



Enough for Today

Matthew 6:25-34

Psalm 126

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This is what anxiety looks like:

Sweaty palms, elevated heart rate, sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach.

Running to catch your train home and getting there just in the nick of time. Getting settled in your seat as the train pulls from the station, only to find that your wallet with your train ticket is not in your purse. This is what happened to me on Thursday. As I furtively searched my purse, I decided to call my colleague Marylen to see if my wallet was in my office at the church. As the conductor approached, I practically buried my head in my purse. While fumbling with my phone, I saw my partner had left me a text message: Call me ASAP.

Not wanting to be in the middle of a conversation with my partner at the same moment I would have to explain to the train conductor that I had neither ticket nor cash, I focused on Marylen. She did not see my wallet, but was still looking and would call me back. At the same time, the train conductor passed down the aisle a second time. I slunk in my seat and did everything I could to appear invisible. I get another text message from my partner Chris: call me as soon as you can. As soon as I'm about to call Chris, Marylen called back. I answered her call, and then my cell phone battery died.

I arrived at Ogilvie Station, miraculously undetected for pilfering my ride, but still not knowing what had happened to my wallet.

I took a deep breath, and started the 5 block walk home, thinking that no matter what happens, I can take consolation in the fact that I will at least have a first-hand sermon

illustration on the scripture topic for Sunday. I told myself, “OK, preacher, why not follow the advice of Jesus, since on Sunday you will expect others to do the same.”

Which I did do. And everything turned out OK. As soon as I recharged my phone I found that Marylen had found my wallet. I called Chris back and everything was fine.

But for many of us, small and large anxieties draw shadows over everyday life.

What if terrorists come again to our beloved country?

What if we can never repent of the destruction we have done to the earth?

What if my child is in danger and I cannot protect him?

What if I am just not smart enough to get into my dream school?

What if I cannot feed my family?

What if our church does not have enough money for a full time Associate for Membership and Mission?

What if my loved one gets shipped off to war?

What if I do not get to the PADS shelter before the 7 pm drawing for beds?

What if the religious right wins?

What if I invite someone on a date, but get rejected?

What if I die alone?

What if I pass germs when I pass the peace?

What if that lump is more than just typical hormonal changes?

What if things get worse than they already are?

Worry... Anxiety... it is that endless loop of “what-ifs” that plagues our sense of security and our ability to thrive. For some, anxiety is our minds’ reaction to the occasional stacking up of situational concerns. For others, anxiety is a daily habit, an indulgence even. Science has more to tell us about anxiety and why we endure it. We know, for instance, that some people are more physiologically wired, from the time they are babies, than others to be anxious. We also know that when we exercise, we create new brain cells—and those brain cells borne of exercise are more immune to feelings of anxiety and helplessness than regular brain cells (New York

Times, Nov. 18 “Phys-Ed: Why Exercise Makes You Less Anxious” by Gretchen Reynolds). A local psychotherapist tells me that anxiety behaviors in teenagers in most places might be cause for concern, but in Oak Park might be considered normal, given the level of pressure and stress our kids endure.

Two FUSH students described what anxiety looks like, Oak Park style: “It all begins in Middle School. They spend all three years telling us how we need to get our act together academically to be ready for high school, because high school is so hard. When we get to ninth grade, they are telling us how they are watching us to see whether we will be capable of handling honors or AP classes. In tenth and eleventh grade, they tell us how much our performance and class selection will affect our college applications. And don’t let me even begin telling you about being seniors, “they said, as they began to tell me about college visits, college applications, SAT and ACT scores, rankings, and trying to stand out for their success as an athlete, an artist, a musician, a club officer. They told me they know that when they get to college, the focus will be on landing that perfect job or grad school placement. In the working world, it will be about making money. At what point, they wondered, will we be able to just be in the moment and enjoy what we are doing?”

Consider the lilies. Consider the birds of the air.

I imagine that these teens and many of us need a reminder of the good news that Jesus preached as part of what we know as his Sermon on the Mount thousands of years ago: “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?” More than hearing that good news, they—we—need to know it to be true! We as Christians called to uphold the baptismal promises we make to all the children of the church can help bring that good news to our youth. We can show them that God indeed has a meaningful and unique calling for them. The point is not to get into the most prestigious schools or to make the most money, but to enjoy becoming the person God calls you to be.

