

Last Sunday after Pentecost
Last Sunday in Ordinary Time
Lections for the Feast of Reign of Christ
II SAMUEL 23:1-7
PSALM 132:1-12
REVELATION 1:4b-8
JOHN 18:33-37
Lections for A Festival of Thanksgiving
JOEL 2:21-27
PSALM 126
I TIMOTHY 2:1-7
MATTHEW 6:25-33
November 24, 2024

Worry, Worry, Everywhere!

Alfred E. Newman always said, he of satirical *Mad Magazine* fame, “What, me worry?” complete with his goofy freckled face and captivatingly stupid grin. Bobby McFerrin used to sing to us the delusional smash hit, “Don’t Worry! Be Happy!” The Kingston Trio, for those who enjoy American folk songs, used to sing “It Takes a Worried Man to Sing a Worried Song,” voicing concerns about some unnamed, but surely mysteriously seductive, woman who might not be faithful while being away from her man. Yikes! I have often heard the admonishment not to be a “worry wart,” my thinking being that warts of any kind are never a good thing! Today, as I seem to have been doing a great deal lately, I am beginning this sermon by stating the obvious. I think it safe to assume that we can all resonate to some degree, at many levels perhaps, with this sermon introduction. Frankly, over the past few years, and especially over the course of the events dominating the headlines in recent weeks, many among us have taken worry to an art form, using some most creative language, expletive adjectives helping us cope, get in touch with our thoughts and our feelings as we try and get a grip on our raw emotions! It seems as if we are creatively worrying, as we find new ways, anxious in so many ways, troubled about so many things, stressed beyond degree, perhaps beyond the breaking point. I guess we will know how accurate that is if and perhaps when we unfortunately see it, too early to make predictions! As we all know, we can only control what we can control, what is under our control.

To be honest, I would rather preach about something other than our cluttered worrying minds this morning but the Gospel lection for Thanksgiving drew me like a moth to the flame and thus you are stuck with this homiletical theme. I will say, however, in my defense, that worrying, exacerbated by heightened anxiety and fear, an emotion fueled by any number of rational but negative thoughts, is something with which I believe, after an unofficial poll, the vast majority of us are struggling as we try and make sense of our new, not-so-new, reality. **My goal this morning, another sermon spoiler alert,**

is to bring some comfort, some assurance, to assuage to at least a modicum, to the slightest degree, our worries about the concerns and the complex issues that trouble our spirits and diminish our souls, hoping to alleviate at least to some level that which is depressing, seeking to damage our emotional equilibrium. As we enter this week, we have arrived at the midpoint of the wonderful season of “Hallo-thanks-mas”, with Thanksgiving Day looming on the horizon, arriving just in time on this last Thursday of November, as it always does, marking sort of a midpoint I guess you could say of all the festivities. Me thinks we need a pep talk, some encouragement, an uplifting word. Perhaps what we need, what would do our hearts good, is a subtle, a not-so-subtle, a gentle reminder that would give us some much-needed cheer, some comfort and joy. Perhaps a polite nudge would be helpful, pointing out that we have so much for which to be thankful, filled with gratitude for life in all its blessings, rejoicing in every aspect of living, basking in the glorious shadow of a graciously loving God. After all, as we all know full well, we live out of our abundance. Yes, all things considered, everything for the most part is truly well with us. Yes, sometimes we need the proverbial kick in the pants, some delightful smelling salts, the kind of encouragement that leads us to celebrate, to embrace the joy inherent in this most wonderful time of the year, song pun intended. The message is a simple one, “Cheer up!” Be of good cheer! The sky is not falling, Chicken Little nothing more than a broasted or fried figment of our imagination!

