

“BACK TO SCHOOL: III – ‘WHAT IF . . .?’
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Elkton United Methodist Church
September 13, 2015

Exodus 4:1-17

Matthew 6:25-34

Last week, in the second sermon in this “Back to School” series I talked about new beginnings and fresh starts. And if you were here, you’ll remember that I told you about all the school changes I made as I was growing up – and how, in some cases, it was a source of anxiety and worry for me – and in others, it was exciting and adventurous.

Well, today, in this third sermon in the series, I want to spend some time talking with you about the worries and anxieties – thus, I named the sermon “What if . . .?” I talked last Sunday about some of those “what if’s?” that students think about – what if I can’t find my locker, what if I can’t find the right classroom and get there late, what if nobody likes me, what if nobody sits with me in the cafeteria, what if, what if, what if . . . ?”

For kids going through it, those worries are very real. I remember, a long time ago, coming home from school, and sitting at dinner with my entire family, which of course, was Mom, Dad and the six of us kids – four boys and two girls. While we ate, we talked, and at some point, I began to tell them the story of my day, in quite an animated way, I’m told. It had been an upsetting day – things had gone terribly wrong for me and I was laying out for them every single solitary detail.

I told them how I had gone to my locker to get my books before class, and couldn’t get into it. I tried and I tried and I tried. I put my books down on the floor, and tried again. I tried the combination over and over and over again – to no avail. It wouldn’t open. I was panicking. I knew I was going to be late for class, then everybody would stare at me, and the teacher might say something – and the more I worried, the more I panicked – and the more that darned locker wouldn’t open!

I think – no, I know, that my family, particularly my brothers and sisters were pretty darned tired of hearing all about it, when I got to the punchline of the story – I was standing at the wrong locker! It wasn’t even my locker!

Well, by the time I got to the end of the story and said, “It wasn’t my locker!” they all cracked up – which didn’t make me, a sensitive teenage girl, feel any better.

And to make matters worse, it has become a running family joke. God forbid that I should start to tell them something that happened to me, even today, because

when I do they'll all say, "You went to the wrong locker!" To which I promptly reply, "I hate all of you!" Ah, families!

All kidding aside, pondering the "what ifs" of life is very real for students in school, and truth be told, it's very real for all of us. As one person put it so well, "Worry is the diet of our day." (On-line, "How to Handle Anxiety and Worry," Larry Moyer, sermoncentral.com)

We are a nation of worriers. One pastor named Janet Hunt tells how one day she went to yoga class – mind you, a place you go to intentionally lay down your worries – and listen to what was going through her mind:

"I could not focus on the yoga poses in my class as I was worrying over what had become of my cell phone. It was not where I had put it the night before. I'm on call at the hospital this week. I'm on call at the church all the time and that is the only sure way anyone can reach me. All through my class I would stretch and try to put it out of my mind and it just kept coming back. (I found it after I got home – it had somehow slipped off the ledge it was sitting on.) Even now (she continued) I'm worrying over a tough funeral I have on Friday, about when I'll finally get the last of the leaves raked, about when I will fit in a series of much needed new member classes and how it is exactly that we'll be receiving our stewardship commitment cards on Sunday. As I list these here I realize how minor they really are. Just imagine how tied up in knots I would be if I really had something serious to worry about! (On-line, "No More Worries," Janet Hunt, Dancing with the Word)

Any of that sound familiar to you? Trying to do one thing while worrying about another?

We're worriers, and what makes it worse is that, as another writer asserts, "We live in an incredibly anxious culture." Wait til you hear what he says! "The evening news certainly depends upon worries at home and abroad to attract viewers. Commercials are constantly inviting us to worry about one more thing – usually about ourselves! – the sponsored product should supposedly solve. More and more houses seem to sport home security signs in their front lawns. And whenever I go to the airport I'm greeted outside by an electronic sign that reads, 'See Suspicious Activity – call 1 800 and so on . . . And there it is (he says), everywhere you turn, everywhere you look, there are visible reminders of just how much there is to worry about.'" (On-line, "Picture This," David Lose, Working Preacher)

Isn't that something? Until I read that, I never put two and two together about how our culture encourages us to worry – but it surely does! And oh, what a toll worry takes on us. "Worry (as one person put it so well), gets in the way of our

living in the moment God has prepared for us. It takes away from our fully experiencing and appreciating what is right in front of us.” (Hunt)

So what’s a person to do?

Well, the first thing is – turn to scripture – and in particular, to the two lessons we heard read today. For in these two lessons, I think the Lord has a lot to say to us about worry and anxiety.

The first lesson – the one from the book of Exodus – presents us with a portrait of a classical worrier – a man by the name of Moses. It’s actually quite an incredible account of worrying, when you look at it closely. So let’s do that.

Moses has encountered God in the burning bush, and in that encounter, God calls Moses to lead his people to freedom. Suffice it to say that Moses doesn’t feel like he can do it – and thus begins this conversation.

Moses – “What if the people don’t listen to me, don’t believe that I have talked to you?”

God – “Well, we’ll show them. Take that staff you have in your hand and throw it on the ground.”

So Moses did it and it turned into a snake.

God – “Now take that snake by the tail” which Moses did and it turned back into a staff. “Now that ought to make them believe you. If not, Moses, do me a favor, put your hand inside your cloak.” So Moses did, and when he took it out, it was leprous – white as snow. God said, “Now put it back, and take it out again” and amazingly, it was restored to wholeness. “Well Moses, that ought to do the trick. And, if it doesn’t, take some water from the Nile, throw it on the dry ground, and it will become blood.”

