

## **WHAT, ME WORRY?**

### **Psalm 9: 7-10, Matthew 6: 25-34 – Bear Canyon, Cor Villa, RGPC**

When it comes to being worried, are you happy with the worries you have, or would you like more? I can lend you some. I have plenty. I imagine that most of us would prefer less than more. When I was growing up, my mom used that wonderful word “worrywart.” “Don’t be such a worrywart,” someone who constantly worries about this or that. Which is also what Jesus urges in our second scripture reading, “Therefore I tell you, do not be a worrywart about your life.” But it’s hard not to worry, is it not?

Worries pop up everywhere. For ex., one summer I worked at Bottomless Lakes State Park outside Roswell to get money to return to college in the fall. A routine chore was emptying 55-gallon steel drums filled with garbage from the picnic tables onto a flatbed truck and driving them a distance to the dump. Johnny Nunez was working with me. It was over 100 degrees, the sun beating down, and the first drum we loaded was not only incredibly heavy, but it stunk to high heaven. It was a candidate for the Nauseous Smell of the Year award.

Johnny and I looked at each other knowing what we needed to do. We needed to drive as fast as that truck would go to the dump and get rid of that overly odorous garbage. But it was only one of twenty barrels that needed to

be taken to the dump. If the supervisor found out that we had driven all that distance and back for just one barrel full of trash, as opposed to taking all the barrels, we'd be in trouble.

As I worried about what to do, I thought about my cousin Jay. Jay Johnson wasn't worried about smelly garbage in fly infested, 100-degree, heat. No. He had a summer job in an air-conditioned auditorium performing at Six Flags over Texas that summer. He had taught himself how to be a ventriloquist, and his life has always seemed rather worry-free to me. Oh, I'm sure that he's always worried about getting a next booking; still, he's stayed busy. His was the first act when the Comedy Club opened here in Albuquerque. Mike Molony interviewed him on the radio. And I'm sure he worried about improving his craft: Still, in 2006, he was nominated for a Tony Award for his one-person play, "The Two and Only," a history of ventriloquism. I also imagine he worried about getting the play to New York and then whether or not he'd win. And I, for one, would worry about what I'd do as an old ventriloquist. Old ventriloquists have lots of competition. We elderly often stand around mumbling under our breath. We get so good at it that not even our grandkids can see our lips move. Give us a dummy and we could easily move in on Jay's territory.

Still, it seemed to me as I worried about that smelly garbage barrel that the life of a ventriloquist is rather worry free in comparison to many other lines of work. Just sit there and open the dummies mouth. But then one day my aunt, Jay's mom, told me that it's not uncommon for ventriloquists to develop psychological problems. Think about it. Night after night, the dummy gets all the laughs while the ventriloquist does all the work. My cousin has always seemed rock solid to me, but his mom told me about a couple of other well-known ventriloquists, one who was on TV constantly doing commercials at the time. He was so jealous of his dummy that he had sought counseling, which didn't work. For his mental health, he was getting out of the business. Never wanted to see that dummy again.

Life can be misleading, can it not? I thought that if I had learned to be a ventriloquist like Jay, my worries would all be over. When, in reality, ventriloquists also have to get along with dummies.

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Worries, do you have enough? Global warming, the attack on democracy, the widespread misunderstanding of the church, the nuclear clock. Still, Jesus asks the question, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" One of the things we worry about is the effect of nutrition on our span of life, so here for your benefit is the definitive health study.

“The Japanese eat little fat and suffer fewer heart attacks than the British and Americans. The French eat a lot of fat and also suffer fewer heart attacks than the British and Americans. The Japanese drink very little red wine and suffer fewer heart attacks than the British and Americans. The Italians drink excessive amounts of red wine and also suffer fewer heart attacks than the British and Americans. The Germans drink a lot of beer and eat lots of sausages and fats and suffer fewer heart attacks than the British and Americans. Conclusion: Eat and drink what you like. Apparently, what kills us is speaking English.”