It is interesting to note, that as we enter the season of “Fear not”, that fear seems to be on the rise and the rampage, unwelcome company that has long passed the three-day stink threshold, fear “stinketh”, an unfortunately ubiquitous presence on the minds of many, suffocatingly affecting nearly everyone or so it appears. Fear, like a tsunami, can be overwhelming, a stain coloring the unsettling times in which we are living, all the collective angst no doubt adding to the proverbial fear factor adversely affecting our daily demeanor. Rachel Mann, writing an Advent devotional book for this year, makes fear the main storyline, the title of her book being *Do Not Be Afraid: The Joy of Waiting in a Time of Fear*.¹ In the Introduction to her Advent devotional guide, Erin Wathen in her book titled *Calling All Angels: An Advent Study of Fearlessness and Strength*, makes an interesting observation. She says that ‘Do not be afraid’ is “the most frequently repeated message in Scripture.”² She declares, “Some say it appears 365 times, to be exact. That sounds a bit too much like a marketing team decided they’d found a great idea for a Christian daily devotional . . . one text a day for a calendar year, what are the odds!?” She goes on to say, “But even if the actual math is not quite that convenient, some variation of ‘fear not’ really does come up more than three hundred times in the Bible. From Genesis to Revelation; from the prophets to the psalms; from Jesus to the faithful ones who followed, the words,” fear not, “have become a mantra across time and space. Clearly faith cannot thrive when fear is in charge.”³ I think she is on to something with that assessment. And by the way, I find it interesting that it is women who are out front, leading this conversation, who are not afraid to get in touch with these often-debilitating feelings, brave enough, courageous enough, to write about fear, helping us get in touch with the intellectual dynamics driving this rational, and

¹Rachel Mann, *Do Not Be Afraid: The Joy of Waiting in a Time of Fear*, (London, UK: SPCK Group, 2024).

²Erin Wathen, *Calling All Angels: An Advent Study of Fearlessness and Strength*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024), XI.

³Ibid.

sometimes irrational, emotion. Perhaps men are just simply too afraid to tread there! Something to ponder!

Either these words we read in the Gospel of Matthew today were paraphrases, call them hearsay, conversations between the rabbi and his students supposedly overheard, call them “quasi-quotes” perhaps, presumed to have been spoken by Jesus at a time when upheaval and unrest was the order of his day, all Israel enduring the oppressive occupation of Roman domination, locally led by the paranoid nutjob Herod. Or these words were put in Jesus’ mouth after his death, sayings attributed to the rabbi by the early Church, the followers of Jesus enduring great hardship, terror and torture, persecution, the very order of their day. **New Testament scholar R. Alan Culpepper cites Gilbert Murray, who “famously characterized the NT era as a period of ‘the failure of nerve,’ which he described as ‘a loss of confidence, of hope in this life and of faith in normal human effort.’”⁴ He also cites E. R. Dodd, who described this period as an “Age of Anxiety.”⁵ In fact, Culpepper describes this entire lection from Matthew as being exclusively devoted to worry and the need to alleviate its immobilizing affects, the divine desire for the faithful to not fall victim to its false but very real powers! Does any of this sound familiar to our ears? In that unsettling, upside down world characterized by so much misery, everyday could very well have been the last day on earth for an unsuspecting, very suspecting, follower of the way. It was this extreme persecution that led the Johannine writer in the Gospel of John (John 14:1) to offer these words of solace we tend to narrowly, unfortunately, associate exclusively with funerals and memorials, “Let not your heart be troubled, you believe in God!” Living in the constant kind of fear, commensurate with a horrific nightmare of this magnitude, was just the way it was, a reality incomprehensible for us as there is no way we can even begin to remotely put ourselves in their place, walking a fraction of a mile in their shoes, but an experience that many who have been victimized by systemic injustice throughout history have had to endure as the only road they could travel, the only landscape they have ever known! And so, into the midst of all that was anxiety and fear producing, all that was troubling and worrisome, worry a matter-of-fact way of life, here come these hopeful words, call them pious promises, words that could easily ring hollow, summarily dismissed as tone deaf, as wishful thinking, shallow naivete, outright pabulum, as Pollyanna platitudes on steroids. Take your pick! That being acknowledged, no doubt, however, these words, these promises, were gladly, joyfully, received back in the day as manna from heaven, as a gift from the mouth of God to waiting ears, providing a source of comfort and security, a reminder that, even at the depths of human despair and despondency, that God was in the midst, remained a holy presence, and that these fragile souls could continue to place their trust as they held onto their faith.**

In the verse prior to what the lectionary editors chose for this Thanksgiving Gospel reading for today, in verse twenty-four, is a warning against “mammon”, “mammon” a most interesting word simply meaning all our possessions. As one commentator notes, “*Mammon* is simply the Aramaic word for

⁴R. Alan Culpepper, “Matthew: A Commentary”, in *The New Testament Library*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 144.

⁵Ibid.

