

## The Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany • February 27, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Matthew 6:24-34

“Follow Me: Looking Ahead”

Sometimes you just want to get away from it all, take some time off from stress, anxiety, and worry. If you've had a lot going on at school with homework and clubs and practices, it can wear you out. If you've been at work nonstop for the past few months, it can take a toll on your well-being. And sometimes plain-old day-to-day life – and all the things that come with it – can leave you looking for an escape. When you get the chance, taking a vacation can help you do just that; you get to unplug and recharge at the same time. St. John's just gave me some time off, and I had an excellent vacation out west, visiting family in Colorado and getting in some fun in the snow. But whether you like to travel for vacation or just stay near home and enjoy some freedom from your normal routine, your vacation will come to an end.

All of a sudden, it seems, the days have flown past, and you're facing the realization that you've got to go back to the regular life from which you'd taken this time off. Even before the vacation's actually ended, you might start thinking about all of the items on your to-do list that will need to get done. Bills will need paying. Errands will have to be run. And, no, the laundry will not do itself. And when you finally get back into your day-to-day life, you'll find that there'll be catching-up to do, too. You might have been on vacation, but the rest of the world wasn't: e-mails and voicemails have piled up, your electric meter's been running, and the milk you left in the fridge hasn't gotten any fresher. Medical appointments loom on the calendar. Deadlines for new projects start to pop up. Day-to-day life overtakes you before you know it, then you start looking ahead – to your *next* vacation.

When you start to think about all the aspects of our lives that can give us stress, anxiety, and worry, it's easier to see why people need a break. If you're looking for a job and are down to the last dollars in your savings, but can't get work, that's stressful. If you've got exams and competitions that require you to perform to the best of your ability, that can start to make you anxious. If you or your loved one have been hit with an illness, you could get really worried about the future. But you don't really have to have any of these things happen to you to feel stress, anxiety, or worry. **It seems like whenever we look ahead, we human beings are prone to getting ourselves wound up and worn down.**

Teaching his disciples in this next portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells them, *“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on.”* In a country where stores offer hundreds of ways to entertain yourself, thousands of options for what you might wear, and even more ingredients and foodstuffs that you might eat, it's all too easy for us to waste time and energy chasing after such things. Luxuries become wants. Our wants become what we need. We use what we have – and sometimes, even what we don't have – in service of those “needs.” The word that Jesus used when he spoke of “serving two masters” describes a slave's service. One who is a slave isn't capable of divided loyalty: it's an all-or-nothing, either/or kind of serving for a slave. In the same way, we can either serve God or be slaves to material possessions and our perceived needs. We can get so caught up in chasing after “better” stuff that we lose sight of what is most important in this life. This can be a hard thing for us to hear – especially if we don't listen to the rest of what Jesus tells his disciples.

As people who Jesus still calls to follow him, we don't need to worry. Someone once told me that **worry is strength stolen from today that does nothing to improve tomorrow.** Jesus put us

another way: “*And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?*” That could also be translated to mean “who can add even eighteen inches to the journey of his life” – worry gains us nothing. Anxiety does us no good. While I was up in the mountains, I got to thinking about the thinner air up there, how there was less oxygen for breathing. Then I started thinking about how I was stuck up there – and I could feel my heart start to beat faster, feel the anxiety start to creep in. No matter how much energy I might spend on thinking about the thinness of the air, it wasn’t going to change anything! Anxiety works as feedback loop that attacks you and wears you down, stealing your strength and giving you only more worry in return. How good to hear Jesus teach his disciples not to be anxious!

Here’s the thing: **Jesus isn’t just telling us, “Don’t worry!”** I don’t know about you, but when someone tells me not to worry, it seems to have the opposite effect. There’s something else going on here. **Jesus is giving us assurance for God’s care for us.** It’s not that we’re supposed to take it upon ourselves to eliminate worry from our lives. God is the one taking it off our shoulders.

Does this mean that Jesus removes all those things that cause his disciples to be anxious, taking care of all those parts of our lives that invite us to stress out as we look ahead? No! Jesus isn’t offering us some kind of “prosperity gospel” that says that life will be great if you’re a Christian. We still know trouble in life with hardship and illness. Those times just seem to keep coming at us; you might be struggling with something like this right now. Christians can and do know need and hunger in life, particularly in those parts of our world where they face persecution. Likewise, Jesus isn’t calling us to abandon our responsibility in planning as we look ahead. Our Lord still means for us to wisely use our time, abilities, and resources; however, we are set free to look ahead without worry.

So how is it, then, that Jesus teaches his followers not to worry, not to give ourselves over to anxiety? **God knows our needs, even better than we do.** We have a loving Father who knows us and who values us. Jesus uses an illustration that his first hearers might have understood better than us city-dwellers. Do birds have to act like they’re in a Disney cartoon, planting and harvesting food and storing it in barns? Do the flowers have to weave garments for themselves? God provides beauty even for the grass, which one day is green but the next dries out and gets used as fuel for a fire. How much more value are you to God than a bird, or flowers in a field? You, for whom God sent His Son into the world to save your life by giving His up on a cross?

This weekend at St. John’s, God is adopting another child as His own through the waters of Holy Baptism. In Baptism, God has called us to be His own, to follow His Son, Jesus. He puts His mark on us, saying, in effect, “You are my beloved child. I know you. I care for you.” Bringing us into His family, God cares for us as we walk through this journey of life, even as we go through hardship, even as we experience loss.

As people who want to know what it means to follow Christ, hear again his word today: “*But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*” Instead of looking to meet our perceived needs, we look to Jesus and his reign in our lives, his righteousness and love for us. As we focus on following Jesus, living in God’s grace, God sustains us and meets our real needs. **When the stress, anxiety, and worry of this world comes knocking, look to the cross and know God’s peace.**

As this season of Epiphany comes to a close, you can look ahead in hope. Jesus has called you to follow him. He has brought you into his Father’s house, made you a part of the family. He walks with you every day – and **he’ll never take a vacation from you.**

Amen.