

“Do not worry about your life” Jesus told the disciples. But for as long as I can remember, it seems that the times in which we live have been anxious. As far as I can tell, “The Age of Anxiety” was, first, the period between the two world wars. W. H. Auden’s 1947 poem of that name was a reflection on those wars, as the cold war was beginning. The whole 20th century has been called an age of anxiety, and that has spilled over into this new century.

We worry; about security mostly. This is so even though in the Western world we are living longer than ever, and suffer less extreme poverty than in any previous generation. We are afraid of falling house values and rising gas prices; we worry about scarcity of food, even if our cupboards and refrigerators are bursting; about scarcity of potable water, even as our faucets, showers, dishwashers and washing machines run, and run; we are anxious about government invasion of our privacy, or criminal theft of our identity; about terrorism; about the terrible fiscal and human cost of war. . . . And there has been a coyote sighted in the neighborhood; or, perhaps, it is only a red fox, after all.

Our anxiety is itself a danger, not to our physical health only, but also our spiritual health. Free-floating anxiety seeks an object, a target, maybe, and it bleeds into hatred, against who- or whatever seems alien. It turns to fear and hatred of immigrants, legal and undocumented; to racism; and to prejudice against people of other religions (resistance to Mormon church on 16th St. NW)¹.

Worrying about security is nothing new. “Do not worry about your life.” Jesus wouldn’t have said it if they weren’t worrying. He said it in Matthew when he was teaching about mammon. Not an ancient Middle Eastern god, just a word that means money; but mammon, money, material security can and does become an idol. Something in which to trust, something to devote your life to, even worship.

Jesus told them a parable about lilies of the field and birds of the air. Poetic, lovely. Sentimental, though? Not likely, not coming from Jesus. He was not a 1st century Palestinian hippie ahead of his time, calling the disciples to drop out and return to nature. He was in society and acutely aware of the dangers he and any disciple would face. He often withdrew from danger, before the end. And he was not naive or sentimental about nature, either. Birds die, flowers fade, the grass “is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven.” Life in nature is not secure.

Birds and beasts experience stress—stress of shrinking habitat; encroaching human settlement; stress of hunger, thirst, severe weather; fear of predators. But they do *not* worry, are

¹“Full up, Fed up, on God’s Avenue,” Washington Post, May 24, 2008, B1.

not preoccupied with a future they cannot control. Unlike human beings, they “have no forethought of grief,” as poet Wendell Berry wrote in “The Peace of Wild Things.”²

We, however, are conscious, aware. We know “we are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return” (BCP 499). And we know there is more to our life than physical survival or even comfort. There is a spiritual dimension in this life, and a life to come: the kingdom/realm of God. Knowing that has something to do with not worrying about our life, what we will eat or drink, or whether we will be clothed.

“*Look* at the birds of the air *Consider* the lilies of the field,” Jesus says. This has something to do with the eye, “the lamp of the body;” the way we see, our perspective, the light we put on things. Don’t just glance at nature out the car window as you speed by, really *look* and *consider*.

Last Sunday, we saw and heard the Rite 13 class, assisted by the other Church School classes, tell the story of creation, from Genesis (1:1-2:4a). You remember the refrain in the story: “and God saw that it was good.” God sees with the eye of providence: everything needed for the life of all creatures of the earth is created and given, and all of it is good.

Look. See everything that grows and thrives. Spring is a good time to see. We do not have lilies in bloom yet, but there are roses, peonies, iris, poppies—extravagant beauty. The geese and goslings (about 8" now and still fuzzy little balls) are out on the tow path of the canal, feasting on the heads of grasses just coming into seed. All fits together in the habitats of nature, everything *is* provided.

But life outside Eden is also often rough, brutal, in nature and in human society. From the get-go, it seems, humankind has persisted in substituting our own agendas for God’s providence, creating the all too familiar history of sin: greed, poverty, wars, racism, injustice. “Security is mostly a superstition,” observed Helen Keller. “It does not exist in nature; nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than exposure. The fearful are caught as often as the brave. Faith alone defends.”³

“Grant, O LORD, that the course of this world may be peaceably governed by your providence” we pray in today’s collect; “and that your Church may joyfully serve you in confidence and serenity” Perhaps when we look with kingdom eyes, by the light of God’s providence—and not with the eyes of mammon, or self-protection—we see our own life and the world differently. Not expecting or trying to cling to security, but nonetheless unafraid.

Here are two views of security and faith in a dis-ordered world. The first from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 49. The prophet is teaching toward to the end of the exile in Babylon, in

²“The Peace of Wild Things,” in The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry (Counterpoint, Washington, D.C., 1998), p. 30.

³ Helen Keller, The Open Door (New York, N.Y., Doubleday, 1957).

the second half of the 6th century BCE, to a people discouraged and destitute. The first of the exiles have headed home to Jerusalem, but they have returned to a city destroyed and a land laid waste, “desolate heritages” the prophet notes. *This* is the new exodus promised by the LORD? And “Zion said, ‘The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.’” (49:14)

To the discouraged and despairing, the prophet speaks words of hope and encouragement, words that are for all who are suffering, abandoned, without help. They are not forgotten. Even if a nursing mother should forget her child (and that is all but impossible, as anyone who has ever nursed an infant will tell you), God will not forget her people. Like a lover, God has tattooed your name—not on an arm or a shoulder, or even on his chest, over his heart—but on the palms of his hands, so that you are always present to him, always right before his eyes. And the Lord will provide.

That is a word of hope, a call to trust for those who suffer, victims of war, of poverty and injustice, of natural disasters. Those who have lost family, home, worldly goods; whose crops were washed away and farmland destroyed, who may have no choice except between trust and utter despair.

But what of us, who watch and worry from a safe distance, half a world away? How does God’s providence look to us?

“Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things [that make for earthly security] will be given to you as well,” Jesus said.

Here is how it looked to Jesus toward the end of the Gospel according to Matthew. (25:31-46) The Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, all the nations gathered before him. He separates people from each other as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. To those at his right hand he says,

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. . . . Truly I tell you, just as you did to one of the least of these . . . you did it to me.”

How strange. Trust in God’s providence is found in giving away, however little, however much we have. This is how we learn to trust, ourselves, and be part of the very security we seek. This is how the world and our life will look when we learn to see by the light of God’s providence, with the confidence to share, because we dare to put our whole trust in the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

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We hear all this, of course, in the promises of our baptism, promises that Chris and Joy, and godparents Howard, Jaydah, Romy and Chester will make on behalf of Emerie Noelle today. To turn away from anything that separates us from the love of God. To turn to Jesus Christ and

put our whole trust in his grace and love. And look. Consider. From that trust flow directly and naturally these promises: To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as our self. To strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. (BCP 302, 305)

There is no time to worry now. We are all too busy serving God and all God's children joyfully, in confidence and serenity.