

August 16 2020 – Pelicans and Cranes

Matthew 6:25-7 – *Jesus is speaking to his disciples and to the crowd of people following him around*

²⁵ “This is why I tell you: do not be worried about the food and drink you need in order to stay alive, or about clothes for your body. After all, isn't life worth more than food? And isn't the body worth more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds: they do not plant seeds, gather a harvest and put it in barns; yet your Father in heaven takes care of them! Aren't you worth much more than birds? ²⁷ Can any of you live a bit longer by worrying about it?

Message: “Pelicans and Cranes”

That particular saying of Jesus is both very comforting and very nearly impossible to live up to all the time.

It's what I call a “yes, but...” passage.

Isn't life worth more than food?

Well, yes, but food isn't free.

Isn't the body worth more than clothes?

Yes, but I'll get sunburn or frostbite if I don't have any to wear.

Yes, a life without worry sounds great...

...but it also sounds unrealistic, at least some of the time.

We've just sort of jumped into it, mid-conversation, with our Scripture reading this morning. But Jesus was talking to a big group of people, including his disciples and followers, and also a crowd of people from the surrounding area.

Those people listening, when these words were spoken by Jesus,

most likely struggled a bit with being told not to worry, too.
Because there was quite a lot to worry about, back then.

We may think that worry and anxiety
are unique to our culture and to our fast-paced days
packed with high expectations and global-scale crises...
...but that's not true at all.

Every human being shares the same needs
for food, water, shelter, clothing and safety,
whether we're in ancient Israel
or contemporary Canada.

But the people Jesus spoke to were also coping
with an oppressive occupying Roman empire,
strict religious laws, heavy taxation,
a status- and honour-based hierarchy,
even an absence of public services
like food banks and healthcare
and social assistance.

There was a lot to worry about, and
not much help to be had.
And here's Jesus, asking them first to follow him,
and then to...
...*not* worry about it.

Imagine those people, listening to Jesus that day.
They press against him, thirsty for answers.
They wonder, does he really care about us?
Does God?
Should they leave everything to follow Jesus?
Did they do the wrong thing by leaving work today
to follow and listen to him?
How would they feed their kids now?
What would they eat and drink
and wear tomorrow?

So Jesus uses an illustration from the world around them

to try and help them understand what he's really saying.

These verses are part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' big teaching sermon from the early part of his ministry. The "mount" that Jesus was on is thought to be located at the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee where it borders what was then a marshy wetland and Lake Hula.

It's an area of Israel that we would describe today as being a stopover for migratory birds travelling between Africa, Europe and Asia...
...something like 500 million birds pass through and stop temporarily in that area. Hold that image in your mind, and let's turn again to what Jesus said.

On the shores of Galilee
and in the wetland and lake to the north,
there were vast flocks of birds
– herons, flamingos, cranes, pelicans, darters –
Big, graceful, hungry birds,
thousands and hundreds of thousands of them.
Look at them, Jesus says, and see:
they don't plant crops
or have granaries
or put up a harvest.
But they are provided for,
abundantly.
We're not talking a single nest of little songbirds, here.
If God takes care of these vast flocks of birds
as they wing their way across continents,
year after year,
God can take care of you.

Aren't you worth much more than birds?

Well, yes...but there does still seem to be a lot to worry about, doesn't there?

Today, we share the common human needs
for food, water, shelter, clothing and safety
with that crowd that was listening to Jesus.

In Canada, there is social assistance,
but it isn't a perfect system.
Our healthcare is excellent and mostly free,
but we still get sick and hurt and have to pay for prescriptions.
And then there's our jobs and our investments,
and our family's futures
in yet another economic downturn.

And coronavirus, too,
a situation none of us ever dreamed we'd be facing,
this time last year.
And let's not get started on global politics
and the things that are happening in other countries,
because we'd be here all day.

I read a little while ago about a university professor
who teaches writing composition
and assigned her students the Sermon on the Mount
to read and respond to.
Most of them had no meaningful prior encounter with the Gospel of Matthew.
Without the filter of two thousand years of religious cultural history
or any personal faith,
she got some very honest and forthright responses.
One student even said that
"the things asked in this sermon are absurd."

Is it impossible, absurd, even,

to suggest that thinking, informed people like us
can live in the world as it is and *not* worry?

The little snippet of Scripture we read today on its own is comforting, yes,
but also kind of uncomfortable, too.

There is a clue though, at the beginning,
that tells us that these verses are
the conclusion of something Jesus is saying,
rather than a standalone statement.

Jesus said, “**this** is why I tell you... [not to worry].”

What is the “this” that he’s talking about?

Well, Jesus was smack in the middle of teaching that crowd
about a completely new way of life
and a new identity that they could take on
and through which they could experience life...
...differently.

Jesus was teaching them about living
as if they were already in the kingdom of God.

A new way of living that is rooted in
compassion, equity, love,
generosity, justice, and abundance,
among other good things;
a new identity that means
actively participating
in God’s transformation
of our worry-filled world
into a preview of that kingdom.

So, I was telling you about that place in Israel,
where Galilee butts up against Lake Hula and a marshy wetland,
the place where so many millions of birds
find food and rest on their travels.

Well, in the mid-20th century,
it was a real hotspot for malaria

and a lot of people were getting sick.

So Lake Hula and the wetlands were drained and turned into agricultural land.
And everyone congratulated each other on boosting economic productivity
and reducing malarial infections.

Changing the ecosystem had many unforeseen effects though,
including increased water pollution in the Sea of Galilee,
the extinction of several unique species,
all the topsoil blowing away,
even dangerous, stubborn underground fires
in the peat layers of the old marsh.

And never mind the birds,
who had lost their ancient stopover
and place to eat and rest
on their journey.

In 1963, a small area in the Hula valley reflooded
and was set aside as Israel's first nature reserve.
In the early 1990s, part of the valley was flooded again
in the wake of heavy rains,
and it was decided to leave the flooded area intact.
This new site has become the second home once more
for thousands of migrating and nesting birds in the autumn and spring.
Most spectacularly and famously,
it's a stopover point for tens of thousands
of tall, elegant cranes to eat their fill
as they migrate from Finland to Ethiopia
every winter.

When Jesus said we oughtn't to worry,
he didn't mean we shouldn't think about tomorrow,
or have savings accounts,
or sit around not doing anything, waiting for a free dinner.
He warns us against worrying and anxiety,
not against planning ahead or taking action.

Because really, have you ever seen a lazy bird?

Birds work hard!

They industriously peck and scratch

and fish and hunt

and build nests and yank worms

and they keep at it, every day.

But they don't worry about it,

because they sense that their Creator

will provide what they need

to keep living.

Sometimes, that providing

– whether it's for birds or people –

comes about because God works through us

to care for creation and for one another,

to actively transform the world

into a preview of the kingdom of God.

And it's a huge blessing for us when he does.

But the truth at the heart of all this,

the truth that nurtures the heart of our Christian faith and life,

is that *God* cares for us and God *takes care* of us.

So yes: we work and we hope,

and sometimes we struggle

and sometimes we just cope with the world as it is,

but we do not worry;

because we know

that we are infinitely valued

and loved by God,

and that he cares for us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.