

Preacher's Foreword: The Children's Sermon this morning was shared by Jo Lynn Robinson: the story of the writing of the song, "His Eye Is on the Sparrow." Civilla Martin, and her husband, Walter, were visiting friends, Mr. and Mrs. Doolittle. Mrs. Doolittle was bedridden and her husband was confined to a wheelchair, from which he worked and took care of his wife. On this visit, Civilla Martin asked how, in spite of their challenges, they managed to live happy, inspirational Christian lives. Mrs. Doolittle responded, "His eye is on the Sparrow; so, I know he watches me."

Civilla Martin was inspired to write a poem, which, when put to music by her friend, Charles Gabriel, became the lyrics to the familiar song we all love.

Immediately following the Children's Sermon, Mark Mancil, with his sons, Bradley and Blake, offered a wonderful, three-part, A Capella interpretation of the song.

Thus, was established the context for today's sermon.

His Eye Is on the Sparrow

MATTHEW 6:25-34 (NRSV) *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if*

God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' ³²*For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed, your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.*

Shortly after Jo Lynn and I were married, the churches in our city got together and invited Joe Blinco, one of Billy Graham's evangelists, to hold a week-long crusade. Jo Lynn's father chaired one of the committees, and I served with him.

One night during the crusade, Ethel Waters came to sing, "His Eye Is on the Sparrow." She was sick that night: fever; could hardly talk; but when she sang, her beautiful spirit prevailed, and it was a very touching moment for all of us.

I had the privilege of driving her back to the airport when the service was over. When we got to the airport she was so sick she was unsteady on her feet, so I walked her to her gate. (That was before security was an issue.)

The airport was busy that night, and she held my arm. When a cowboy walked by, she swayed and brushed up against him, and he uttered some racist insult. Ethel must have felt me tense up; and she reached over and patted my arm and said, "Never you mind. I'm a child of the King. The King will take care of it."

Thank you, Mark, for your own uplifting interpretation, and Jo Lynn for sharing the story behind the writing of "His Eye Is on the Sparrow".

The text this morning is the closing comments in the part of Matthew we call, "The Sermon on the Mount." Its theme is, "*So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.*" It's easy to say. In isolation, apart from the context, it has the saccharine, sweet shallowness of "Don't worry; be happy!" ("Hakuna Matata").

But consider the context: the Jewish rabbis had engaged in an on-going debate since the time of the later prophets—roughly the 6th and 8th centuries, BC. Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, says it was like a courtroom argument, with testimony and counter-testimony. At stake were contradictory images of God. The rabbis were not afraid contradictory positions; in fact, they relished the encounters and believed the faith grew and flourished from the exchanges. They knew the contradictions were in them; no in God or in Scripture.

The testimony emerged from traditions nobody knows how old; traditions bearing the residue of pagan cultures surrounding the earliest generations of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Their image of God was harsh: a tribal god—jealous of his territory and his people; judgmental, punitive, vindictive and bloodthirsty. A god of retaliation, punishing the sins of the fathers to the seventh generation. The language of the testimony was from the courtroom: Sin was equated with evil and guilt. It required punishment. Justice was retributive—vengeful.

The counter-testimony emerged later—during the period of the kingdom, late in the eighth century, BC, when the prophets began to preach the possibility of forgiveness, but with a caveat: first, the people had to turn from their wicked ways and return to God. You had to be good; then, God would forgive and love.

By the sixth century (BC), the prophets were portraying God as loving, redeeming, lifting up the fallen. The language of the counter-testimony was medical, not legal: sin was equated with being broken or wounded. It required healing, not punishment. Justice was restorative, not punitive—a matter of making things right.

All of this is about the nature of God: what is God like? Christians instinctively always have looked to the Bible. I understand that, and in one sense it's correct; but it may not yield as clear an answer as we think. Because of the testimony/counter-testimony nature of Scripture (especially in the Hebrew Scriptures), even as we engage the 'God of the Bible' we can cobble together virtually any vision of God we choose from the Bible's diverse and even contradictory images. We do this mostly unconsciously; and that doesn't help matters.

Even when we restrict our quest to the pages of the Bible, we're likely to find just about any kind of God that we want to find. If we want a God of peace, he's there. If we want a God of war, he's there. If we want a compassionate God, he's there. If we want a

vindictive God, he's there. If we want an egalitarian God, he's there. If we want an ethnocentric God, he's there. If we want a God demanding blood sacrifice, he's there. If we want a God abolishing blood sacrifice, he's there.

Let's be honest: these are outright contradictory images of God. Is God bi-polar? How do we resolve this?

My sister is married to a wonderful man. I love him dearly, if for no other reason than that he is very good to—and good for—my sister. But I have difficulty with his theology. His way of resolving these contradictory images of God is simply to embrace all of them. God is both punishing judge and loving savior. If we take his model to the extreme, we end up with a schizophrenic God.

How do we resolve the confusion? The writer of the epistle to the Hebrew Christians nails it: *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...”* (HEBREWS 12:1-2 NRSV).

British theologian, Bradley Jersak, writes, “...if you're endorsing revenge, torture or war, ...you cannot say you're a follower of the guy who explicitly said, 'Love your enemy' and 'Do good to those who hate you.'” For Christians, the key to resolving the contradictions is Jesus.

The rabbis learned and taught through their debate. It was their way. And Jesus joined the debate. He took sides in the debate, and the text today is a part of his counter-testimony: *“Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”* *“Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ... if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you...”*

Bradly Jersak writes that he and his colleagues “...finally noticed that Jesus' favorite image of God was Father. Jesus showed us (seventy times!) in the Gospels what fatherhood meant to him: extravagant, sacrificial love, affirmation, affection and belonging. It meant scandalous forgiveness and inclusion.

The old way of thinking—the testimony—is that we've sinned; we're evil and guilty. And before God can forgive us, we have to repent: stop our sinning and become good again. Then, we can be forgiven. *Then*, we can experience God's love.

Jesus' counter-testimony is this: *“Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”*

Jesus demonstrates mystifyingly safe, welcoming Father-love, extended to very messy people before they repent; before they have faith. With his counter-testimony, Jesus redefines repentance and faith as simply coming to him, baggage

and all. The repentance he calls for is to welcome his kindness into our deepest needs and wounds. Grace does not come to us after we repent; indeed, it is grace that enables our repentance and transformation. Paul writes in Romans: *“God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”* (ROMANS 5:8 NRSV)

Salvation is about healing, not punishment. It is about being made whole.

And that's why

“I sing because I'm happy!

I sing because I'm free!

For His eye is on the Sparrow;

And I know he watches me.”

Prayer Slide