

LIVING THE NOW

Part 1 in the Series: Take a Breath

Philippians 4: 4-7, Matthew 6: 25-33

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Jazz vocalist Bobby McFerrin some years back topped the music charts with his song “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” “Here’s a little song I wrote, you might want to sing it note for note, don’t worry, be happy. In every life we have some trouble but when you worry you make it double, don’t worry, be happy.” It is right up there with Elton John’s song in the Lion King, “Hakuna Matata,” the Swahili phrase meaning no worries.

These are popular songs, not just because the music is catchy, but because we like the message. Don’t worry. Be happy. No worries. Oh, that sounds nice. How sweet it would be to be free from worry.

How sweet, indeed, but the reality is that few people are free from worry. No wonder, there is so much to worry about. We might be waiting for results of medical tests. We may have financial troubles and not know how the bills will be paid. We worry about the safety of our children. They can be hurt in so many ways. So much can harm them. I used to think that once my girls were grown and married and employed and had homes of their own, my days of worry would be done. Wrong. I still worry and now I have sons-in-law to also worry about plus grandchildren to add to the worry list. So, far from being done, I have more. We might worry about an upcoming job performance review or family issues that need resolving or a conflict between friends or at work. Many of you have told me you think it is great that I speak each week without notes. Well, I have done that for years, and for years I have worried about the week I will completely forget what I planned to say. It is a weekly Saturday night, Sunday morning worry. It sounds like I worry a lot. That’s worrisome. Well, I suspect that if I went around the room, everyone here could easily tell me about at least one thing they worry about. Psychologists tell us that we are a stressed-out, anxiety-riddled society, which is to say we are a worry-filled bunch.

So as much as we might like McFerrin’s song and smile when we hear Hakuna Matata, the fact is we probably add under our breath, that’s easy for you to say. As well meaning as it usually is, it seldom does any good to say, “Don’t worry,” to one filled with worry.

And yet, having said that, I look at today’s lessons and read Paul saying do not worry about anything and Jesus saying, “I tell you, do not worry about your life....” Clearly, worry is not new to us, given that Paul and Jesus had to advise those around them not to worry; but in both cases, like us, the people had reason to worry. Most of the people who gathered to hear Jesus were poor. They worked to make enough for daily survival and much of what they could make went to Roman taxes. Their survival depended on the fickleness of Roman officials and, since many were farmers, the fickleness of weather. They had no access to health care, social service networks, or charities. It is no surprise that when Jesus spoke about not worrying, he spoke of basic necessities – don’t worry about what you will eat or drink or wear.

Paul worked among persons of various economic situations. What they had in common was that they became Christian, a very unpopular and even dangerous thing to do. It meant that they might be disowned by their families, or barred from employment, or be at odds with the government. Paul himself was often in prison, not for crimes committed, but as a political prisoner. There was reason for a lot of handwringing.

Still, despite these realities, both Jesus and Paul instructed us not to worry, and we are once again forced to mumble under our breath, "That's easy for you to say." It is not like when someone says, "Don't worry," we can say, "Oh, OK, I'll stop." How is that even possible?

What makes it possible is that behind their words is God. Paul prefaces his advice not to worry by saying, "The Lord is near." Put his advice in that context. "**The Lord is near.** Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." And? And, Paul says, "The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Paul reminded this group of believers, who were up against so much, that the Lord is near, and we should lift all of our concerns to God, and God will give us peace. This is what we sing in the well-known hymn *What a Friend*. "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer." You see, it is not that the things we worry about are unimportant or inconsequential or silly. Not at all. That is not Paul's point. His point is that the Lord is with us and that fact alone should give us peace. It is the exact point to which we attest every time we recite the most beloved of all psalms, the 23rd. What do we say when we recite it? "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." Paul's point! We fear no evil for thou art with me!

This is exactly what Jesus tells us in the gospel. Why not worry about what we will eat or drink or wear? First of all, he says, life is about more than food and clothing. Also he adds, look at the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. God feeds and clothes them, and you are of more value than both. In other words, the Lord is near and knows our needs, and will walk with us even through the darkest valleys. Remembering that the Lord is near and that we can trust in God is the key to reducing worry.