Now, wouldn’t you think, with all that evidence from God, that that would be enough to stop Moses from worrying? Not so fast. He takes up a new tack – “God, you know I’ve never been eloquent, I’m not your best public speaker, can’t you find someone else?” Frankly, I think God starts to sound a little irritated when he responds, “Who gave you speech in the first place? Wasn’t it me, Moses? Now go, I will be with you and tell you what to say!”

Still, Moses worries and persists. “God, please send somebody else!” And then, the scripture says, God was angry, and says “Okay, Moses, take Aaron your brother with you. He’s a good speaker – he will talk for you.”

Wow! What an incredible picture of what worry can do that is! Worry to such a degree that, time after time, no matter what God said or did, Moses still worried!

Then, in the Gospel lesson, it's Jesus talking about worrying. In the passage just prior to the one we heard Jesus is talking to the people about money – and loving money rather than God – and of course, behind the love of money is worry – worrying about having enough, and getting enough, and keeping enough.

So, Jesus says, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.” He sees the toll worry takes, and he recognizes the spiritual problem that it is, as well. So he invites his listeners, which include us, by the way, to look at the bigger picture – all of life, and God's place in it, and God's love and care for us.

Put these two scripture lessons together, friends, and I think there are some powerful words from the Lord for us today about worrying and anxiety.

And the first is this: Remember the past. Remember what God has done for you in the past. Remember how God has provided for your needs, how God has been there and carried you through everything, how God has guided your steps and how God has never let you go – ever. And then, remember that if God has done that in the past, won't God do that in the future as well? God is faithful, and as God has done, God will continue to do for you – always.

I think back on something that happened to me a few years ago – something that I know I've told some of you about – something that I will never forget. I was called on to do the funeral services for Dr. Stravakis, who used to be at Union Hospital. A lot of you, I know, remember him – he was instrumental in setting up the emergency department at the hospital.

Anyway, he was a long-time, beloved member of the medical community here in Elkton. He died in the summer, and was to be buried in a private ceremony just for his family over in Elkton Cemetery and then there was to be a public service at the fire hall. I met with the family beforehand, as I always do before funerals, and when I did, I discovered that all of us had been mispronouncing his name forever – it was Stavrakis, not Stravakis.

Well, names are really important, and I wanted to say it right, so I worked on it and worked on it, and worried over saying it right. The day of the burial came, and it was a really, really hot day. I went to the cemetery and gathered at the grave with his family, and was just about to begin, when I look up and saw that a whole host of people was coming through the gate of the cemetery for the service – and it was the leadership of the hospital – many doctors and nurses who had worked with him.

So now, there's a bunch of us gathered at the grave, with the sun beating mercilessly down on all of us – and I began – mind you, still worrying about saying this poor man's name right. “We have gathered here today to remember and give

God thanks for the life of Peter” and then I said, not Stravakis, not Stavrakis, but I said, something horrible like Stavraski! I just about died! I wanted to crawl into the grave myself. I was mortified! I mean, it was really bad – I didn’t just mess it up, I butchered it. And everybody there knew it.

Quickly, I got my wits about me, and had an impromptu prayer, asking everyone to bow their heads, and when they did, I glanced down at the grave of his son, and said something like, “we are so grateful for the life of Dr. Stavrakis” saying it right that time.

And then the service went on – only for a few minutes more, and it was done. After I said the benediction, the doctor’s wife, who was a little tiny Russian woman, came walking right over to me – right in front of God and everybody. My heart skipped a beat because I was so afraid she was upset over what I had done.

Instead, she came right up to me, took my face in her hands, and said “Thank you so much, it was beautiful. You know, you couldn’t have done this in my country. Women weren’t allowed to do this. But it was so beautiful. I want you to do my service when I die.”

And in that moment, I knew grace – pure and simple grace. When she had every right to be upset, instead she loved me and cared for me. And you know what? When she died, I did her service and told that story.

My dear friends, we need to remember things like that – times when God has taken care of us, when He has carried us through our worries, and poured upon us grace after grace. We need to remember His love so that worries don’t consume us.

And then, as Jesus said in the Gospel lesson we need to look around us, focus on the present and all the good God has given us. In a way, worrying blinds us to the good things that are all around us – we’re so consumed with the “what if’s” that we miss God’s glory all around us.

So, Jesus says, “Look at the lilies of the field and the birds of the air.” And remember God’s love that gives all of these things. Instead of focusing on all the images that society thrusts in front of us – images of fear, terror, scarcity, and evil – focus on images of good – abundance, courage, trust, love.

They are all around us. Today, in fact, they’re everywhere. The faces of children running down the hall to Sunday School and greeting their teachers with a hug. The sounds of the choir back in their place in worship. The faces of the greeters in the parking lot, at the door, and the ushers ready with a hug. Friends in the pews. Beautiful organ music and moving prayers.

And that's just in here. Go out into the day and see the good things all around you – family and friends gathered to watch football together, youth scouring the area in their scavenger hunt, people going for walks in wonderful weather.

Jesus invites us to lift up our heads and see life – the good life that God has given us – it's everywhere. Lift up your head and look at it – and as you do, your focus will turn from worrying to trusting; from bearing everything on your own to giving things over to God.

So I invite you, in the words of Jesus, as you leave this place, “Do not worry about your life” instead, remember what God has done and will still do for you, and, lift up your head, look around and see the glory of God – for it's all around you. Let it remind you that you have no need to fear, no need to worry. All will yet be well! Thanks be to God.

Amen.