

Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin
The Trouble with Worry
Isaiah 49:8-16a
Matthew 6:24-34
May 25, 2008

On any given day, I probably worry about a hundred different things- some of them significant, many petty or too embarrassing to even admit. In the morning, I worry about what I'm going to wear; I worry about whether or not I should try to make breakfast and be late to work, or if I should just grab a muffin and a cup of coffee on my way to the office. Then, I worry about whether or not I should be spending the money on that muffin, and I start to add up in my head how much money I have spent on muffins and coffee over the past year. Then I worry about the environment and the wasteful habits I cannot break- like forgetting my coffee mug. I add up in my head how many paper coffee cups I've thrown away over the past year and how many trees were cut down to fuel my caffeine addiction. Then I worry about the calories in that muffin I'm eating, and I start to add up all the muffin calories I've eaten over the past year. So I worry about whether or not I'll have time to get to the gym to burn off those muffin calories. I worry that if I don't get to the gym, the clothes I have won't fit, and I'll have to find new clothes... You get the idea. I know you've been there, too, if not with muffins and coffee cups, then something else.

Of course, most of our worry is of a less frivolous sort. We worry about our children, and about our aging parents. We worry about our retirement and our health insurance. We worry about the cost of living. We worry about whether the chemo is working. We worry about the depression that seems to be getting worse. We worry about the cost of daycare and overcrowding schools. We worry about our relationships. We worry about our loneliness. We worry about the people in our life- those close to us and even those that aren't so close.

There are also those in our city and our country, way too many of them, who worry about whether or not they'll have enough to eat today. People who worry that today is the day that the bank will foreclose on their home because they can no longer pay their mortgage. There are too many people today who worry because they have little more than the clothes on their back and no idea how to escape the windowless cells of poverty and unemployment. There are people who worry today that the police will arrest them and deport them to the country of their birth, where economic conditions are so bad that being homeless in the US is a dramatic improvement.

And who of us is not worrying right now for the people of Myanmar and China- where natural disaster has taken so much human life? We worry for the survivors who, until just a few days ago, could not get help because a corrupt political regime blocked much of the aid. We worry for the survivors who can't get help because the roadways have been obliterated by avalanches. We worry also for the countries where violence is commonplace and curable diseases go untreated. We worry about the economy and the rising price of oil and what that means for our own lives. We worry about the world's climate and how we'll ever be able to garner the national and global support necessary to effect real change.

The cycle of worry is endless. The cycle of worry is endless. It is consuming; it is self-perpetuating; it is everywhere.

And Jesus said, "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?" "And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"

For the coffee and muffin worries that eat away at our time and energy, Jesus' message offers simple relief, because the answers to his questions are so easy: Of course my life is more than food, and my body is more than clothing. Of course I cannot add a single hour to my span of life by worrying. These pithy statements are a cold splash of water on the groggy face- they wake us up and clear away the fog that keeps us from seeing our true reflections in the mirror. We have bodies with clothes and food in our bellies and sinks that overflow with water with just the turn of a knob. If you can't gain an hour on your life by worrying, it seems very likely that you could gain many, many hours to the span of your life by NOT worrying. Minutes, hours, days of our lives restored to us if we could just acknowledge the trouble with worry and then place our trust, and our lives, in God's hands. Like the birds of the air, who "neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them." Or like the lilies of the field that "neither toil nor spin, yet even rich king Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." God even clothes the grass of the field, alive today and thrown in the fire tomorrow. And aren't we, asks Jesus, of as much or more value than these? So why all the worry?

Here's the rub: we are not birds or lilies or grass. We are sentient beings. We have brains that think and consider and moralize and empathize and yes, brains that worry. And for as much as we might all like to sit back and relinquish our reaping and sowing, our toiling and spinning, we must concern ourselves with our own well-being. We are responsible for finding food and drink and shelter and clothing, and God knows we need these things. God knows we need them all. And so that is what we do. We do what is necessary, and sometimes what is not, to gather about us the resources to provide for ourselves and our families. In times of scarcity, our worry increases and our focus upon our resources becomes more singular, more inward-looking. We

pull tight what we have around us; often gather more than we need. We build bigger storehouses for our things; we gather more. And then we worry more.

The trouble with worry is that it leads us away from reliance upon God for our well-being and towards reliance upon ourselves and upon wealth. If in theory we say we trust that God will provide for us; in practice we trust only ourselves. In the passage just preceding the one we read this morning in Matthew, Jesus reminds his listeners not to lay up treasures on earth, where rust and moth consume, but lay up instead treasures in heaven. For where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also.

And the beginning of the passage we read this morning warns similarly about the danger of splitting loyalties: “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” Our hearts cannot be split between heaven and earth. We cannot truly serve God if our devotion and loyalty are given over to our worship of and worry about wealth. We cannot truly rely on God’s intimate care for us if we are sunk so deeply in our worry that we begin to think that we are solely responsible for our own survival. Jesus challenges our assumptions about human self-sufficiency- Jesus tells us that human life is not self-sufficient, nor does it provide its own meaning. Human life is God-sufficient, and we find the meaning of our lives outside ourselves; Human life inescapably ‘serves’ something that gives it meaning. The choice is not whether we shall serve, but what or whom we shall serve.¹

The trouble with worry is that it creates a self-centeredness that precludes this awareness of God’s grace in our lives and makes us forgetful of these truths. The trouble with worry is that it is insulating, isolating, exclusionary and ultimately God-forsaking.

