

Relax! God Has it Covered©

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:22-34

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This past week I heard from both the men and the women's Bible study groups. They both offered sermon titles for today's message. The men sent a text, suggesting a quote from Alfred E. Newman's signature phrase in *Mad Magazine*: "What ... Me Worry?" That was just before they left the building to continue their discussion downtown at *Cupcakes and Kisses*, because we all know we can be more creative if we have ice cream, right?

They later told me they managed to solve the ancient question regarding who makes the coffee. I admit they caught me off guard with that one. My mind started quickly reviewing the Scriptures for today and I finally had to give in and say that I had missed that part of the Scripture. The answer came ... "Seriously?" The answer in the Bible to who makes the coffee? "Hebrews!" (As in He Brews!) See? Ice Cream *does* get the creative juices going.

Later, I heard from the women's discussion. Their suggestion for a sermon title was more serious and was clearly focused on the Hebrews reading about faith. "Unseen, Yet Real" was their offering for today's message. A great suggestion. As was the one from the men. But, I was leaning more towards the focus today being about worry and when the guys sent me this little picture with these words – "Relax. God has it covered," I knew that was it.

Today's Scripture passage is a part of the dialog Jesus has with the people, and sometimes it appears, with the disciples only. It is about money and possessions; it is a warning to us all about keeping our focus on what is really important as God's people ... storing up things of the kingdom of God, rather than hoarding possessions and riches that we cannot take with us when we die.

Jesus encourages giving generously to the poor; giving away the things that weigh us down and keeping our thoughts and our hearts focused on heavenly treasures instead of earthly treasures.

Today's text is actually not the suggested lectionary passage for this Sunday. It is sandwiched in between last week's message that Shaun preached on and the one that was suggested for today. But I felt led to preach on this passage particularly because of Jesus words about worrying. Not that we have anything in the world to worry about ... right? Of course, I say that with tongue in cheek because it is almost impossible not to worry. So, what are some of the things we worry about today?

It doesn't matter whether you are listening to local news or the national and world news on television, or reading it in the newspaper, or on the internet, or listening to a politician – we are bombarded with bad news that often times causes our hearts to race and our blood pressure to rise. Not only are there fearful stories of violence somewhere across the ocean; or a long distance away from us in our country; not only is it happening a little distance in the city, where there is crime every day; but sometimes, as it did so recently, so tragically, it happens right in

our own backyard. But, we have lots more in life to worry about than crime and terrorism, don't we? Even if we didn't have those things happening so often, we could still make a long list of things that cause us worry.

I've heard the term "It's the economy, stupid" repeated this week, several times, as political analysts talk about what our presidential candidates should be focusing on. Security and the economy. Jobs, or the lack of them is a big worry for many people. My daughter has applied for and interviewed for a number of jobs over the last two years. She was working two jobs and it was still difficult financially. She finally has gotten a full-time job with benefits, although the pay isn't what she hoped for, as someone with a college degree and a good bit of experience. But it is a full-time job with the potential for growth. So she is thankful.

My daughter-in-law has recently been laid off, due to the work load being reduced. It is the same company my son works for and while they are telling him he won't be laid off, there is definitely some worry there for them. Making enough money to support our families is definitely a worry for many people. Of course, there are other things: like health issues and issues around aging. Really, the list is too long and you're probably getting depressed with the list I've already named.

I used to be a chronic worrier when I was growing up. I would have a list of things to ask my mom before I could go to sleep. Things like:

"Are the doors locked?" "Are there any tornado warnings out?" (A typical thing to worry about in Kansas and Oklahoma). My mother used to say: "If you didn't have anything to worry about, you would worry about that!"

Well, I've outgrown much of that worry, I'm happy to say. Not that worry doesn't come creeping up sometimes. But you know what I've found that counter acts those moments when worry starts to take over?

Prayer. Talking out loud to God. Telling God what I'm feeling; what I've heard that is causing all those horrible images to come to mind; asking our Heavenly Father to intervene and take that away; saying firmly that I am a person who trusts in God no matter what happens; that I believe God really does have it under control. Prayer really does help. God is always faithful to calm my troubled spirit and to give me a new measure of faith.

Of course, we don't know how things will turn out. We do see a lot of bad things happening to a lot of good people, in spite of faith. Right? I've shared with you before the experience I had, working as a hospital chaplain. When I was doing my Clinical Pastoral Education in the Iowa City Hospital, my unit was the Pediatric Bone Marrow Unit. I was so amazed at the strong faith of many of the parents whom I talked with. Parents of a two-year-old. Parents of a 16 year old. Parents of children of all ages who either had recently had a bone marrow transplant, or who were waiting for one.

