

## Lessons Along the Way: Do Not Worry

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 6:24-34  
on March 5, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

### I.

We're moving steadily through Jesus' lessons along the way in the Sermon on the Mount, considering over these past weeks the things that capture Jesus' imagination too: the here-and-not-yet kingdom of God, the interior life of prayer and practices of discipleship, the encouragements against storing up here in favor of planting there. Jesus foregrounds the experience of trusting God in the Sermon, and never more clearly than in today's text.

You can't serve God and wealth, Jesus warns. It divides your heart and your attention. Put money in its right place, otherwise it will own you like a master, and you its slave.

And do not worry about your life, he continues, not what you'll eat or drink or what clothes you'll wear. The word translated here as 'worry' comes from the Greek, *merimna*, which can also be translated as sleeplessness or anxiety that paralyzes.<sup>1</sup> So instead of that energy-draining and self-destructive worry, look at the birds, flying free, "careless in the care of God," as the Message translation says. Instead of the ceaseless fretting and debilitating panic, consider the lilies of the field, among the loveliest of creation. If God's eye is on the sparrow, and if God's mind is on the lily, don't you think God will take care of you, you of little faith? Do you trust that God holds you in it?

### II.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Case-Winters, *Matthew, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, p93.

This is one of those texts that causes the hearer to very immediately protest, am I right?

You can't serve God and wealth, Jesus? Haven't you heard the news? Inflation's up, and markets are down, and recession fears are around every corner. The many are one crisis away from bankruptcy, and the few are richer than ever before.

Don't worry about tomorrow, Jesus? Haven't you seen what's going on around here? The planet is warming, and our unity is cooling. War is raging, and division is reigning, and haters are having their hey-dey.

Look at the birds and consider the lilies, Jesus? Better yet, look at the bills!<sup>2</sup> Consider the mortgage! Look at this diagnosis and that relationship headed right toward a trainwreck. Consider this threat of a layoff and that pipe that's about to burst and flood the basement.

Yet to our protestations, Jesus is clear and calm. *Don't try to serve God and money. Don't worry. Do look. Do consider.* And in the context of everything he's named so far about the kingdom of God, we hear these words in light of God's new day that is dawning here. Sometimes the dawn blurs easily with the darkness, the horizon is hidden and can't be seen. Yet Jesus believes it. He announces it. He points to it. He lives it. He dies for it. This new day, this new dawn cannot be held in the darkness of the tomb.

But before we can believe it and announce it and point to it and live it ourselves, Jesus knows we have to see in a whole new way first. As scholar Anna Case-Winters notes, "of course, it is not enough to say, 'do not worry.' Capacity to trust in God's providence enough not to worry requires seeing the world altogether differently."<sup>3</sup> Jesus understands that for humans,

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Thomas Long for this image, *Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion*, p75.

<sup>3</sup> Case-Winters, p92.

sometimes we have to see it to believe it. “Those who know that God summons the sun to rise,” Tom Long says, “are confident that, whatever tomorrow brings, it will also bring God with it.”<sup>4</sup>

So look at the birds and consider the lilies, Jesus says. Lift up your eyes to the hills, the Psalmist says. Stop and consider God’s wonders, Job says. In God, all things hold together, Colossians says.

Let’s remember all that Jesus is **not** saying here. He’s not saying “don’t worry about tomorrow, because I’m going to make everything alright. Don’t worry about tomorrow, because you’re just fine today! Don’t worry about tomorrow, because the reckoning will come and I’ll zoom you up to heaven before we get there. Don’t worry about tomorrow, because your worries are baseless and impure, or your preparations are useless and trite.” He’s not inviting us to “look to your bank account, for there will you find rest,” or “consider the politicians or the systems of this world, for there will you find hope.” He doesn’t ask us to “list all the issues you have with the birds of the air,” or to “critique the lilies of the field.”<sup>5</sup>

As God’s beloved creation planted like a seed in this world, Jesus is clear. Turn your attention outside of yourself with more intention than just a casual glance. Remember that this world has needs beyond the ones right before you. When anxiety and worry rises up like waters threatening to crest your head, reorient yourself to the God who says, “when you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned.” Allow

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Long, p76.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Nadia Bolz Weber for this phrase from her sermon found here:

<https://www.mavismoon.com/blog/meditation-for-iudgmental-bastards-like-me-nadia-bolz-weber>

your imagination to awaken to a new day where worry isn't your daily companion. Trust that God has the whole world in their hands.

