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Matthew 6:25-33

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Terrible, Thanks for Asking

MATTHEW 6:25-33

"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. IS NOT LIFE MORE THAN FOOD, AND THE BODY MORE THAN CLOTHING? LOOK AT THE BIRDS OF THE AIR; THEY NEITHER SOW NOR REAP NOR GATHER INTO BARNS, AND YET YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER FEEDS THEM. ARE YOU NOT OF MORE VALUE THAN THEY? AND CAN ANY OF YOU BY WORRYING ADD A SINGLE HOUR TO YOUR SPAN OF LIFE? AND WHY DO YOU WORRY ABOUT CLOTHING? CONSIDER THE LILIES OF THE FIELD, HOW THEY GROW; THEY NEITHER TOIL NOR SPIN, YET I TELL YOU, EVEN SOLOMON IN ALL HIS GLORY WAS NOT CLOTHED LIKE ONE OF THESE. BUT IF GOD SO CLOTHES THE GRASS OF THE FIELD, WHICH IS ALIVE TODAY AND TOMORROW IS THROWN INTO THE OVEN, WILL HE NOT MUCH MORE CLOTHE YOU--YOU OF LITTLE FAITH? THEREFORE DO NOT WORRY, SAYING, 'WHAT WILL WE EAT?' OR 'WHAT WILL WE DRINK?' OR 'WHAT WILL WE WEAR?' FOR IT IS THE GENTILES WHO STRIVE FOR ALL THESE THINGS; AND INDEED YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER KNOWS THAT YOU NEED ALL THESE THINGS. BUT STRIVE FIRST FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND ALL THESE THINGS WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU AS WELL.

My sermon title comes from a podcast with just that name where the host tries to get honest answers to the question, "How are you doing?" The conversations with host Nora McInerny are candid and refreshing. She gets people to open about how about they are really doing and what they are feeling. In a world where small talk dominates, Nora encourages people to be open about the things that keep us up at night.

How did your job interview go? Terrible, thanks for asking.
How was your doctor's appointment? Terrible, thanks for asking.
How is your kid doing at school this year? Terrible, thanks for asking.

Real talk makes us vulnerable, and we must admit that our lives are not perfect. Today's text is a response to the admission that we are carrying burdens around with us – both visible and invisible worries.

'Do not worry', Jesus says four times in our text today. Do not worry about your life. The cognate of the verb used here is anxiety or worry which is elsewhere translated as sleeplessness. Do not be sleepless. Do not stay awake worrying about your life. Does worrying add one single hour to your life? Probably not. Yet it is hard not to do it. In a stressful world, with pressures to achieve and provide and grow, worry is the natural biproduct. I worry, therefore I am.

But lest we think this passage is some trite secular advice like, "Don't worry, be happy." 'Do not worry' is advice from Jesus to his friends about what it means to have faith. The text assumes Jesus is in a close relationship with the disciples, one where he knows the worries that keep them up at night. Worries about their family, their aging parents, their sick relatives. Worries about their financial situation. Worries about their future. Worries about their health. Worries about the strength of their faith. Worries about doing enough good in the world. I love to think about

Jesus as a conversation partner for the disciples when they are out on the road or sitting around a table. They talk openly about their hopes and their fears and their frustrations and their joys. The reason he gives them this sermon about worrying is because they have been able to answer the ‘How are you doing?’ question honestly. They can admit to him that at 3am they woke up and tossed and turned while worrying about x, y, or z.

At first, Jesus’ sermon might seem not that relevant or helpful. ‘Do not worry. Look at the birds of the air. God feeds them and are you not more valuable than the birds? Consider the lilies. Clothed in glory and wrapped in beauty, are you not more important than they?’ Having very little in common with birds and lilies this text can feel abstract. But maybe it is supposed to feel that way. Jesus gives them illustrations that will lift their sights from the day to day worries to a new way of thinking. When you turn your mind to the natural world, your perspective changes. Think of a rushing river, a babbling brook, an imposing mountain, a field of wildflowers, an open desert, a flock of birds, a floating butterfly, a heard of buffalo. Thinking of these things or even better experiencing the natural world helps to get us out of our heads, out of the concerns of the moment, and into the vastness of God’s care for creation. Jesus’ turn towards the natural world is an invitation to reorient ourselves. It urges us to keep our worries in the larger context of God’s reign in the world, God’s presence throughout history, God’s work in and through humanity. Sleepless worry does not add a single hour to our lives but sucks the life out of our days.

During the height of COVID when I was feeling especially stir crazy and anxious, I booked a quick trip to a cabin in West Virginia. A friend and I took my kids for an overnight adventure. We went for a hike in the woods, and we ordered food from the lodge and sat out on the porch and ate our dinner. We watched deer from our windows and owls on the branches. That night it stormed, and we fell asleep listening to the rain. I did feel my mind lifting to loftier thoughts and the grip of my worry releasing me. I slept like a rock. Perspective is a beautiful thing.

Paul writes to the Philippians, “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.”

Faith in God calls us to a more fulsome perspective of our lives – one where we are less focused on what we eat and drink and wear and more on the God who nourishes and clothes and soothes. A focus on the natural world reminds us that we are not the creators, we are not the redeemers, we are not the sustainers of life. God is those things for us and for the world. When worries creep into our nights and rob us of sleep – we remember we are not alone. We have a God who waits with us in the night, a Shepherd who seeks to call us back, and a friend who tells us to remember the birds and consider the lilies. As Christians are invited by Jesus to open up about our worries to God and then to remember the faith which provides us a change in perspective.

Here is the practical challenge for you: next time you wake up in the night and you are worried – do the thought experiment Jesus prescribed. Think of how easily and peacefully the birds gather what they need. Think about how beautifully a lily is adorned in color and perfection. Think about God as the Creator of the birds and the lilies and then remember God is also your Creator.

Hold your worries in the light of God as your Creator. We hold them up to the light of Christ and the love of God shines through. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

This is one of the more universal teachings of Jesus – because we all worry and Jesus offers us a life where these worries are held in balance with God’s great love for us and providential care for our lives.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.