

The Risks of Trusting God

John 12:20-33

It's been said the street definition of "worry" is: "trying to control the future." If you are a worrier, then that likely describes what you are doing—trying to control all the yet-to-be-discovered, all the worst-possible-outcome variables that you believe will impact your life or situation.

As a rule, I'm not a worrier, but I can be in certain situations. When the outcome is vitally important to me, or when the person in question is close to me, or when the responsibility for a set of circumstances lies with me, then I'm apt to worry. That's when the "what-ifs" start haunting me, keeping me awake at night. I will lie in bed worrying about how things will play out, how I will manage anything that is unforeseen, and if this matter is a "gamechanger" in my, or someone else's, life. Am I ready for the moment, especially if, without adequate preparation, the consequences could be catastrophic? Between three or four o'clock in the morning, I find the answer is always, *No!* Which, of course, is why I'm not sleeping.

Perhaps for that reason, for years I've found comfort in one of my favorite Scripture passages from Philippians 4:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

When I'm anxious the calming spirit of those words are like a salve to my soul, granting me enough perspective to, as the well-known adage goes, "Let go and let God." It's trite, I realize, but still I find it helpful;

it is easier to do when I'm able to refocus and exercise a bit of faith in order to trust God with all of the unknowns.

I'm certainly not alone. I would say, this is what faith is for many people. With all the things that inspire us along our spiritual journey, in all the company we keep, and the good things we do in the mission and ministries we share, ultimately what seems most meaningful to us in our religious faith is being able to trust God with the unknowns.

Fortunately, you and I live in a time in history and human development where our list of unknowns is far less daunting than those who came before us, especially centuries ago when church dogmas, superstitions, and old wives' tales were the ways to answer the riddles of life. Today, medical advancements and good hygiene have taken the dread and worry out of most maladies and conditions. The common threats to survival and long-term suffering have been largely addressed through god-like abilities and sensibilities. We are still mortal, to be sure, but the quality of life and longevity is much greater than it has ever been. Death doesn't cast its shadow on the average day as it once did for those in the past.

Not surprisingly, the role of God in most people's lives has also lessened with fewer unknowns and tempered fears. It's interesting how much a sense of control plays into this and into our consciousness. Much of what used to bring people to their knees now gets addressed in other ways. We routinely expect good results from medical procedures and treatments. We trust that we will have a steady income from an employer or a government check of some sort. When storms arise, we have advanced warning to prepare and

mitigate disaster; normally, we expect insurance will kick in, if need be, to help with our recovery. Even when we suffer, we know that there are multiple ways in which we can communicate our concerns and people will show up at our door. In other words, we have control over so many of the variables that once would have devastated those in generations past.

But, that said, one thing we still don't control, i.e., the future. We don't have absolute charge over what will happen to us or those around us. So there's ample room for us to show concern and to worry a bit. There are more things unknown to us than we might realize—things that still lie out there to haunt us. When the moment comes, we still have to wonder: will we be ready? Have we accounted for all the risks, including in “Letting go and letting God”? Can we face the unknown and trust God with utter confidence and without worry?

In many respects, I think this is one of the more perplexing questions of faith and, theologically, of Jesus' own struggle in his final hours. Can we trust God without risk or reservation? Though Jesus was the one to foster obedient faith, I have to wonder if he himself would not have been anxious and apprehensive when he wrestled through many unknowns in his last few hours of freedom before he was arrested and faced his fate. All four Gospels speak to Jesus' agony when he came to Jerusalem, except John accounts for this not in the Garden of Gethsemane following the Last Supper, but earlier in the week, soon after Jesus' entrance into the city.

The timing probably doesn't matter because it's likely Jesus was filled with anguish for quite some time. He knew what coming to

Jerusalem with his reputation, mission, and message would mean. No one else may have, but Jesus would have long reckoned with the consequences of speaking truth to power. Few, if any, survived a direct confrontation with either the Roman or Judean authorities, especially one intending to defy their established roles and power.

The only disciple who possibly might have figured things out was Judas, who had already been calculating the cost of his discipleship. He may have thought it better to sell Jesus out in the hopes of saving their lives before it was too late, rather than having them all tried and crucified for sedition. The rest of the disciples, of course, were oblivious to the impending drama, entering Jerusalem in celebration certain God was going to miraculously break through and bring forth the long-desired messianic age.

You can't blame them. No matter how one connects the dots, it's nearly impossible beforehand to figure everything out to its finest detail. Something is missed, or overlooked, or miscalculated. Even the wisest minds struggle to forecast every turn of event. So it may have been with Jesus, not merely his disciples.

I have to assume that Jesus had many things torturing his spirit as he entered this fateful week. Irony upon irony with every encounter, perhaps even fear upon fear. The advent of the hour made it all real—everything he had imagined for years. Certainly, tradition portrays Jesus as divine, which presumes he was preprogrammed for the trauma—hard-wired from the beginning of time to be the divine atonement for human sin. Thus, he was merely following a divinely predetermined script—one that he, as part of the Godhead, would have cast and choreographed. His agony, following such logic, was

merely his human emotion factoring in, or perhaps sorrow over Jerusalem not welcoming his presence.

