

“The Birds of the Air” / Matthew 6:25-34 / 24 November 2013

“Do not worry about your life,” Jesus tells the impoverished multitudes of the Galilean countryside, “what you will eat and what you will wear. Consider the lilies of the field; God clothes them better than a king. Look at the birds of the air; God cares for them, and you're worth more than a whole flock. Don't worry about tomorrow. Don't worry.” Ah, but it's just so hard not to worry!

Years ago, in the mists of another life, I used to deal with my worries by taking them out into the woods and abandoning them there like Hansel and Gretel. I used to go out every Sunday with a camera, a walking stick, and a bottle of water. My goal was always to discover new ground on a Sunday hike. Up in Kane, we were surrounded by so much forest that it would have taken me a decade of Sundays to finally exhaust it all. When I got back from my hikes—and this step was somehow as important as the hike itself—when I got back, I would go to my computer and put that day's hike onto my little blog about the forest. I mostly just kept the blog as a photo-journal for myself, a way that I could revisit all my best hikes whenever I was sitting at my desk and up to my neck in tedious or trying tasks. I never expected anyone to read my hiking blog. I mean, it was far from gripping material. I talked about salamanders, and moss, and strangely shaped rocks. But read it they did. In time, a local online magazine asked for permission to republish many of the articles. I adopted a pen name, “The Woodland Parson.” (Okay, so that wasn't really my pen name, but it's pretty close.) And I became the hiking guru of the Allegheny National Forest. It's easy to become the guru of something that nobody else is writing about. The fame was unexpected...and thrilling.

As the newly designated authority on the great North Woods of Pennsylvania, I began to get emails from people asking me to help them plan their backpacking trips. Mind you, backpackers are people who actually spend the night in the forest, a thing that I have still never done—except in safe, conventional campgrounds. I got one email that said, “I'm coming up from Pittsburgh to camp at a certain spot you mentioned. Can you tell me if it's safe for my Labradors to drink the water in that stream?” Needless to say, it was a question beyond my area of expertise...which, by the way, is supposed to be divinity. Someone else wrote in to say, “I'm coming in from Cleveland to camp out at Seneca Head, what do I do about bears?” I dunno, pepper spray? Loud noises? Most living creatures are repelled by knock-knock jokes. Try those.

The scariest email of all came from a mother in New York City, a lifelong New Yorker who followed my blog faithfully, and she loved the idea of getting closer to nature. She wrote to ask the standard questions about drinking water and bears, then she told me that she had seen some photos I had taken of a boulder called Sleeping Giant, and she loved it and wanted to go there with her ten-year-old daughter. She was going to drive as far as the nearest town, about fifteen miles away from the boulder, then she and her daughter were going to ride mountain bikes into the forest in search of Sleeping Giant, where they planned to camp. Now Sleeping Giant is a truly spectacular rock; it's an enormous boulder with a deep overhang, maybe thirty feet across, with a sheltered area underneath. People have been camping under that thirty-foot wide roof for centuries. Archaeologists believe that the Erie Indians—long since extinct—used the place for shelter. It's unknown to tourists, and there are no roads in and out of the area. It's a fascinating place that I'd recommend to anyone...except to a woman and little girl from New York City. I wrote back and tried to be positive about the adventure that this New Yorker had planned. I was very glad that my blog had helped to bring a couple of tourists to the area. But I also had a deep-seated sense of guilt: two city girls, only one of them an adult, on bikes, beyond the range of all cell phones! They wouldn't last one night alone in the woods. I wouldn't have braved a trip like that, and I was the Woodland Parson!

I imagined mother and daughter showing up at Sleeping Giant, weary from their long bike trip, to find a pack of drunken drifters hiding out there from the law. I was sure that my faithful readers from New York would perish at the hands of escaped convicts, or at the paws of black bears, or in the jaws of some poisonous snake. And the last words on their lips would be, “Woodland Parson! You misled us! We're a couple of nice Jewish girls from the Upper West Side; our lives were still before us.

We trusted you, Woodland Parson, but you led us deep into the dismal forest to die!”

And so, of course, in order to spare them such a fate, I began to micromanage their vacation. “What you need to bring is this. Where you need to go is there. And hey, do you know what poison ivy looks like? Poison oak? Poison SUMAC?? It's less common but very itchy.” Oh, how I worried about my faithful reader from the Big Apple. I just wanted her and her daughter to be safe, so much so that...she stopped answering my cautionary emails. Well, the weeks dragged on, and I forgot about the two girls from New York City who wanted to camp at Sleeping Giant until, one day on the Internet, I happened across a photo of the two of them, posing in the cavernous rock shelter at Sleeping Giant. And in the caption of the photo, it said, “Thanks to Woodland Parson, we found the coolest rock in the world. This is Sleeping Giant.” And it occurred to me, just because they're Jewish women from New York doesn't mean they're any less capable of taking care of themselves than I am. In fact, it could have meant the opposite. You've got to be pretty strong to be any one of those three things: a Jew, a New Yorker, a woman. And I realized that my worrying had been silly and needless. I turned my back, and they made the trip and had a great time. Fear! It caused me to grasp for control that just didn't belong to me. My worries caused me to reach for control that was far from mine.

It's just so hard when you're not the one in control, so hard not to...worry. In our reading today from Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount, he says, “Do not worry about your life. Look at the birds of the air; they don't plant or reap, and still God cares for them. Consider the lilies of the field; they do nothing at all, and they're better dressed than the most glorious king. Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.”

