

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

November 24, 2021 – THANKSGIVING EVE, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*Don't Worry—Be Thankful!*”

Joel 2:21-27 (The prophet encourages people, animals, and even the soil, not to fear—God is doing great things)  
Psalm 126 (Rejoice for all the Lord has done for us.)  
1 Timothy 2:1-7 (The apostle encourages prayer and thanksgiving for all people)  
St. Matthew 6:25–33 (Jesus counsels against worry—that we are to place His kingdom and its righteousness first)

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I suspect there isn't a person alive who doesn't worry—at least, part of the time, or at some point. It's endemic to the human condition, and can happen even when we're fine and everything is going okay. That said, I also think there are two types of worriers, which my husband and I each exemplify. Rick, a phlegmatic, says: “I don't worry unless there's something to worry about.” Whereas, I, a choleric, say: “I worry until there's nothing to worry about.”

But in this evening's Gospel lesson, Jesus begins by telling His disciples—and by extension, every one of us—“*Stop worrying about your life!*” He emphasizes this by adding, “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” Or, as a 21<sup>st</sup>-century online meme read: “Worrying really works! 98 percent of what I worry about never happens.” Further illustrating the futility of worry, Eli Joseph Cossman, an American inventor and entrepreneur, wrote: “If you want to test your memory, try to recall what you were worrying about one year ago today.”<sup>1</sup>

Then, there's the story (you may have already heard) about the woman who, for several years, had been having trouble sleeping at night because she was worried about burglars. One night her husband heard a noise in the house, so he went downstairs to investigate. When he got there, he *did* find a burglar. “Good evening,” said the man of the house. “I'm so pleased to see you. Come upstairs and meet my wife. She's been waiting ten years to encounter you.”<sup>2</sup>

Usually, we hear that the antidote to worry is faith. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century essayist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote: “Sorrow looks back, Worry looks around, Faith looks up.” And Martin Luther penned: “Pray, and let God worry.” Faith *is* an important part of putting our worries to rest, but speaking from personal experience, I find that one of the best hedges against fear and anxiety is *gratitude*. Thankfulness. Giving thanks. Thanksgiving. An attitude of gratitude.

On those days when life seems to be getting the better of me, I try to begin thinking of things for which I'm grateful, and to thank God for them—as minor and mundane as they may be. I could be in the shower and simply thank God for privacy (which many third-world people don't have), and for unpolluted hot water (another scarcity in many places), and for soap that smells good. Or I might be driving to church and start thanking God for the blue sky, that baby lamb I just saw, and the colors of the autumn leaves as they are turning.

Daring to utter these “small thanksgivings” usually moves me to larger, more important ones, such as thanking God for His being God, and for sending us Jesus. And expressing my profound gratitude for my family, the health I do have, the joys of music and laughter, this congregation, and so on.

In our Old Testament lesson for this evening, the prophet Joel enjoins the people, the animals, and even the *soil*—the very *dirt* under their feet—not to fear. Not to be anxious. Not to worry. Instead, they are to “rejoice and be glad!” Why? Because, says Joel, “the Lord has done great things.” He goes on remind them of the rain the Lord sends to grow the crops, and the fruitfulness of the land; how God will repay the people for the years the locusts destroyed their harvests; how the people will feast on abundance once more, and Israel will never again be put to shame.

The ancient prophet is on the right track here, because he understands that joy and thanksgiving go together. In tonight's Psalm 126, verse 3 (New International Version) reads: "The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy." Rick and I have a framed, calligraphed version of this verse on our wall at home. It was given to us as a wedding gift, and expressed our joy and gratitude at being united in marriage.

Giving thanks is also closely linked with *remembering* good things—either from your own life, or more importantly, which you feel God has done for you. In tonight's Gospel, Jesus invites us to remember how the Lord cares for the birds in the air, the flowers on the vine, and the grass in the fields. And, He reminds us that to God, *we* are of even greater value—so why wouldn't the Lord take just as good care of *us* as He does of nature?