But what if there wasn't anything preprogrammed or preordained about it? What if Jesus was honestly grappling with a lot of unknowns in those final hours—unknowns that were never fully determined or resolved even when he gasped his last breath? To think otherwise would have meant all of this was staged and his actions merely robotic—well-rehearsed street theatre devoid of real passion or choice. Is that how we're to believe it went down—that those tears of agony were the stuff of crocodiles? I don't think so.

Hence, this leads me to believe Jesus was left to the mystery of the moment and would not know how it would all play out until each moment actually played out. His intuition may have sensed the direction, but each person he encountered along the way still had a free choice to make. Plus, Jesus had to wonder if his own disciples would possess the courage to carry on the mission after what was happening to him. Did they even get it? Would they understand what the messianic dream brought with it when it was up against the established powers? Would they even be able to advance the kingdom's coming, or would things simply fall apart, since the center did not hold?

Even on a personal note, you'd have to wonder if Jesus was worried about the indignity and pain he was about to suffer. Life rarely was easy, but to that time he hadn't suffered in the way that he likely would once under arrest. The torture of a tyrant is always an uncontrollable variable. John the Baptist was beheaded, even though

he was revered by the masses. Who would have foreseen that? So what would Jesus likely face in his final hours?

Then, perhaps even as strong as fearing the potential manner of his death, was the shame and disgrace that would accompany it. He was in the lion's den and the angry beasts were ravenous. At risk was all the good that he had done up to that moment, all the divine mercy he had been able to deliver, all that he had meant to so many on the margins—even the message that God was finally coming to save them—potentially gone in a moment's shame, as his messianic popularity would be slammed by the malicious conspiracy to level him. How would he be characterized by the demons of disinformation inherent to reigning powers?

All this is to say, Jesus must have had a nightmare of compounding “what-ifs” haunting him, wracking his brain and his breath, buckling his knees in an agony he had never experienced before in his life! No one would know his pain, except *Abba*—his spiritual Father. And *Abba* didn't appear to be working any magic tricks to deliver him from that fateful moment.

Was it enough for Jesus to simply “let go and let God”? *Just trust God, Jesus, he'll make you a way somehow!* That counsel always sounds so easy, so trite, so unexamined. Why? because we're always going to hang on to something—something to help control the future, if at all possible—something to get us through the night. That's fair to admit; there's no sin in that. Human beings can't *and shouldn't* let go *that* easily. Life means too much! We shouldn't let go of that. That's why God gave us a brain and a conscience—to worry enough *to prepare!*

The truth is, in each moment filled with unknowns, in facing any challenge to our lives, in dealing with situations that test our mettle, our courage, and our faith, we're supposed to prepare enough to neutralize some of the variables within our control. We are to prepare as if it all depends *on us* and then pray like it all depends *on God*. That's what faith is—not a delusion that delivers us from pain and problems without any effort on our part or that makes us believe everything in life works out perfectly—but instead, it's a spiritual wrestling match with reality that requires our preparation along with the presence of God to help us face each moment as it comes, for better or for worse. Faith isn't for believing in happy endings; it's for holding onto hope to get through what reality brings our way!

I'm sure, if Jesus had his druthers, he would have preferred an immediate coronation with nothing but public adulation coming his way. That's human nature. But that isn't reality. Life isn't that clean, that simple. Reality often stinks; there are crosses to bear. People suffer and die, often for no good reason. Good people are made victims of evil situations, and that doesn't for a moment mean that God is not there. It only means that it takes the help and presence of God to get through their terrible ugliness with any degree of hope. None of us know what we will experience until we reach that moment. When we reach that moment, all we can do is trust we have prepared ourselves for it and *live in that moment*—not focusing ahead, but only in the moment—looking to God for strength and presence. In our fateful moments is when we realize that *the only thing we ever control is our own response to what we encounter*. The rest is in God's hands.

In that light, the risks of trusting God are negligible when we live in the moment when and as it comes to us. Preparation—yes; paralyzed by fear—no! All the “what-ifs” that haunt a worrying mind, forecasting what might occur in any given moment, count for nothing once we’re in the moment itself. We simply live it out, trusting God and controlling our responses to the moment, which in itself will be consequential in its own right. And that’s where all the good within us can confirm with absolute certainty that we are truly in God’s hands and we can pray our way through each breath we take while we make this journey, even until we breathe no more.

The agony of Jesus was as real as ours and his resolute calm is reflective of what we experience and express when we trust God in the moment, assuming we’ve done our part to prepare ourselves and prayed our way through each unknown. Again, that’s what faith is—what it means to trust God. In the moment, it’s filled with passion and with peace. It’s everything we could ever expect of a human and it’s everything we love and value about God.

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