“Can you by worrying add a single hour to your lifespan?” Certainly not if you worry excessively. *Homiletics Magazine* once reported a study, like so many others, suggesting that not being a chronic worrier can add years to your life. In the mid-sixties, some 7,000 students at the University of North Carolina took the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, a test that among other things, measures one’s tendency to be optimistic or pessimistic. Over the next four decades researchers determined that “the pessimists had a significantly greater likelihood of dying sooner from any cause than did the optimists.” If one wants to live longer, don’t be pessimistic.

Worry, of course, is not the same as pessimism, but it’s not entirely different. Worry is our response to something in particular, pessimism more

an outlook on life in general. At the root of each, often enough, is a shortage of hope and trust, the sort of hope and trust in God that is foundational to Jesus' teachings. Also foundational to our Psalm reading. "The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you." Scripture is filled with calls to hope and trust in the Lord. And our lives are filled with validation for having done so.

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Jesus begins our Matthew reading by saying, "Do not worry about your life;" and brings it to a close by saying, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for the day." Not at all does he say, "Don't worry, period." He says, "Don't be a worrywart." Obviously, we have concerns that are truly worrisome. A pastor was at the hospital the other day when a patient ran out of a room and said, "You've got to get me out of here."... "Why?" ... "Because my nurse said, 'It's a simple operation, you can handle it. No need to worry, nothing will go wrong.'"... "What's wrong with that?" the pastor asked. "The nurse was just trying to comfort you."... "No," said the patient, "she wasn't talking to me. I overheard her talking to my doctor."

There are some things we do need to be worried about, especially when such worries can be alleviated by taking needed action. And right now, there is needed action that needs to be taken on a global scale, lots of it. “A stitch in time still saves nine.” Yet, once we’ve done all we can today, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for the day.”

And we know that reality do we not? How many times have we heard someone say, or we ourselves said as the day wears on, “Whew! It’s been one of those days.” There are those days that run us ragged, get us down. Adding to them worries about an unknown tomorrow could cause us to blow a fuse. Plus, there is so often no need. Not only does what we worry about so often not happen, but Daniel Gilbert, a psychologist who studies happiness, made a discovery in his work that bears upon worry; namely, even when the things we fear happen, they’re often not as bad as we may think. (Repeat)

Gilbert says that a number of experiments have found that people constantly overestimate how unhappy they will be after a tragic event, and this keeps them from taking risks. And we know all about this. Often, when confronted with life choices, we worry that we will be devastated if we choose wrongly. One reason, he says, is that “we base our estimates of our future happiness on the people we are today and fail to appreciate that we

may be different tomorrow.” But things happen, big things, little things, quickly, slowly. We can change to the point that what we fear today is of less concern tomorrow.

Also, when we labor to avoid risks that may bring us sorrow, what we fail to appreciate in advance is how quickly we might absorb such events, should they come to pass, and move on.” We’re more resilient than we may think, which is biblically reinforced by God’s constant confidence in our abilities. In God’s opinion, by God’s grace we can withstand much more than we so often think. “The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble,” says the Psalmist.

William Sloane Coffin, the long-time pastor of Riverside Church in NY City, used to say that God is short on protection but long on support. Meaning, God does not always keep us from encountering difficulties, but God always helps us deal with them. Once he said, “God comes to earth as a baby so that we can finally grow up, which means we can stop blaming God for being absent when we ourselves were not present, stop blaming God for the ills of the world as if we had been laboring to cure them, and stop making God responsible for all the thinking and doing we should be undertaking on our own. I’ve said it before and will probably say it many times again: God provides minimum protection, maximum support – support

to help us grow up, to stretch our minds and hearts until they are as wide as God's universe. God doesn't want us narrow-minded, priggish, and subservient, but joyful and loving, as free for one another as God's love was freely poured out for us at Christmas in that babe in a manger." And if we grow up and stretch our hearts and minds to drink in all of life, we will worry less about tomorrow than some of us do today.

The matters we worry about are both big and small. Still, the good news is that we as individuals, and we as humankind, are capable of handling even those matters that today cause us great worry. Amen.