

Trinity 15 (2023)

Twenty-four years ago, worry was in the air. The year was 1999.

As wildfire spreads through dry undergrowth, so the fire of fear spread throughout the nation and world as the turn of the millennium neared.

Because the year in most computer programs was represented by only two digits, the fear was that as clocks advanced from Dec. 31, 1999, to Jan. 1, 2000, everything would go haywire. Prediction were rife that:

- Power grids would fail.
- Planes would fall out of the sky.
- Home appliances would explode.
- The financial system would collapse.
- Nuclear power plants would melt down.

Did any of these things happen? Of course, not. As Geoffrey James, contributing editor of a science magazine, wrote:

“The Y2K bug was real, but the predictions of a world-shaking disaster were utter nonsense.”

Even so, a lot of freeze-dried food, gold bars and survivalist equipment were sold. Fortunes were made, and many duped.

Two decades later fear and worry have not gone away. If anything, they have only increased.

I have a friend who spends hours each morning scouring the internet for impending disasters and calamities. He then passes on these articles to those on his email list.

What they have in common is that the sky is falling . . . the end is near.

Several days ago, he sent me a text with a link to an article predicting another lockdown, arriving just in time for the Presidential election.

Of course, if you look at the headlines on these articles, you find that these wild predictions are almost always followed by a question mark. The demise of responsible journalism in this country is a cause for concern.

Fear and worry have been around for a long time. People in Jesus' day were plagued by them. In many ways, their worries were real. Palestine was a powder keg ready to explode.

Insurrections against the Roman occupiers were all too common. These insurrections were quickly put down and the leader hung on a cross. Nevertheless, fear and uncertainty over what was going to happen next hung in the air. As real as these concerns may have been, Jesus in today's Gospel cautions His followers against worry.

A good teacher repeats his key points. Jesus is no exception. Three times, He says, “Don’t worry” or “Be not anxious.”

Verse 25: Be not anxious what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on.

Verse 31: Be not anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?

Verse 34: Be not anxious for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

Jesus’ message is clear and unmistakable: Worry is wrong. Fear is futile.

Bobby McFerrin’s 1988 Grammy-winning hit says it more colloquially: “**Don't worry, be happy.**”

Simplistic? Perhaps on the surface, but before we dismiss the concept outright, let's take a closer look at Jesus' words. A good place to begin is to note what He is NOT saying.

First, He is not saying, be improvident. Refusing to take out insurance policies, not preparing for winter while it is summer, not putting aside money for a rainy day is foolishness, not faith.

Improvident people court disaster for themselves and put heavy burdens on others.

Rather, we need to go to nature and let the lowly (and in some quarters loathed) squirrel be our teacher. The squirrel collects and stashes away acorns and nuts in the summer in preparation for winter. He is wise to do so.

Joseph in the Old Testament did something similar. Warned of God that seven fat years were going to be followed by seven lean years, he took

action. Acting under the authority of Pharoah, he collected and stored grain in barns against the coming bad years. As a result, not only were the people in Egypt saved, but members of his own family who came down to that country to live.

So, the first thing Jesus is NOT saying is, be improvident . . . that is ‘take no thought for the morrow’ in a reckless and senseless way.

A second thing He is not saying is: Be work shy or lazy. “God is going to take care of me, so I am going to lie down under a shade tree and wait for Him to do so.”

Again, we look to nature for our instruction. True, God feeds the birds of the air, but He does so indirectly. He does not drop the worms into their open mouths. Rather, they must go out and collect what He provides.

Earlier this year, a bird built her nest on the porch of the church. On more than one occasion,

I saw mamma bird bringing food to her young. She was anything but lazy and work shy.

The same should be true for us. Those who can work should work, not just to satisfy their own needs but the needs of those who can't.

But there is a third thing Jesus is not saying. He is not saying that His follows will be exempt from earthly adversity.

Yes, God knows every time a sparrow falls from the air, but they do fall. The same is true for us human beings. Bad things happen.

No one is exempt from the hard knocks of life in this present age, including Jesus' own people. He says as much in John 16:33: **“In the world ye shall have tribulation [or trouble].”**

Also, if you do foolish things, there are consequences.

If you get too close to the edge of a cliff and fall over, you are going to go down. The law of gravity is not suspended because you are a Christian.

Okay, at times God provides dramatic, miraculous rescues. We acknowledge these and give thanks for them.

More than that, in the age to come, all wrongs will be put to rights. Broken bones and shattered lives will be put back together. Those who died tragically and according to our way of reckoning prematurely will be given life. Martyrs will be openly vindicated.

The dry bones in the vision given to the OT prophet Ezekiel will take on flesh and live. But we have to wait for God's purposes to be worked out. ///

So far, we have looked at three things Jesus is not saying: be improvident, be lazy, and expect a fall-proof life.

What then IS He saying in this passage?

I think it is this: Don't let worry consume you, especially over things you have no control. If God provides for the critters, *how much more* will He provide for you, His beloved child. The key phrase here is 'how much more'.

Trouble may come and almost certainly will in this life, but God is greater. Whatever we are facing, God knows, God cares. God is providing. In the end, all shall be well, to quote Mother Julian of Norwich.

What is being forbidden is not prudent planning and action but fear which debilitates and destroys and renders joy in the present impossible.

The trap that we so often fall into is that we think we have to shoulder every problem alone. Everything from paying my car payment to world hunger rests on *me*. It doesn't.

Realizing God is ultimately in charge is a very freeing thought.

Yes, I stand ready to do my part, to make wise provision for those things I can, to right the wrongs I am able, yet I am the under-agent and not the Man in Charge. I'm in sales, not management. I like the verse that says:

Threats and opposition
Shall not blunt our mission;
Let all the world hear –
God is in control.

I might add: Cares and concerns over things I have no direct control shall not take away my peace. God is in control. ///

What is Jesus advocating in today's Gospel?

Certainly, not improvidence, laziness, or an expectation that the skies will always be blue. Rather, faith, faith in God's goodness, care and presence. Paul at the end of Romans 8 asks:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?”

He then answers His own question with the affirmation: **“Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.”**

This is our hope and stay as well. Whatever happens, I'm in God's hands, and they are good hands. I'm going to make following Him my first priority and leave the rest to Him.

If you think about it, that's not just good theology, that's good common-sense.

Okay, something catastrophic may one day happen . . . so what? I have today. I'm not going make myself miserable over what *might* happen.

I going to live this day to the full. I'm going to pay attention to the birds of the air, the flowers of the field. I'm going to love, laugh, give thanks and serve. The rest I'm leaving to my Father in heaven.

What's on your mind this morning? What's troubling you? Whatever it is, give it up. Bring it with you as you come to the altar and leave it there. Let go and let God.

“Don't worry. Be happy.” More than a glib line from a popular song: a direct command from God above.