

“Written on the Palm of God’s Hands”

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Isaiah 49:8-16; Matthew 6:24-34

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Some years ago, a book came out titled You Can’t Afford the Luxury of a Negative Thought. I first became aware of it when my mother had a bad heart attack. She had bypass surgery, and then in the days following all this in the hospital she was given lots of materials for recovery from heart disease, such as dietary and exercise recommendations. Then she was given handouts about lifestyle change and stress reduction. It was all quite interesting, and I’ve tried to apply some of those stress reducers to my life, such as “Don’t wait until your gas tank is on empty to go to the gas station; buy another loaf of bread when you are low on bread instead of waiting until you are actually out of bread,” and so forth. Finally, my mother was given a list of recommended books to read for her recovery and successful living. They encouraged laughter and reduction of worry and anxiety. One of them was You Can’t Afford the Luxury of a Negative Thought.

Well, what do you know, the gift shop of Virginia Mason Hospital, where Mom was recovering, had a small book store, and lots of the books on Mom’s “heart health” list were in that book store! Such a coincidence! I bought three or four of them, including You Can’t Afford the Luxury of a Negative Thought. I left this small stack of new books on a side table in Mom’s room, being a dutiful daughter, though I admit I was a bit skeptical as to how much good they could really do. I left for the evening, and went home.

The next morning I returned to the hospital, and Mom had had a good night. I found her propped up in bed and reading this book about negativity being an unaffordable luxury. She was excited about it, smiling with new light in her eyes, eyes that had so recently been dulled by crisis and pain. “Mary, this is such a good book!” and then she went on and on about how negativity and worry and anxiety are often choices that we make about how we interpret the world around us. Such negativity is often a luxury of persons who have choice about the way they live, and it has documented affects upon one’s health. Rather than pushing a type of “positive thinking” approach that ignores or even avoids reality, the book urges its readers to take full acceptance of their current reality, but then choose to focus upon what is positive. Worry is too energy-sapping and negativity distracts from the goodness and beauty that are within our grasp, if we will choose to give them priority.

I remembered this book as I pondered our Gospel lesson today. “Therefore I tell you,” says Jesus, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” Jesus says these things in the middle of his wonderful and life-giving Sermon on the Mount. This sermon begins with the Beatitudes, and then lasts through

chapter 7 of Matthew. The Sermon on the Mount is full of wonderful nuggets of truth and inspiration, and it is formed around the overarching theme of the urgency and the distinctiveness of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Now the Kingdom of Heaven is a reality that is very different from so many other lifestyles, or credos, or loyalties, or earthly realities. Wealth and possessions may have an intoxicating allure that derails the priority of God's Kingdom, and we hear about how loyalty to God must take precedence over these things. Self-righteousness and prestige and outward religious show are also distractions from the true Realm of God. Anger and a judgmental attitude are attributes that can become all-consuming to persons, and the Sermon on the Mount continually points us back to the difference that living in the here and now as a citizen of Heaven makes in the life of a disciple of Jesus. So many things can sidetrack us from what is real and what is truly important in life, and the Sermon on the Mount reorients us to what really matters.

Worry is right in there, too, and it is the focus of our Scripture today. Stress and anxiety do not rule over sparrows and lilies, and neither should they hold ultimate sway over human beings. We don't have time for worry. We have the reign of God to strive for!

Does this mean that we're all to go home after church today and forget about fixing dinner? Will it just appear on the table, floating down from heaven? Does this mean we need to give up maintaining a home, earning a living through work, and throwing away any and all forms of responsibility? Of course not!

Does this mean that we should respond to all of those who have lost so much in the disasters of Myanmar and China and the Midwest of our own nation with a word that they need to quit worrying about where they will sleep and what they will eat and how they will provide for their dependent family members? Of course not! God help us if we distort the Scriptures to respond to hurting people in such a calloused and stand-offish manner!

There are realities of survival that rightly demand our attention. But these things should never become the tail that wags the dog in our living. If you want to find life as God intends it, put the World of God at the top of your list. Security, both personal and global, must come second to that. No matter how effective your deadbolts and alarm systems and anxious preparations, not one thing on this earth will last forever. God's World outlasts everything. Running after money and stuff really leads no where, in the end. So does the desire to outworry and overplan for every contingency that might possibly arise. It really disintegrates when real life comes along. You can't outguess everything that might happen to you or to your loved ones, and you will kill yourself with worry trying to manage everything around you. Best to be reasonably prudent, and then trust God to be there for the unforeseen future.

Do you remember The Color Purple? What an amazing book by Alice Walker, and what a beautiful movie by Steven Spielberg. In one scene, the two main characters, two African American women, are walking in a field full of wild flowers. There is the wonderful scent of the outdoors, such as the scent of spring that surrounds us right now in these springy days. Many of the wildflowers in this scene of the book and the movie are colored purple, and one woman says to the other that she thinks it makes God frustrated when people just walk right by the color purple and don't see it. Creation is alive with beauty and love. "It just want to be loved," she says. Then she points to the trees, and says they are all but shouting about their God-given beauty. "God just want to be loved, too," she concludes, and says that God goes to great lengths to love us and to surround us with care and beauty. The sin is that we just ignore it all.

The writer of Isaiah puts it so well: "Can a woman forget her nursing child,...Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; ..." God loves us immensely, and God will not forget us. No matter what happens, God will be with us through disasters and mistakes and illness and hardship.

Trust in God's care frees us to give more of ourselves in pursuit of God's reign, that world in which the poor, the meek, the grieving, the hungry, the merciful, the peacemakers, and the persecuted all find blessing. Trust in God's care frees us to put our self-interest aside, and to be part of God's blessing to the hurting ones around us. And then, isn't it amazing, when we have a giving heart and an outreached hand, we think we are blessing another person, but instead we find we are the one blessed by the compassion and transformation of our own heart?

So friends, place yourselves in the loving hands of God, hands that already have your name written upon them. You don't have time to worry or fret or disintegrate with fear and anger. The Kingdom of God is at the doorstep! It is time to embrace a new way to live! It is time to step out with the love of God changing the way you see the world around you. And know that, as preacher Tom Long says, "Whatever tomorrow brings, it brings God with it." Nothing will ever separate you from God's love, and nothing will ever steal you away from those caring hands. It's time to let go of all the frantic stuff of life, and let the life-giving wonder of God's love and presence infuse your world anew. Amen.