent annually in direct marketing to us by drug companies.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Then there is the Internet where we have access to more health information than at any time in human history. You feel something, go online and diagnose yourself. This meme captures it well: **GRAPHIC: GOOGLE: CREATING HYPOCHONDRIACS SINCE 1998.** Hypochondria is defined as having an irrational fear of being really sick.

Often our fears of getting sick come from how data is presented. The American Cancer Society, notes that men have a 1 in 4 chance of dying of cancer. Women, it is 1 in 5. That’s really scary and we already fear cancer. So, the number for men is actually 22%, which is a bit lower than 25% but who’s counting? Now, let’s take out the number who are smokers, that drops the number down, for men, to 15%. So, non-smoking men, you have an 85% chance of NOT dying of cancer. That actually doesn’t sound so scary any more. Ladies, your odds are even better. We’re often not told that the average age of a cancer diagnosis is 70 and death is 73 – so, for the 15% who are going to die of cancer, most die of cancer in their 70’s. The odds of dying of cancer before your 60th birthday is .5%. Said another way, your odds of **NOT** dying of cancer are 99.5%. For women, the odds are even better.

Here’s the point – we can worry about a lot of things that are unlikely to happen to us. For our present purposes, I’d offer this definition of worry: **GRAPHIC:** **Worry is imagining a negative future that may never happen.** Jesus addresses this in the Sermon on the Mount. **GRAPHIC: “Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life?”** (Matthew 6:27). He goes on to say, **GRAPHIC: “Therefore, stop worrying about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself.”** In other words, don’t drag the things that might or could happen in the future into your present.

But how do we refrain from worrying about tomorrow and what might happen? Buddhist, Christians and therapists of all kinds agree that the key to his is something called **GRAPHIC: MINDFULNESS**. Mindfulness is about neither living in the past, nor the future, but living in the present. You are not sick yet. So, don’t ruin today worrying about a sickness that might never come in the future.

Part of what I like about mindfulness and living in the present is that if you do – if you are paying attention – you might just see God and hear God and find yourself in the middle of God moments that free you from fear. **GRAPHIC: In a book by Hallie Lord called, *On the Other Side of Fear* *How I Found Peace,*** *s*he tells a touching story of a summer day in Alabama when she and her three kids were on the way to the airport. She was on I-10 and saw something on the side of the road that was odd. For some reason, she felt compelled to pull over. When she did what she found were three monks – Dominican friars from France who had come to the United States and were on their way to Kansas City of all places to help build a monastery there.

She asked if they needed something and they asked if she could take them as far as she was going down the road. A bit uncertain, she decided to invite these French monks into her car – a two door Saturn that already had four children in it. She noted they tossed their backpacks in the trunk and somehow squeezed into the car – I can’t quite picture eight people in her little car. But they squeezed in with children on laps, and not nearly enough seatbelts. She describes the journey as though “the Holy Spirit himself had managed to squeeze himself into my car.”

When it was finally time to let them off, she offered them money to help on their journey. They refused. Then she offered them a half-eaten sack of trail mix. They said in their French accent, “Oh, yes! Absolutely! Does it have M&M’s in it by any chance?” She noted that a look of glee “danced across their faces” when she assured them it did. As she climbed back into the car they asked if they might sing a hymn for her. And there, around the car, they sang, “May God bless You and Keep You.” Hallie noted she started crying and kept crying as she drove down the road. She noted that she’d been through some very hard times in the previous few years – times that left her thinking God didn’t love her. She wrote, “But then he sent his friars to me…during which God chanted, “I love you my daughter. I love you. Can you feel it now?”[[3]](#footnote-3)

I wondered how many thousands of cars drove by that day and missed God showing up in the form of three Dominican Friars? The key to seeing God, to sensing his daily care, is paying attention and living in the moment. Let me remind you again of the words of Jesus, **GRAPHIC: “Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life?”** (Matthew 6:27). He goes on to say, **GRAPHIC: “Therefore, stop worrying about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself.”**

**II. Growing Old**

It’s not just sickness we fear. We fear growing old too. We fear it in so many ways and for so many reasons. We fear becoming obsolete or irrelevant. We fear looking old. We are a society that seems to value youth, and we desperately want to postpone growing old, and looking old. All of this starts fairly young.

Some of the fears we have about getting older, particularly when we are at midlife, are unfounded, but we believe them nonetheless. Let me test this one out – how many of you have moments when you can’t remember a word, or someone’s name and you’ve said or wondered – half-joking, half serious, whether you’ve got early onset Alzheimer’s? For those 45 to 65, the chance that you don’t have early onset Alzheimer’s is 99.75%.[[4]](#footnote-4)

I think we fear that the older we get the less happy we’ll be. I found this chart interesting, the source of the data was Nielsen, and it shows self-reported happiness from 18 to 82+. **GRAPHIC: SELF-REPORTED WELL-BEING** I find this amazing – our happiness drops and hits a low – still 6.3 out of 10 – but hits a low around 50 years of age, and it gets better each year after that so that the happiest people are not the young adults, but the senior adults in their 80’s! It appears that if we keep our health, we might actually say with Robert Browning, “Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be.”