This new way of seeing doesn't eliminate the mortgage or save you from the layoff. But as you see a new way of living, one ungoverned by sleeplessness and suffocating anxiety, you see what cannot be taken away from the winds and whims of this world. Your belovedness, right in God's heart. Your place, right in God's hands. Indeed, God did not promise to give us a happy life, but rather a **held** life. Held like the sparrows in God's eyes, held like the lilies clothed by God's imagination, held in nothing less than unconditional love for you and me.

### III.

Three years and a week ago, I sat on my back porch in a complete state of disorientation. It seemed to me that the ropes tethering my life's boat to every meaningful anchor that grounded me had been sliced, hacked without warning, and suddenly I was adrift in the open sea. The day before, I'd read a convincing article entitled, "The Case for Canceling Everything,"<sup>6</sup> and one right after the other, it was happening with dizzying speed: airports and public places, NBA games, restaurants, my kids' school. And after deep consultation with our lay leaders, I emailed you to say that we wouldn't gather in person for worship that Sunday, and for the rest of the month at least. It was unthinkable. You remember it too, I'm sure, those early days of covid when every contour and shade of that unrelenting, uncompromising steamroll towards a new reality felt as disorienting as anything we'd ever known.

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<sup>6</sup> "The Case for Canceling Everything," *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2020.

That morning, I'd woken up in a panic, sweaty and breathless, my heart racing and my mind on fire with worry, a morning state I'd learn to grow familiar with in this season. I poured my cup of coffee, and slipped through the house to the porch. I remember inhaling deeply in the quiet dark, the fresh morning air a needed salve to my fear and emotional claustrophobia which had seemingly sprung up overnight.

Something else had sprung up overnight: the blooms on the cherry tree in the center of my backyard, their white and pink petals dazzling like mounds of snowflakes gracing an awakening world. *Has the tree always been this beautiful?*, I wondered. I took a long sip of my coffee, and quickly opened *The New York Times* app on my phone, unable to look away for another moment. Headline after headline crashed over me, as I felt my shoulders rise and tighten, my breath quicken, my stomach churning with the surreal. And then a chorus stopped me in my doom-scrolling – the birds in my backyard were practically shouting at each other. I watched them fly laps around my yard, chasing each other across the treetops, their every squawk and sigh ringing with the sunrise. I told Josh later that I felt like I was in a bird sanctuary or a Disney movie. *Have the birds always been this loud?*, I wondered.

Despite all the evidence staring me in the face, I couldn't see it that day; the anxiety was just too dominating. In the days to follow, I'd do as I bet you did: receive handmade masks as life preservers, fly nervously through grocery and then Clorox the boxes and packages when I got home, hunt down hand sanitizer and Lysol like my life depended on it (because frankly I thought it did), make a schedule for my kids' homeschooling (because I was grabbing for order wherever I could), drink some water and call my mom and try to breathe.

Yet over time, underneath the anxiety that laid over me like a weighted blanket, I'd find that the created world all around me was healing me and making me whole every day. Somehow in this moment of deepest anxiety and worry and fear in a generation of our world's movement, God gave us the birds of the air to watch and the lilies of the field to consider. I'd awaken to spring like I had never before, noticing all that unfurled while my life hurried from moment to moment, too busy to look beyond a casual glance. I'd hear the holy invitation echo through the ages and hold me in this precise place of fear: *Emily, listen to the birds. Consider the cherry tree. Pet your dog. Look to the horizon liquid with sunrise. Come to the peace of wild things. Lie down in green pastures. Let me lead you to still waters. Don't worry about tomorrow. Rest in the grace of the world, in the grace of Love, in the grace of God, and be free.*

#### IV.

So friends, my prayer for us today is this. May you hear Jesus's call to lay down your anxieties and worries about these days. May you be encouraged as you turn your eyes and your spirit instead to the lilies and the sparrows who hold God's favor. May you let God hold you close in the living of your days. And there, may you be free.

*I sing because I'm happy!*

*I sing because I'm free!*

*For his eye is on the sparrow,*

*And I know he watches me.*

*Amen!*