

Proper 3, 2008
St. Luke's, Renton, WA
Kevin Pearson, Preacher

Matthew 6.24-34

Look at the birds of the air. Contemplate the lilies. Actually, I've been reading about Zebras. I've been reading Robert Sapolsky's book, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, which, despite its playful title is an exhaustive look at stress and its affects on the human organism. I've learned that stress ... anxiety ... is an auto-immune response to perceived trouble. Zebras, according to Sapolsky, ... Zebras (and most other non-human critters) experience acute stress when acute stress is needed. When a lion is on your tail, you want your brain's stress impulse to get your heart pumping, your tail lifted high, and your hooves moving you across the savanna at break-neck speed or your neck *will* be broken. That's good stress. Birds do it, bees do it, maybe even lilies do it (in there own lillyan ways). So consider the lilies, consider the birds, consider the Zebras on this count: run from lions.

Zebras don't, as a general rule, spend much energy worrying about the possibility of misadventure in the coming week. They don't take on the relationship worries of other Zebras or various other concerns that don't concern them. It's not that their fragile ecosystems aren't worrisome, they don't worry because their brains, evidently, just doesn't go there. Ours do. We humans, being gifted with brains capable of analytical thought, imagination, reflection and the like ... we have brains that can anticipate potential problems and imagine solutions and we can choose to act accordingly. *And* we have the capacity to wear ourselves and each other out, brooding over matters beyond our ability to influence.

This is where Reinhold Neihbur's serenity prayer "God grant me the serenity to accept the things that cannot be changed, the courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference," this is where Neihbur's prayer is a breath of sanity in an often, fretful world. The prayer is no cop-out. Reinhold Neihbur was one of the greatest theologians of the last century and is considered the father of the social gospel movement (next to Jesus, that is). This is no cop-out. It's just the way it is: we're not in a position to affect some things and trying to do so, or worrying about them, will only make matters worse for us and make everyone around us miserable. In fact, as Sapolsky makes clear, our bodies were not made to withstand the continual immune response of on-going or chronic stress. [One of the ways we deal with that is to give it away freely to others.]

Perhaps it's a good time to hear Jesus' words of wisdom. The crowd gathered around Jesus this morning is still the same folks who have been listening to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. You know ... "blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God, blessed are mourners, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, and peacemakers." "Blessed are you," which is to say, "You are the folk who are really going to get this kingdom of God thing." "You have it coming and what a day that will be, what a day that is, when the ways and means of God come to be."

In the mystery of God's time, the kingdom of God is both something we yearn for *and* every minute holds the potential for it's unveiling. As we sang in our gathering song:

Here in this place the new light is shining,
now is the kingdom, now is the day.

But you cannot serve two masters. More specifically, you cannot trust God *and* madly shore up your cash reserves in case trusting God doesn't pan out. Your heart will be in one venture or the other. And further, if you plan on wealth saving you, you're in for an awfully worrisome journey. There will never be enough. Why even our money says "In God we trust" right on it! That should be some clue.

"So quit your worry," says Jesus. Quit your worry about what you will eat, drink, and what you will wear and seek first the kingdom of God. Seek the kingdom of God. Seek the kingdom of God and everything else you need will be given to you. Stop worrying and seek the kingdom of God.

On Friday as I was worrying about this sermon ... how I would pull together the various ideas in my head ... on Friday I was worrying about this sermon while hiking in the now lush, green woods near our home, (though at the time I hadn't noticed the forest's lushness or greenness.) I was heading up the trail working different angles, and the phone rang and I got some perspective. It was Barbara Bigley, one of our long-time parishioners, calling to say that her husband Ben's health had declined considerably and it was time to gather the family and to say our prayers.

For me, there's nothing like the end of a life, whether it's the ending of someone else's life or anticipating my own, there's nothing like the ending of a life to bring perspective to the living of life. Am I here to spend my time, my energy, my lifeblood worrying or am I here to seek and live the kingdom of God?

And when I put it like that, there's no question. I'm with the poet Mary Oliver who wrote,

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it is over, I don't want to [worry]
if I have made of my life something particular and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

I want to say: all my life I was a bride married to amazement.
I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

Jesus takes the worried disposition of his listeners and reframes it; he gives it some perspective. "Contemplate the birds, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, but God feeds them." Contemplate the lilies. Look around you. Look at the lush green woods and the whole world teeming with life.

An evolutionary biologist who was doing a post-doc on bugs once told me that there is more life going on that is absolutely crucial to human life and the life of the planet in the first inch of topsoil than anywhere else on earth. How's that for perspective?



Jesus' words of wisdom are: look around, get some perspective, see what's really going on, what's important, what's not, what you can change, what you can't, get very clear about what you stand for, stop worrying, seek the kingdom of God. Here in this place new light is shining, now is the kingdom, now is the day, not just in some heaven, light-years away.

Of course, what the issue boils down to is whether we trust God or not. That's why we try to serve two masters, right? We try to serve God in church and worry about God-knows-what the rest of the time.

Is God trustworthy?

If we opt to live together in this world with devotion and compassion and love and justice and as peace-makers ... if we are called to be mystics: brides married to amazement, and lovers: bridegrooms holding the world in our arms, adventurers: unwilling to have simply visited this world ... if we opt to live together in this world with devotion and compassion and love and justice as peace-makers will it all work-out OK?

There was in a time in their exile that Israel thought not. Israel in exile worried that God had forgotten them, prompting some of the most beautiful and passionate poetry in all the bible, spoken from the voice of God:

Can a woman forget her nursing child,
Or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
Yet I will not forget,
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.

Stop worrying. Seek the kingdom of God. Seek the kingdom of God. Be a bride married to amazement. Be a bridegroom, taking the world into your arms. Listen to the birds, contemplate lilies. Know that God has marked your name in the palm of God's palms as we marked the cross of Christ in Ben Bigley's palms just yesterday. Look around you. Don't just end up simply having visited this world. For now is the kingdom, now ... now is the day.