We certainly see this in scripture when we notice the sheer number of people whom God uses well beyond their 60’s – in fact, many of the heroic figures in scripture were what today we would call “senior adults.” And I love the promise of God in Joel 2:28, repeated in Acts 2, **GRAPHIC: I will pour out my spirit upon everyone; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams.** That is, particularly in our old age God will continue to fill us with his Spirit and speak to us in dreams, dreams of God’s will for our lives and for his people. How important it is that those of us who are not yet “old” listen for the dreams of our elders, and that those who are elders listen to the visions of those who are younger.

**III. Death**

That brings us to the real issue, underlying our fear of getting sick and our fear of growing older: our fear of DEATH. We’re all going to die. According to the actuarial tables, most of us will live to be at least 80. If you are 80 the IRS predicts you’ll make it to 88 or 89 if you are a woman. If you make it to 88 the IRS charts say you’re likely going to make it to 92 if you are a man or 94 if you are a woman. If you make it to 92, you’ll likely make it to 95…and this continues until, if you make it to 120, their actuarial tables run out of space! But we are all going to die.

Here the Buddha and Jesus start off in similar ways – both say that we’re not to cling to this world. We’re to hold it loosely. This non-attachment, the Buddhist says, helps alleviate fear. I see how that could help and the idea is consistent with Christian spirituality in ways. And in Buddhism there is the belief in reincarnation so you might return to this life as someone or something else.

Christ offers a different response to the universality of death. When he saw his friend, Mary, grieving the death of her brother Lazarus, **GRAPHIC: Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live; even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”** He tells us that death has been defeated. We don’t return to repeat the lessons of this life only with different people. We die and are resurrected.

This is what Paul notes in his powerful assertions in the 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians, drawing upon the prophets and interpreting them in the light of Jesus’ own resurrection, he writes, **GRAPHICS: When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”**

Easter is God’s answer to our deepest fear. God came and walked among us in Jesus, who suffered and died, and was buried, ***but on the third day he rose from the grave!*** We are resurrection people. On the day when Christ stepped out of the tomb humanity’s greatest enemy was defeated, the deepest source of our fear. If we actually trusted this, it really would be okay when we die. We would grieve saying goodbye. But we would have the hope that our goodbye was only “for now.”

We believe the real adventure starts after death. That we continue to be, that when this life is over, we have a building, not made by human hands, eternal in the heavens. We believe that the day comes where there is no more sorrow, suffering, tears or pain.

We remember the words of Jesus to his disciples the night before he died, **GRAPHIC: Don’t let your hearts be troubled, trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, will I not myself return for you that you might be with me where I am?**

We, like David in the 23rd Psalm, can say, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, *for you are with me*.” It is this hope that changes how we face our own death, and helps us to grieve as those who have hope when we lose someone we love. Indeed, **“Death has been swallowed up in victory!”**  Trusting this gives us the ability to live life unafraid, with courage and hope.

**Conclusion: The Fear of the Lord**

We’ve spent the last six weeks talking about why we don’t have to live with fear. The Bible addresses fear more often than any topic except justice and forgiveness and it repeatedly teaches us not to be afraid, for God is with us. But while we’re usually told not to be afraid, the scripture also repeatedly tells us that there is one fear we’re meant to have: “The fear of the Lord.” We’ve often misunderstood this concept, but I don’t want you to miss it today.

We have often seen God as our friend, as our loving Father, but we forget that God is the power behind all that exist. Abraham, Moses and others, when they came in contact with the glory of God fell to their knees and hid their faces, not because God was angry, vengeful, or cruel, but because their very existence was contingent upon him and that, apart from his grace and love, they were aware that his power and glory would have completely consumed them. The power of God and the love of God are inseparable, and both **GRAPHIC: AWE - FULL**

The writer of Proverbs tells us, that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of knowledge, and that, **GRAPHIC: The fear of the LORD leads to life.** That reverence, respect, awe, fear – leads us to seek to walk carefully, reverently and faithfully before God. It leads us to recognize that God is God and we are not. In the light of this fear, fully understood, all other fears would disappear. And that leads us to something so many of the secular books talk about as one of the most important ways of overcoming fear: Being clear about a purpose bigger than yourself, and seeking to pursue it. Your purpose is to love God, and to love your neighbor, to walk with God and to do his will. In the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, it is to **GRAPHIC: Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all other things will take care of themselves.**

Will you wait until you are dying, to start living? Or will you fear the Lord, trusting in his love, and offer your life to him each day? As we do that each day, we’ll still experience fear from time to time, but his perfect love will in fact cast out our fear.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

**Scripture Reading**

John 11:25-26

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

I Corinthians 15:54

When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

Proverbs 19:23

The fear of the LORD leads to life.

1. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=113675737> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/03/23/yes-drug-companies-are-bombarding-your-tv-with-more-ads-than-ever/?utm_term=.1d784ec6294e> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. p. 29-35 of On the Other Side of Fear, Hallie Lord *Our Sunday Visitor* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I calculated this based on the census data of 81 million Americans between the ages of 45 and 64 according to the US census bureau. There are believed to be 200,000 cases of persons under 65 with early onset Alzheimer’s. Divide the two and you get a prevalence of .24% [↑](#footnote-ref-4)