Today, as the last Sunday before Advent begins, is not only the Sunday we celebrate Thanksgiving. In the lectionary calendar, today is also known as Christ the King Sunday. One of the most important things we can remember when we feel anxious is we are not in control; we are not sovereign over the future. We cannot control everything. Jesus Christ is our sovereign. As those in the recovery movement would say, “Trust in your higher power.” Is God organizing the fine details of our lives, like an intricate puppet master? Probably not. But is God the God of history? Is God intimately and ultimately concerned with the well-being of God’s people? Absolutely. Hear this prayer that has brought peace to many an anxious soul:

“God, grant me the ability to accept the things I cannot change; Courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference. “

But it is a paradox, isn't it? Are we not told that we are to work and hope for God's kingdom to come down here on earth? Are we not to work for peace and justice? ...to love God and our neighbor more fully? ...to care for the earth, whose days are numbered because of our consumption?

...And yet Jesus tells us not to worry about tomorrow.

It is a paradox that there will be 650 hungry people who will line up for a holiday turkey on Monday, each one representing a family that is hungry.

...And yet Jesus tells us not to worry about what we will eat or what we will drink.

It is a paradox that people in this church make phone call after phone call, send out resume after resume, looking for that elusive job...

...And yet Jesus tells us that we are to be like the birds of the air, who neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, yet their heavenly parent feeds them.

How can this be? What was Jesus getting at? Does he want us all to be a bunch of deadheads without purpose, without drive? Was Jesus suggesting that we become fatalists, throw our hands up into the air and become subjects of history rather than agents of history? Did Jesus want us to give up on the world and on the people struggling within it?

I think not. I believe that Jesus does not want us to waste time worrying about our lives, rather than living our lives. Jesus did not want us to be big thinkers worrying about injustice, rather than being active agents for justice in real and tangible ways. Jesus did not want us to sit and worry about when God's kingdom will come; he wanted us to be disciples who work to bring God's realm into the present.

No, worry does not get us far. But, we will feel less anxious about that math test if we study the week before.

We will feel less anxious about our unpaid bills if we actually call the people we owe to make alternative arrangements rather than avoiding creditors each time they call.

We will feel less anxious about our teens' well-being if we take the time to have regular conversations, to know their friends and their fears and their future hopes.

And we do our best with the resources we have now, and at a certain point we just have to trust that in the big picture, we, like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, will have what we need.

And I want you to prepare yourselves, to steel yourselves, in the coming weeks. Because there are many people whose job it is to tell you that you do not have what you need, that you do not

have enough. I think in this economy the messages will be particularly powerful. This year, you will not get a break on Thanksgiving because many stores will be open over the holiday to maximize their profits. Wal-Mart, I am told, will never close between Thanksgiving and Black Friday, so as to avoid human stampedes when the doors open. And so when you feel a strong compulsion to spend, make yourself a lily of the field or a bird of the air, who needs nothing but the love of your creator and perhaps to be grounded in the earth or upheld by the wind. Keep your eyes open for what is available next week and throughout Advent at the Alternative Christmas Store- it will give many options to celebrate Jesus' birth with less commercialism and greed.

The closing hymn we will sing in a few moments comes straight from our Psalm for the morning. Psalm 126 speaks to the remarkable resilience of God's people. Coming from the perspective of exile, where once the psalm was "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion." (Psalm 137), the outlook turns to one of hope:

"May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves."

These are words from a people who have the faith that God will see them through. For them, that faith is enough.

It is enough for today that I am a child of God.

It is enough for today that I have bread to eat.

It is enough for today that I have oxygen to breathe.

It is enough for today that I love someone.

It is enough for today that I can give a prayer of thanksgiving.

It is enough for today that I was able to sleep last night.

It is enough that I am able to offer a helping hand, a kind word, a smile to someone else.

It is enough that I am in this sanctuary, and I am not alone.

We are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.