Sunday, August 9, 1992
GOD'S GOOD PLEASURE
Luke 12:32-34

Someone asked me the other day, "Why is it that fundamentalism seems to be growing, not only in Christianity and in this country, but around the world and in most religions?" I certainly do not have a comprehensive answer to this question, but I told this individual that one of the reasons, if not the main reason, religious fundamentalism has such a strong appeal in our time is because the world is changing so rapidly, and that tends to make many people uneasy. Thus, there are those among us who want something to hold on to that is unchanging and offers simple answers to complex problems. When change is so rapid, we tend to have little faith in the long-term future because we have no idea what the future will be. It comes down to such basic things as maybe the job you now have will soon no longer be necessary.

It's no surprise then that the emphasis now is mostly on the short-term — goals, quick profits, fast relief, eat, drink, and be merry, for who knows what tomorrow will bring. The accent in today's world, as I've said before, is on instant gratification. It's extremely difficult to learn to cope with rapid change and the ambiguity that comes with it.

It is no accident that our time has been called the "age of anxiety." The dictionary describes anxiety this way: "Anxiety is an abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear, often marked by physiological signs, by doubt concerning the reality and nature of the threat, and by self-doubt concerning one's capacity to cope with it."

Not only is there rapid change, but to many, it seems as if things are out of control. An astute observer is lamenting the times: "But the present world is a different one. Grief, calamity, and evil cause inner bitterness...there's disobedience and rebellion... Evil influences strike from early morning until late at night. They injure the mind and reduce its intelligence, and they also injure the muscles and the flesh."

But wait, this observer lived more than 4600 years ago in China, even though his observations appear contemporary.

Listen to this more recent commentator: "The nation is worn out. Administration and protection have broken down; robbers make every street unsafe at night... trade has diminished, investments stand still, property values fall. People have lost their economic footing and their moral stability. Citizens have seen their savings consumed in taxes and inflation. Women are dizzy with freedom, multiplying divorces, abortions, and adulteries."

Is this a description of the 20th century? No. It is a historian's depiction of Rome a few years before the birth of Jesus. I only changed the tense of the verbs from past to present. Yet it sounded eerily like our time and like us, did it not?

Let's move closer to now. Here is a more up-to-date description. This one is about our country.

"Within the last few years, the public has been scandalized by the degree of corruption and blatant dishonesty revealed in government and politics... The exposes of favors and gifts... given and received as bribes to obtain special privileges have shocked us... members of Congress have received special gifts and interests in economic enterprises for delivering special favors to their constituents... others have been convicted of receiving kickbacks in

salary from employees and have placed friends and relatives on the payroll without their contributing work... reliable witnesses have pointed to widespread fraud and graft. There has been a striking failure in the congress in disciplining its members from both parties who have been involved in corrupt practices. In a number of cases, convicted congressmen have been re-elected by large majorities."

This is a more contemporary description of our time, and in a way it is. The quotation is taken from a textbook for a college course in Christian social ethics published more than 40 years ago.

The pressures today may seem more intense, but as these quotations illustrate, our situation is not new. In this kind of world, it is certainly legitimate for us to seek help from our faith in God, but that need not automatically imply a return to a rigid fundamentalism that fears all change, is suspicious of new knowledge and growth, and is afraid to question old assumptions.

The people of Jesus' time were as anxious as we are today. Even though they had heard his words from the Sermon on the Mount: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear... Your Heavenly Father knows you need these things... but seek first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness and all these things will be yours as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have worries of its own. Today's troubles are enough for today." In spite of this, his closest followers, the disciples, were especially worried. They could see the opposition to Jesus was growing, especially from the people in power. They had given up much to become his followers. What about the future? Could they trust God? That was their basic question.

What did Jesus say to his disciples in their anxiety, and what does he say to us now?

"Fear not, little flock, for it is God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32) "Fear not." "Do not be afraid." It is amazing how frequently these words were spoken by Jesus, not only to his disciples but to other people with whom he came in contact.

In the Old Testament too, these words are heard time after time. It's no accident that the 23rd Psalm is the most frequently requested part of the Bible for reading in funeral services and at those other times in our lives when our world seems to be coming apart and we need to be reassured of God's mercy, goodness, and faithfulness.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters." Restful, reassuring. Sheep don't drink from dangerous, swift-flowing rivers. "He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."

When Natan Sharansky wrote a book four years ago, which tells about his defiance of the Kremlin and his nine years in prison under the most primitive conditions, he titled the book, "Fear No Evil," because he said the 23rd Psalm was the source of his strength and gave him the courage to survive, especially that sentence, "I fear no evil, for thou art with me."

This Psalm also dares to speak about the end, that dark valley, and names it as a place where the Good Shepherd comforts us. So here we are reminded of God's faithfulness at the beginning of life, when evil threatens us, and at the end of life. "Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

I especially like those words, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” I do not know the Hebrew language in which the Old Testament was first written, but a look in a Bible commentary reminds me that, as is so often the case, a word can be translated more than one way.

“Goodness?” The word has many nuances in the Old Testament. Goodness names all those benefits of God’s presence. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, it is good to know that God stands with us. “Mercy?” This is that beloved Hebrew word, hesed. Often translated “steadfast love.” Mercy is the word for kindness, the fidelity of God, even when we are not faithful. God’s goodness and kindness follow us.

But the word that surprises us is that word translated as “follow.” Goodness and mercy follow me. The Hebrew can also be translated as “pursue me.” Here we are plodding through life, and who’s that behind me? Why, that’s goodness and mercy. They’re not only following me but pursuing me. They won’t let me alone. Here’s a story Dr. William Willimon of Duke University likes to tell about God’s goodness and mercy pursuing us.

We knew him as a mean old man. Resentful. Bitter. Someone said that his bitterness was justified. His beloved wife died giving birth to their one child. The child died shortly thereafter from complications. “He has reason to be bitter,” they said in his little town.

Never went to church. Never had much to do with anyone. When in his late sixties, they carried him out of his apartment and over to the hospital to die, no one visited, no flowers were sent. He went there to die alone.

There was this nurse. Well, she wasn’t actually a nurse yet, just a student nurse. She was in training, and because she was in training, she didn’t know everything that they teach you in school about the necessity for detachment, the need for distance from your patients. She befriended the old man. It had been so long since he had friends, he didn’t know how to act with one. He told her, “Go away. Leave me alone.”

She would smile and try to coax him to eat his jello. At night, she would tuck him in. “Don’t need nobody to help me,” he would growl.

Soon he grew so weak he had not the strength to resist her kindness. Late at night, after her duties were done, she would pull a chair and sit by his bed and sing to him as she held his old gnarled hand. And he looked up at her in the dim lamplight and wondered if he saw the face of a little one whom he never got to see as an adult. And a tear formed in his eye when she kissed him good night softly on his cheek. And for the first time in maybe forty or fifty years, he said, “God bless you.”

And as she left the room, two others remained, breathless, whispering softly in the old man’s ear the last word he heard before slipping away into the dark valley. The word was “Gotcha!” whispered in unison by “Goodness and Mercy.”

No wonder the words of Jesus, “Fear not, little flock, for it is God’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom,” sound familiar. They remind us that we can live as Christians with a sense of the presence of God’s kingdom now. And when we live with a consciousness of the kingdom’s presence, we do not worry about the future. The kingdom is already present in our midst, and it will be fully present in God’s time.

“Fear not little flock, for it is God’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.” Amen.