‘property,’ including, but not limited to, money, and in itself has no sinister connotations,”⁶ despite the way the word as used in this phrase found in the Gospel of Matthew is usually negatively interpreted, preached and taught. That being said, in some ways it is unfortunate that this verse about mammon was obviously with intent left out of the lection we read today, for so much of our worry, of human worry in general, originates with concerns about possessions, what we own and what we do not own, what we have and what we do not have, our insatiable appetites, an issue that is indeed truly fitting, more than appropriate for those who lack the basic necessities, the things that you and I take for granted as an abundant part of our lives, what some have coined as “affluenza”. Guilty as charged! We are so comfortable with the things, with the stuff, that we have accumulated and have come to enjoy, accoutrement received as a rightful expectation. The difference between a collector and a hoarder is in the eye of the beholder, perhaps only the slightest degree of separation. Lurking in the wings of this text, somewhere behind the curtain, even if it is not spoken but not far removed from our thinking, stirring within us as it should, we get it, is a reminder that our lives, while obviously overflowing with a bountiful harvest, others, however, truly not so much, scarcity not a part of our life experience but unfortunately routine, most ordinary, a perverse inheritance, by circumstance or situation, bequeathed to others. Food insecurity is a way of life for so many people today. If these Matthean words were first penned by a writer in the early Church, they point to the probability that the provisions which had been collected and stored, minus the attempted deceptive hoarding by Ananias and Saphira who were immediately struck dead when their ruse was discovered, revealed that the cupboard was almost bare. Stress was building among this gathered Christian community, even yet to be named as such, as essentials were running low and that the prospects were dim for meeting the ongoing physical needs, the very sustenance, of the faithful who had banded together out of faith and fear. As the hit song by Jackson Browne sings, they were “running on empty!” You will remember that these early church communities had combined all their possessions, all they owned, having all things in common, and were living off the proceeds, waiting for a second coming, a Parousia, that never came.

The Matthean writer reminds this original anxious audience, and now including all of us, that anxiety is not helpful, that worrying about anything is not going to make anything better. Of course, the writer of this Gospel was specifically addressing the dearth of material things, noting that worrying about whatever lacking is not going to make them magically appear. Fear only serves to diminish and debilitate! Managing anxiety is a daily exercise! Even so, could we ever blame these early followers of Jesus for at least experiencing some level of panic, after all they had given up everything, literally so, believing that the humble rabbi from Nazareth, understood to be a messianic figure, was going to come back and rescue them? This fantasy was fueled by a false narrative and thus a false hope, promoting a guaranteed return that never materialized, a promise not kept, dead on non-arrival, their prayers dashed while amazingly keeping hope alive. The irony of this text is that it is not a call to be without, to go without, to give up possessions, but is a reminder about perspective, priorities, that all that we have, all that we own, cannot be, can never be, the tail that wags the dog. Possessions are, or always should be, a means and not an end, a tool and not a trophy! Writer Marilyn McEntyre cites Richard Rohr, who observes, “All great spirituality teaches about letting go of what you don’t need and who you are not . . . Then, when you can get little enough and naked enough and poor enough, you’ll

⁶M. Eugene Boring, “Matthew”, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. VIII, Leander E. Keck ed., (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 210.

find that the little place where you really are is ironically more than enough and is all that you need. In that place, you will have nothing to prove to anybody and nothing to protect. That place is called freedom.”⁷ Yes, there is more to this life, more to our lives than all we can accumulate, living life far more important than our stuff, and we all have a lot of stuff! Invoking what seems like an ancient echo from the wisdom literature found in the Hebrew Bible, even invoking the supposedly wise king named Solomon, a man who evidently possessed both riches and brains, **this Gospel writer waxes eloquent, poetically reminding these anxious worriers that these words were meant to comfort and offer assurance of the care of all creation inherent in the God who created, who crafted every magnificently amazing bit of the universe, from crafting the birds of the air to the lilies of the field. The skeptic or cynic in us can read these words as the most grandiose hyperbole, as more than embellishment, easily an eye-rolling exaggeration, yes, easy to do when there is no food on the table, replaced by a mound of piled-high bills. Even so, the part of us who trusts, who has put our faith in God, sensing a very real presence of mystery, of the kind of awe and wonder that only comes from an unidentifiable but very substantive transcendence, believes almost with certainty that God is somehow sovereign, in control, as challenging as that theological idea is in a world seemingly out of control. Yes, God is still in charge, the Spirit still in the wings, still in the midst, whatever any of that language means, divine presence always wrapped in mystery, cloaked in the veils hidden by the darkest of glasses, to use a profound Pauline image acknowledging the essential, even primal, primordial, role of human doubt in the always evolving religious arena. Being faithful is never easy, no matter what anyone may try and tell you, as convincing as easy and simplistic answers frequently are, regardless of whatever snake oil the piously pontificating preacher simpletons are attempting to sell.**

