

Sermon: Alive in the Age of Worry

Scripture: Matthew 6:24-34

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

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This morning Judy and I are going to read this scripture from the Gospel of Matthew which comes from Jesus' sermon on the mount in dialogue form. Rev. Alyce McKenzie is professor of preaching at Perkins School of Theology at SMU I Texas and she writes this and invites us to enter imaginatively into being there on the mount when Jesus gave his famous sermon and that it might go something like this if you felt emboldened to interrupt him. I'll play Jesus and since I can imagine Judy interrupting him, she'll be the voice of what might be going on in our own heads:

Jesus: "You cannot serve God and wealth" (Mt. 6:24b).

You: Why not?

Jesus: "Because no one can serve two masters. A slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other" (6:24a).

You: I don't know if I agree with that or not. It seems overstated.

Jesus: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear."

You: Seriously? Isn't your advice a little naïve? I do need to plan ahead and know where my next meal is coming from and make sure my family is clothed.

Jesus: "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"

You: Yes, when you put it that way, but . . .

Jesus: "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?" (6:26)

You: Yes, but . . .

Jesus: "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" (6:27)

You: No, I guess not, but . . .

Jesus: "And why do you worry about clothing?" (6:28)

You: Well, because I need to be appropriately dressed for various occasions and at least try to be somewhat up to date.

Jesus: "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" (6:29).

You: Why do you keep making these nature analogies? Those are flowers. I'm a person.

Jesus: "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?" (6:30)

You: It would be nice to think so, but don't you think worry serves a useful function sometimes?

Jesus: "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'" (6:31)

You: All right. I get that you're not going to budge on the worry issue. But tell me this: what am I to do with all that mental free time I used to spend worrying?

Jesus: "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Do not worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today. (6:33-34)

I like how McKenzie gives voice to what at least I know to be stirring in me to some extent when I hear this beautiful passage from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The minute he says "therefore I tell you do not worry" is when I begin to worry about what he's saying. To tell someone who is worried not to worry, and I am guessing, it's a rare person among us who isn't worried this morning about something or will be by day's end, is like telling someone not to notice the elephant in the room, "just ignore it, don't think about it!" If we haven't been worrying up to that point then Jesus saying "do not worry about your life" will very likely get us going!

The singer songwriter John Mayer has a song called The Age of Worry which just seems so apt for our age, doesn't it? Obviously worry has always been a part of the human condition, apparently Jesus' listeners needed to hear it in his sermon, but isn't there something about this day and age that just seems like it's best called the Age of Worry. The song goes like this...

Close your eyes and clone yourself
 Build you heart an army,
 To defend your innocence
 while you do everything wrong.

Don't be scared to walk alone

Don't be scared to like it.
 There's no time you must be home
 So sleep where darkness falls.

Alive in the age of worry
 Smile in the age of worry
 Go wild in the age of worry
 And say "Worry, why should I care."

He wrote it before the pandemic but the pandemic has unleashed a whole new stream of worry that we didn't really know to be worried about. Maybe politics has always been so worrying but the last 4 or 5 years have found many of us worrying in ways we hadn't imagined. Climate change, I'm worried. Racial tensions, international tensions, economic tensions, gun violence and our legal system? I'm worried. It's no wonder our teenagers these days are seeing unprecedented level of mental health issues related to depression and anxiety, among the usual worries of teenage life that are enough to unhinge a person any old day, they are picking up on unheralded anxieties of the culture around them too.

Know your fight is not with them
 Yours is with your time here.
 Dream your dream but don't pretend
 Make friends with what you are.

Give your heart and change your mind
 You're allowed to do it.
 Cause God knows it's been done to you
 And somehow you got through it.

Alive in the age of worry
 Rage in the age of worry
 Sing out in the age of worry
 and say "Worry get out of here."

John Mayer encourages a counter-phobic response to all the worries in our Age of Worry, instead of shying away from what's creating anxiety in us, he recommends we run towards them, engage them, "rage in the age of worry and sing out in the age of worry and say 'worry, why should I care?!'"

I know someone who has struggled with debilitating effects of worry and through therapy has found techniques for dealing with it which include list-making of what they will do in the coming day and exercise, getting into the body and out of the head.

For some who are alive in this Age of Worry such practices and techniques are life-saving and for others not quite enough to quell the tide of rising anxieties that sometimes aren't even connected to external situations but arise out of seemingly nowhere to send them into a tailspin. A traumatic situation from the past can be triggered in their body and create an anxiety response that feels life-threatening and can rarely be talked away. For some, their brain and its chemistry makes being alive in the Age of Worry a way harder course to traverse and for sure the blessing of modern medicine can such a boon for such people. But medication itself is never a silver bullet and practices and techniques for addressing anxiety and the worries that are conscious to us are still critical for healthy living in this Age of Worry.

Jesus is not unaware of what it means to be alive as a human and face the worries that seem to simply be a part of who we are trying to survive and thrive in this world of dangers and unknowns, an existence where in the end sorrow, pain, death are part of the package for us all. He was not unaware of this because he lived it himself and in the end especially we see him very much worried in the Garden of Gethsemane with what he was facing, so much so that he asked God if there was another way, that could avoid this particular

cup of suffering. But because he saw it through, we believe that across the ages his Spirit has been able to be present to us in our worries and sorrows and sufferings. As he spoke to his disciples a couple thousand years ago, his words reverberate through to us today. God wants our healing and God wants our good and the turbulent waters of our spirit settled and calm.

So what does Jesus say to do in this Age of Worry to heal our worried souls? He directs us to the natural world, to get outside, to take a walk, to notice the lilies of the field that neither spin nor toil and yet are provided for. Just notice them. Yes, we still do need to work and plan our grocery list and figure out this problem that we are having, all of which can generate worry but none of it can't be placed for just a moment on pause while we notice the changing leaves of autumn and the cool quiet of the morning and the light that slants low and yellow across the landscape in the evening... all reminding us that along with death and sorrow and pain, there is much that fits together just right and is beautiful and good. And maybe accompany that breathing of the air with a prayer to Jesus himself who was alive in another age of worry and knows our worries and the particular contours our own individual souls that face them. Listen for what he has to say to you in the midst of it all. I think you'll find that it's not a word of judgment or condemnation but of care and attentiveness, like you would be to your child who is anxious and worried about many things.

But Jesus takes a deeper cut with regard to our worries and he tells us to consider what you might do this day, this week, this month, that is aligned to the values, practices, behaviors of the Kingdom of God and make those a priority. When overwhelmed and worried by many things go simple. The Kingdom arrives within and without through the simple unnoticed things.

Have you told someone that is important to you recently that they are important to you and how much you appreciate them? That would be something at home in the Kingdom of God, right? In the face of anxiousness about finances, have you given generously lately without counting the cost? That's a Kingdom practice that flies in the face of worry and says for a little moment "worry, why should I care?" What about giving a sandwich to the homeless or cleaning up a yard at a habitat site, remembering those whose lives are lived on the edge. Those are simple acts of the Kingdom of God. Is there a clear step for the good that you could take, however insignificant that could be, in the face of an overwhelming injustice in our society that contributes to Kingdom Come? Have you prayed lately for that person, the one who is the very last on your list of people you'd think to be praying for? Isn't that the behavior of a citizen of God's Kingdom? And consider considering and thanking God for those remarkable lilies of the field and all the other astounding elements of the natural world around us and maybe read again that beautiful poem from Wendell Berry that probably you've heard before:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