You can tell that Jesus first preached these poetic words in the open-air. These famous lines have the mark of a completely unscripted sermon. It's as if Jesus feels the Spirit moving, so he stands up on the mountainside and speaks. And see how he speaks about the things he sees: the birds, the lilies, the fields. He speaks about the things he knows, as a poor Galilean, reaping and gathering into barns, toiling, and spinning thread. He just gets up and says what he believes to be true. He talks about birds, and the love of God, the pointlessness of worrying. You and I are so constitutionally unlike Jesus! As most of you know, I have recurring nightmares about preaching without notes. What would I even say to you if I'd accidentally grabbed the wrong manila folder when I left the house this morning, if I found myself standing in this pulpit with a folder full of grocery receipts or unpaid bills? Would I have the ability to stand before you, like Jesus, and talk about the birds of the air?

No, for you see, unlike Jesus—and perhaps a little bit like you—I am a worrier. Unlike Jesus, I like to be in control of my environment. And unlike Jesus, I don't really know all that much about the birds or the lilies of the field. If worrying could add one single hour to our span of life, then you and I might be in for a long one! But just consider those birds of the air, so calm and unafraid! The birds of the air don't worry about anything. They prepare, and they build nests, and they search for food. They sing. Some of them come to tragic ends at sliding glass doors and on the bumpers of cars, but they don't worry. Just listen to those old birds. They've been singing the same old songs since long before Jesus walked the earth. And they'll be singing like that long after you and I are gone. They're not singing any wise words. They're just doing what they're made to do, because they have the wisdom to *know* what it is that they were made to do, and the great wisdom to be content with it. The birds, in all their birdbrained simplicity are wise enough not to worry, wise enough to know themselves and stick to the things that they were created for. They neither reap nor gather in barns. And yet your heavenly Parent feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

It's all about being in control...which we're not, but which we want so badly to be. Nothing worries us quite like the deep down realization that diet, and exercise, and careful financial planning, and even an hour of church every week cannot put us in the driver's seat of the universe. A manager at an insurance agency said to a new employee, “We don't sell safety. We sell peace of mind.” He might as well have said, “We sell an illusion of being in control.” You and me, we invest so much, so much energy, and time, and money in purchasing illusions of being in control.

It starts early in life, too. Many older people tell me that they remember lying in bed as children and listening to their parents talking about money problems. And then they, as children, would lie awake late into the night worrying about things that they didn't begin to understand and couldn't do anything about. They would dream up solutions. I'll set up a lemonade stand and rescue my parents from the poorhouse. I'll sell my dolls. I'll get a job. How we worry! My own daughters started doing it when they were five and six. Driving in the car, one of them would speak up from the backseat, with a note of worry in her voice, "Dad, are we going the right way?" Or if I made a U-turn, "Are we lost?" My favorite was when they asked, out of the blue, "Are we going to run out of gas?" Neither of them has ever been in a car that ran out of gas. I'm not quite sure that they know what it means to run out of gas. But it scared them. I just wanted to tell them, "Don't worry. You don't even understand the issues that you're so worried about. Worry about childlike things, like whether Dora and Boots will be able to get the baby panda home before dark. Don't worry about these things that I've already taken into consideration." But it doesn't help to tell someone, "Relax. Don't worry." That advice has to come from within.

There are so many things to worry about. A Lutheran pastor was driving through a very Catholic section of Chicago, and his wife was beside him in the passenger seat. Officer O'Malley stopped the pastor for speeding, but when he noticed the pastor's collar, he assumed that the man was a Catholic priest. Suddenly the officer was very respectful. "Um, excuse me for pulling you over, father, I can see you're a busy man. I just need to remind you to respect the speed limits, if you please, now. Have a good day." The officer drove off, and the pastor's wife said, "Shame on you. Don't you know what he took you for?" The pastor replied, "Oh, I know what he took *me* for. I just wonder what he thought about *you*." We worry about needless things, like what people think of us. We worry about the people we love. We worry about our life, and we worry endlessly about tomorrow.

But of all our many worries, our biggest one is over the fact that we're not in control. Each and every human life is littered with vain attempts to gain control of the universe, to wrest it from the capable hands in which it has been placed, and to put it in our own. From God's perspective, it's probably about as silly as our five-and-six-year-old children telling us how to drive. So Jesus tries to soothe those ragged, impoverished people of Galilee back in his day, and his message is still the same for you and me, "Do not worry about your life. Consider the birds of the air; they neither reap nor gather into barns, but your heavenly Parent cares for them, and you are worth more than many birds." We all worry and grasp for control. But if we were actually handed the steering wheel for this big world and its destiny, I think we'd learn right quickly what a thankless task it is to be the one in control. We're not up to it, and so our worry is unnecessary and even harmful.

Some people actually use their faith as a means of feeling in control. They do it because there is a real sadness that comes with admitting our own powerlessness. But on the other side of that pain, there is joy. It's the joy of laying down a heavy burden that we had no business carrying in the first place. The quest for control is a misguided one. It has wrecked many a human life and many a nation. No, control is not the answer, for we cannot have it. A better quest is a life of simple acceptance, a life of trust, a life that looks at its own worries and fears, then says, "Control is not mine. I cannot be in control. But I will remind myself that the God who has brought me thus far still walks beside me. I will choose to trust." For though things may not always turn out the way we would have chosen, we can see it in the world. There is One who brings hope out of fear, joy out of sorrow, life out of death. And in the end, even the thing you most fear often turns out to bear its strange and wonderful gift. We're not in control, and we hate that. It worries us. We're not in control—not really—but we can participate with God in bringing about a world that ought to be.

Consider the birds of the air, they don't do anything to earn their keep. But God cares for them, and you are worth more than many birds. Whenever we walk through uncertain times, times of transition, times of change, we feel that old lack of control bearing down on us. And it's scary. We don't recognize our lack of control for the gift that it is. There are times of transition ahead for all of

us. But the God who directed the past directs our future. My prayer for us is that we will face the days ahead with all the grace and courage of a flock of birds. Amen.