The good news for us is that we do not have to worry about what we eat or drink or wear and probably never will. Perhaps only a few among us at sometime in the distant past have had the misfortune of experiencing the challenges of going without. We are set, good to go, rich beyond all measure, the wealthiest of the wealthy of the world. But nowhere is it suggested in this biblical text that we do not have to worry about what others, what our neighbors, will eat or drink or wear. Now there is a very different conversation, a very different spin, a radically alternative viewpoint, presenting us a sobering discussion that changes the narrative, turning the emphasis on a dime, flipping it upside down on its axis. Suddenly, we gain a new perspective when we ponder the plight of so many in our world, when we stop and consider the other, literally taking an inventory about our neighbor, and no it is not a position taken in this lection for today but is only gleaned when considering the many other readings that the Bible has to offer. The problem with most people who read the Bible is that they only read what is in front of them in a given moment, reading as if a scripture passage stands on its own, is independent of other texts. It is easy to quote isolated verses, arrogantly proof texting as we go, forgetting that it is the whole of this book of books that must be considered when taking any text into account. Only then can these presumed holy words fully inform us, giving us the big, the complete, picture, getting us to where we need to be and hopefully want to be, the true desire of our hearts where numerous biblical writers would wisely guide us to go. After all, the Bible is a buffet, a smorgasbord, not an entrée! We cannot consider Matthew, chapter six, what we read today, without recalling Matthew chapter twenty-five, a text appearing toward the end of the Gospel. Yes, we remember this graphically depicted parabolic tableau describing the sheep and the goats. Though not

⁷Marilyn McEntyre, *Midwinter Light: Meditations for the Long Season*, (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2024), 7.

considered a parable, this apocalyptic drama, reminds us of the Godly command to do for the least of these, feeding, clothing, quenching, visiting, whatever constitutes the cups of cold water needed by an individual or a community. Yes, when we place our attention on others, once again, focusing on our neighbors, then we can breathe by taking the magnifying lens off ourselves, our oft narcissistic priorities shifting in an instant, the world becoming a better place with each and every person who gets their needs met because we have gladly and obediently chosen to intervene, yes to interfere, as expected in a most appropriate and graciously loving way.

Perhaps attentiveness to the other, to our neighbors, would help us take our minds off our worries, at least temporarily. Perhaps sharing is what the Matthean writer had in mind and implied at the conclusion of our reading for today when the original audience, and now each and every one of us, was gifted with these words, implored to seek the kingdom of God, what I prefer to inclusively call the realm of God. Seek the realm of God first, along with all the righteousness that is part and parcel of the very essence, the very being of God, and everything else, we are told, will be added unto us. And yes, this is where the intersection framing the liturgy today occurs, an enmeshing of the liturgical themes of the *Feast of the Reign of Christ* and *A Festival of Thanksgiving* harmonizes in a most delightful way. They are so distinct and yet so ironically interdependent! Indeed, how thankful we are for the eternal realm of God, in this life and the next, the reign of Christ, in our lives and in our world, admitting that we rarely get to see glimpses of divine manifestation in our world, however rare, however remote, because we humans tend to get in the way, our vision clouded because of the worries, the fear and anxiety, that cause more crises than any of us would like to discuss any further as we enter this most wonderful time of the year. For today and for this week, let us declare a moratorium, let us suffer a delightful case of amnesia, forgetting, at least for a while, all that troubles us, that causes us to worry, that seeks to overwhelm us with fear and anxiety. Who knows? Doing so may be contagious, spread like wildfire, and last longer than we can imagine, or at least long enough to get us through the holidays, days which are meant to be, after all, holy days! Keep the faith! All will be well! Happy Thanksgiving, everybody!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and longs for us not to worry but to trust by faith, yes, as challenging and difficult as that monumental mountain is to climb! Amen and amen!