

## “A Very Present Help”

Psalm 46; Luke 12:22-31 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might trust in your providence so deeply we cannot help but share its blessings. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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It seems every sermon is reminding me of a song lately. This week's is also a children's song, but I didn't learn it till much later in life, because it came from Children Worship & Wonder. I wonder if you remember this one. It's taken directly from Psalm 46: “Be still and know that I am God. Be still and know that I am God. Be still and know that I am God.” I hadn't really noticed it before now, but when I was singing it this morning, it seemed like maybe it was doing that thing where you emphasize a different word in the sentence each time you repeat it. Be still and **know** that I am God. Be still and know that **I** am God. Be still and know that I am **God**. Can you sing it with me once and try to sing it and hear it that way? Be still and **know** that I am God. Be still and know that **I** am God. Be still and know that I am **God**.

In many ways, this is a foundational verse for the lesson we heard from Luke. It looks like Jesus is mostly saying “Don't worry,” but he's basically quoting Psalm 46: Stop freaking out and remember that God is God. All too often, we look at these verses and act like they are just wellness advice: Don't let the stresses of life get to you; it will raise your blood pressure. Use this app to practice some deep breathing

and visualization instead. Imagine you're in a field of lilies (and you don't have any allergies, so you're not sneezing, you're just really relaxed...); the things that were stressing you out can't reach you here!

It's not that stress-relief techniques are a bad thing. It's just that that's not what Jesus is talking about here. To take that lesson is to ignore verses 30 & 31, where Jesus makes his real point. True stress-release isn't about regulated breathing; it's about living within a system where no one has to worry about whether they will have something to eat or not. It's such a simple thing that we have made so complicated, it might feel easier to just put up a poster inviting us to "Consider the Lilies" and go to our "happy place" for a moment. But that's not the full extent of what Jesus is calling us to.

Now, I will be the first to admit that there are some weird red herrings in these verses. Jesus often throws in details that make it seem like he hasn't spent as much time in nature as it seems like he did. Anybody who watches birds for any length of time can tell you that birds hustle all day long to get enough food. God is not just dropping seeds and bugs into their mouths while they lounge about in their nests. Birds are almost as busy as bees! That's why I'm really glad Jesus gave us the example of the lilies as well, because it makes a lot more sense to me. Is there anything so at peace as a plant? Flowers are so much more peaceful than, say, gold finches, who fight even when they're eating birdseed laid right out for them in my bird feeder.

And then there's that bizarre connecting thought in between these two metaphors. "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?" I'm not saying it's weird to declare that worrying doesn't increase our life span. I just think it's funny to pretend that adding an hour to our lives is a "small" thing. I guess we know now that quitting smoking will, statistically, increase your chances of living longer by quite a bit; but they didn't even know that back then. I suppose the point of the nonsense is that Jesus is trying to tell us we're going about it all wrong. That bit about lifespan is him reminding us that God is God and we are not.

Jesus is drawing a contrast here – between the systems of "the nations of the world" and the sacred economy of the kingdom of God. The economy of the world is based on fear, scarcity, and status. You have to worry if you'll have enough; indeed, they want us worried whether we are enough. It's not just do you have something to wear, but is it the right brand name? Is it the latest fashion? Not just did you eat dinner, but have you been to the trendy new restaurant?

The economy of the kingdom of God, on the other hand, is based on love, abundance, and equality. This is a reality in which we recognize our mutual relationship with one another, and no one is afraid to share, because we all trust that God is going to provide for everyone. The watchword of the kingdom of God is "enough." Not as in "that's enough now," but as in "everyone has enough to spare."

God is “a very present help in trouble,” Psalm 46 says, “Therefore we will not fear.” A “very present” help is not about ‘pie in the sky;’ it’s about living in a system where we can depend on our neighbors. God is a very present help because God calls all of us to live as though the kingdom of God is here, near, among us, within us, on earth as it is in heaven, sharing liberally because we trust in the abundance of God’s goodness. Jesus is not telling us that it doesn’t matter if someone eats or not. “Your Father knows that you need” to eat healthy food and drink clean water and have the chance to wear clean, protective clothing. Jesus is inviting us into an alternative economy where these basic realities don’t come about because of individuals striving, but because of communities sharing and looking out for one another, truly treating one another as kin.

The difficult, of course, is that Christians have historically only accepted Jesus’ invitation temporarily. We’ve treated the kingdom of God as a “nice place to visit” without actually committing to living there. And so there are people who are beyond worried about what they’re going to eat, because they have no food. People in our own towns, and people all around the world. God’s economy of love and abundance is failing them because we have failed to enact it. Parents in Gaza are hustling harder than the birds to feed their children, risking death from snipers to do it, and coming up with barely enough to last the day. Children in our own community are relieved to be back in school because they will have a steady source of breakfast and lunch now,

after a long, lean summer. Jesus invited us to strive for the kingdom of God, and instead of following him into that new way of arranging the world, we made posters with flowers telling ourselves not to stress out.

We are not God. But we can be God's hand and feet, if we just choose to be. We can make God a "very present help" by being present in the ways Jesus has called us to be, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, ensuring clean water for the thirsty. We don't have to live in the world the way it is; we can live in the world the way God wants it to be: by striving not for status but for common dignity; not for mine, but for ours; not for dominance, but for mutual trust. When we are motivated by love rather than fear, we can share instead of worry. When we remember that God is God and we are not, we can enter into the economy of compassion Jesus invited us into, without the pressure of having to "fix" it all ourselves. "Therefore we will not fear." Hallelujah and Amen!