Most of the children there had lost their hair due to the treatments for cancer. Some of the children were too weak to get out of bed. But most of them were still just being children – playing with toys, reading books, using squirt guns on the unit when they had parties, watching

the fireworks from their 8th floor unit on the 4th of July. Most of the parents told me they had a strong faith and they believed their child would be healed and would go home and have a long and happy life. But, my last week there, after being there for three months, three of the children who were there before I was – the two-year-old and two of the teenagers – passed away. Their bodies had rejected the bone marrow that had been transplanted. I learned a lot that week from those parents. While they were so trusting and believed that their child would be healed, even when their child died, they still trusted God! They didn't ask, "Why did God let us down?" They didn't pound their fist at the sky and cry out in anger, "We trusted you, God! Where were you?"

Of course, they were grieving. Their hearts were broken. The deep sorrow was evident in their faces and their voices. But still – they trusted God. They trusted that their precious child was with God; that there was no more pain and suffering for their sweet baby. And they believed that, even though their sorrow was tremendous, God would get them through. At that time, I was still in seminary. My daughter was a teenager, driving, out at night. I was a worrier then too. It was in that experience that I understood that simply praying that nothing would happen to her, didn't always mean that nothing would happen to her. But, I saw what Paul described as faith being something we cannot see, yet is there in us, given to us by God. Faith is a gift that enables us to trust – no matter what happens.

I saw, with my own eyes, that faith in action with those parents. It was the kind of faith that causes us to proclaim in all circumstances, even where it is a matter of life and death, what Paul says in Romans 14, "Whether we live, or whether we die, we are the Lord's." (Rom. 14:8) I love how Jesus says, in verse 32: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." And as we read in Hebrews, Paul's words about faith, we might also hear the words of our Presbyterian fore-father, John Calvin who wrote: "Faith is a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely-given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."¹

Jesus tries to calm our worry by giving us illustrations of how God takes care of the birds and the lilies. Their lives are fragile, yet God watches over them completely. God is ultimately in control, no matter what happens.

Civilla Martin wrote the lyrics to the song, "His Eye is One the Sparrow," based on Matthew 6:26 (which is Matthew's version of our text in Luke today, where Jesus refers to God's care for the birds and the lilies, and also on Psalm 32:8 that says: "I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye." She tells about how she was inspired to write the song:

"Early in the spring of 1905, my husband and I were sojourning in Elmira, New York. We contracted a deep friendship for a couple by the name of Mr. and Mrs. Doolittle—true saints of God. Mrs. Doolittle had been bedridden for nigh twenty years. Her husband was an incurable cripple who had to propel himself to and from his business in a wheel chair. Despite their

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.2.7.

afflictions, they lived happy Christian lives, bringing inspiration and comfort to all who knew them. One day while we were visiting with the Doolittles, my husband commented on their bright hopefulness and asked them for the secret of it. Mrs. Doolittle's reply was simple: "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me." The beauty of this simple expression of boundless faith gripped the hearts and fired the imagination of Dr. Martin and me. The hymn "His Eye Is on the Sparrow" was the outcome of that experience. — *Civilla Martin*²

"Why should I feel discouraged and why should the shadows come?
Why should my heart be lonely and long for heaven and home?
When Jesus is my portion, a constant Friend is He,
His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches me ...

Let not your heart be troubled; these tender words I hear;
And resting on his goodness I lose my doubts and fears;
Though by the path He leadeth but one step I may see;
His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches me...

Whenever I am tempted; whenever clouds arise;
When songs give place to sighing; when hope within me dies;
I draw the closer to Him; from care He sets me free;
His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches me...

I sing because I'm happy; I sing because I'm free;
His eye is on the sparrow And I know He watches me"³

And Jesus says to us, in every time of turmoil: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

In a time when the things we worry about are very real; in a time when politicians would use those fears to their own advantage, causing our worries to reach new levels; in a time when we experience competition in jobs and anxiety in trying to get ahead; in a time when the church – especially mainline denominations like ours – are declining in members; when the majority of the population claims not to have any desire to even attend a church – I encourage you to think about what Jesus says here. These are words of assurance; words that are meant to calm our troubled spirits and to help us remember where our treasure really is – in the promised kingdom that is ours because God loves us so much; because our Heavenly Father watches over us in all things.

I feel certain that it is only through that trust and faith that the disciples, and the early church, who experienced so much persecution, were able to persevere and keep strong in spreading the good news throughout the world; in keeping Jesus' command to love our neighbors, in modeling their lives of discipleship after Jesus' example.

² From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

³ Cevilla D. Martin, *His Eye is On the Sparrow*, 1905, ©Public Domain

We have much work to do, little flock. There are neighbors near and far who live in fear and worry; there are those who long for a sense of peace; who ache for fulfillment, not even knowing that it is God they are longing for. But it is only when we let go of our own fears and lean into the trust of the one who has promised to watch over us – no matter what – only then can we go with confidence to a world in need. It is only by moving worry and fear out of our hearts and minds that we will have room for a real passion for being disciples; room for a new, creative vision for reaching out to the people around us.

The message for us today – that we take with us into the world – all comes down to this: “Relax. God really does have it covered. Amen.

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