Think about how worry works on us. It focuses us in two directions over which we have little control: the past and the future. A lot of our worry is actually related to the past – the I Wish syndrome. I wish I had done this and not that, or I wish I had said this and not that, or I wish this had happened or that had not happened, or I wish I had made that decision instead. We keep reliving what is past, worrying that we made the wrong decision or did the wrong thing, even though, to my knowledge, worry has never changed the past one iota.

When we are not focused on the past, we focus on the future with the What If syndrome. What if they don't like me, what if I don't get the job, what if I didn't pass the test, what if the test results are bad, what if, what if? We create numerous scenarios, imagine every possible scenario, and then worry about the consequences of each.

Now, reasonably looking at the future and addressing our worries can be a helpful. We know we have a test coming up. We can worry about it, or, here is an idea, we can study for it and feel more confident. We all hope to grow old but wonder how we will finance a long life. We can worry about it, or we can invest when young and probably have enough money when old. If we are not feeling well and know something is wrong physically, we can worry about it, or see a doctor and get some test and find out what is up. Looking ahead can be helpful. A favorite question that flight instructors like to ask students while in the air is, "If your engine quits right now, where will you land?" As the student starts looking, fumbling for an answer, instructors then like to pull the power off and say, the engine has quit, now land. This is not to create worry. It is to teach that you should know all of this before the engine quits. It is not the time to figure it out after the engine quits. That is wise. It means in a difficult moment you can stay calm and not worry.

The problem in life is that we imagine everything negative that can happen, things that we cannot plan for or have no control over. This makes us feel helpless and powerless, and like sure-to-be victims. So we worry. We become very anxious about all that might be. Interestingly, we rarely imagine all that might go well. We focus instead on all that might go badly. It ties us in knots. Ah, but just as worry never changes the past, it also does not change the future.

Jesus said in our lesson, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" Of course not. While there are some things we can anticipate and plan for, some things over which we have some control, the fact is there are many things, good and bad, over which we have no control, things we cannot anticipate and no amount of planning can change, and certainly no amount of worry can change.

That is why remembering that the Lord is near and that the Lord walks with us, no matter what, is the key to peace. When we are focused on the past, caught up in the I Wish syndrome, we are crying over spilled milk. No amount of worry will put it back into the bottle. Maybe our computers have an undo button, but there is no undo button in life, so worry is of no value. When we are focused on the future, we become immobilized by all of the What Ifs. No amount of worry can give us control of the future, so worry is of no value.

What is of value is living the now. When we live the now, we can act in positive ways. We can learn from the past, or repent of the past, or work to make amends from the past, if need be. That is not worrying. That is taking positive action. When we live in the now, we can act in ways to reduce worry about the future. If we are worried about our health as we age, we can stop smoking now, eat less and better now, lose weight now, exercise now and increase our chances of a healthier future. Worried about future relationships? We can treat others the way God has directed now and improve our chances of good relationships in the future. Worried about finding the perfect job? We can get the education or training we need now to expand the opportunities for our dream job in the future. There is much we can do when living the now to be proactive and worry less.

We just need to understand that, despite our best efforts, there is just so much we can control and make happen. Much is not in our control. So, instead of missing life because we are so worried about all that might happen, better to live life in the now trusting that, while we do

not control the future, God does, and God will be with us no matter what. Yes, a lot can happen, including things we cannot even anticipate or imagine. A lot can happen. But even though I may walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil. Not because I have a plan! Not because I anticipated! Not because I imagined every scenario! Certainly not because I worried about it! “I will fear no evil for thou art with me!” It is our trust and confidence and faith in God that frees us from worry and enables us to live in peace instead of turmoil.

Are there things you are anxious about? No doubt. Are there things you are worried about? No doubt. I get it. We all do. We have all been there. We are all there now. But listen to Paul and let his words seep into you. “The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Let go of the past. Let go of the future. Give both to God. Live the now. Don’t be focused on what was. Don’t be focused on what might be. Live the now. This is the time you have. Right now. Don’t worry. Be happy. Hakuna Matata. No worries, because the Lord is near. Thanks be to God. Amen.