¹ Boring, M. Eugene. *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume III* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1995).

I learned recently about the South African concept of Ubuntu- which translates most elegantly as “I am because we are.” It means that we are all connected, and that we cannot be ourselves without community. Ubuntu speaks to the reality that our health and faith are always lived out among others, and that an individual’s well-being is caught up in the well being of others. In the context of our Christian life together, we might add to this concept of Ubuntu, “We are because God is.”

I imagine that this is what Jesus had in mind when he preached this sermon to those Galileans gathered on that hillside. Most of them poor, probably; some of them disciples, struggling with their choices to leave homes and families to follow Jesus. Jesus is reminding them that they have chosen a radical lifestyle- one that can only ever be at odds with the culture of their society, but a lifestyle that is governed by a creator who lovingly provides for the whole creation. It is a lifestyle with great demands- perhaps the greatest being that in living towards the kingdom of God, individuals no longer live for themselves, but for the whole world. It requires the letting go of worries that insulate, isolate and exclude, and in exchange, grabbing on to the conviction that God’s providence is always present, even when life looks dim. The path to not worrying comes through gaining utter confidence that God is faithful to God’s promises, and God has promised to care for us, just as God cares for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.

My heart sits with the people of China and Myanmar still. Many days after natural disasters but hardly closer to any real recovery from the damage and the grief of so much life

lost. I imagine it is hard to be a resident of that area of the world and not be worried about what you will eat or drink, or what you will wear. Sources of fresh water now carry disease; homes are nothing but piles of rubble; access to aid is limited by corrupt politicians and roads blocked by avalanche. These are the times when we wonder and worry about where God's providence is. These are the situations that cause us to wonder how God's care for creation fits into the story of death and destruction.

I think that we cannot look for God in explanations or justifications for disasters. Any explanation or justification that we come up with will ultimately fall short of providing solace and meaning in a horrible situation. Instead, I believe we are called, through this radical trust in God's care for creation, to look for God in the compassionate responses to disaster. I'm thinking about the Chinese workers who died this week as they tried to clear the roads to villages cut off by the earthquake- individuals who set aside their worry about themselves and put themselves into the action of caring for others.

I'm thinking about the relief workers in Southeast Asia who continued to advocate for the release of critical aid to victims of the cyclone in Myanmar, risking their own safety for the sake of total strangers. I'm thinking of the innumerable grassroots organizations around the world where individuals set about transforming their communities, not for their own self-interest, but for the sake of their neighbors. "I am because we are, and we are because God is."

God knows we need fresh water, nutritious food, shelter from the elements, clothes to keep us warm and dry. God knows we need these things. In the reading from Isaiah that we heard this morning, the prophet proclaims the ways in which God provides for humanity. In a single verse, four powerful verbs voice God's sovereign initiative, which has set in motion new historical possibilities for God's covenant people: I have answered you, I have helped you, I

have kept you, and I have given you.² And continuing on through the rest of the passage: in God's care, those held captive will be brought out of the darkness; they will not hunger or thirst; the scorching wind and sun will not strike them down. Roads will be made through the mountains, and the people shall be guided by springs of water. God will care for us like a nursing mother for her child, and we will be in the palm of God's hands- each of our names will be inscribed in God's palm.

God is intensely aware of our experience and our needs and incapable of forgetting about us. It is in holding fast to this truth, in utter confidence of God's promises that we will follow Jesus' command to not worry about our lives.

How will this look? How will the relinquishing of the trouble caused by worry look in a world that is still ravaged by natural disaster and violence? Well, with all the hours and days we've added to the span of our life by placing ourselves in the palms of God's hands, we will follow the teachings and actions of Christ into the very midst of disaster and need. We will bring casseroles to the bereaved in the midst of grief; we will pull the drowning from floodwaters and lift stones off those crushed under an avalanche; we will offer comfort with our tender hands; and we will contribute necessities with our open pockets.³

When hearts stand firm in the midst of disaster and refuse to succumb to despair; when communities stand firm in the integrity of conscience and compassion as temptations to spiraling corruption rage, we will be following Jesus' call to action: Strive first for the kingdom of God and God's justice, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Just like the birds and the lilies and the grass, our time on earth is short. Our mortality is promised to us from the moment of our birth. We will do our best to spend every moment

² Gaventa, et al. *Texts for Preaching, Year A*. (Westminster, John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1995).

³ Farley, Wendy. "Where is God when Disaster Strikes?" from *The Thoughtful Christian* (www.thethoughtfulchristian.com, 2006).

rejoicing in God's steadfast love for us. And when the darkness falls, and the worries cloud our vision, we will reach out into the darkness for those hands- those huge, warm hands where the name of every man, woman and child is inscribed with tender loving care, for all eternity.⁴ So do not worry. Do not worry.

⁴ King, Doug. 8th Ordinary, Proper 3, *Moveable Feast*, 2008.