If you can't think of anything for which to be thankful, then try to remember good things that have already happened in your experience, or which you believe the Lord did for you—or, for someone else. This tends to lead to gratitude, and from there, to a greater sense of peace.

When Jesus speaks of the "Gentiles" fretting over what they will wear, what they will eat, where they will go, what they will do, and so on, He means non-believers, those who don't know the God of Israel. Or, in our frame of reference, those who aren't Christians, who don't know Jesus. By extension, does that mean when we worry, we are evidencing unbelief? No, because plenty of faithful Christians are still anxious and fearful. We may indeed have a strong faith in God, but at the same time, if we are worrying about everything, we're *behaving* like non-believers. And we don't want to do that! Faith's twin is Trust, and this is the core issue. Trusting God for what we need is an act of our will, a decision, *not a feeling* or an emotion.

A few years ago, I was greatly concerned that an out-of-print music CD for St. John's Vacation Bible School had been misplaced. I was hoping to purchase another disc somewhere, but hadn't been able to find one. Since I felt strongly God wanted us to go forward with this Christian education endeavor, *daily* I had to tell the Lord, "Either I trust You, or I don't. And I'm not willing to say I *don't* trust You. So, I trust you." It was a *decision*. An act of the will. I still *felt* anxious! Eventually, I was able to order the CD from eBay, and our VBS was terrific! This was a good example of what American columnist and podcaster, Regina Brett, meant, when she quipped: "Everything can change in the blink of an eye. But don't worry; God never blinks."<sup>3</sup>

As we head into the Thanksgiving Holiday, let us take to heart that we are not to worry about things, and that—along with our faith—*gratitude* and *remembering* can be pathways to greater peace of mind. After all, true thanks-giving doesn't have to do with *what's* around us, but with *Who* is in us. The Bible says that God is love, and St. Paul tells us that "hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Romans 5:5) True peace comes to our spirits as a gift from God Himself. As we read in 1 Timothy 1:7 (YLT), "God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind," or, as the Amplified version puts it, "a calm, well-balanced mind."

In 1636, amid the Thirty Years' War, a German Lutheran pastor, Martin Rinkart, is reputed to have buried five thousand of his parishioners in one year, and average of fifteen a day. His people were ravaged by the plague, conflict, and economic disaster. (Hmm ... sounds like our time, too.)

In the heart of that darkness, with the cries of fear and suffering arising outside his window, he sat down and wrote this table grace for his children: "Now thank we all our God / With heart and hands and voices; / Who wondrous things hath done, / In whom His world rejoices. / Who, from our mother's arms, / Hath led us on our way / With countless gifts of love/ And still is ours today." Here was a man who truly understood that thanksgiving comes from the love of God that He has poured into our hearts, and not from our outward circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

**Let us pray:** Lord God, You are the author of love, hope, joy, and peace. As we give thanks for all the many blessings with which You have abundantly filled our lives, help us not to worry about the days to come, nor to be anxious about the things of this world. Give us grace to remember Your goodness and be grateful, and help us to trust that hope *does not* disappoint us, because of Your love poured into our hearts through the gift of Your Holy Spirit. To You be all thanksgiving, honor, and praise! *Amen*.

<sup>1</sup> E. Joseph Cossman, [GoodReads.com](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/823291.E._Joseph_Cossman), n.d. <[https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/823291.E.\\_Joseph\\_Cossman](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/823291.E._Joseph_Cossman)> 15 November 2021. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Adapt. William Marshall, "Eternity Shut in a Span," [SermonIllustrations.com](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/w/worry.htm), n.d. <<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/w/worry.htm>> 15 November 2021. Used with permission.

<sup>3</sup> Regina Brett, [BrainyQuote.com](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/worry-quotes) <<https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/worry-quotes>> 16 November 2021. Used with permission.

<sup>4</sup> Adapt. Don Maddox, [SermonIllustrations.com](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/t/thanksgiving.htm), n.d. <<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/t/thanksgiving.htm>> 15 November 2021. Used with permission.