

**A Sermon from All Saints' Episcopal Church, Briarcliff Manor, New York**  
***Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck, Rector on May 25, 2008 (Pentecost 2, Year A)***

What keeps you up at night? We all have something. Work, children, finances, relationships, the reality of your own mortality, the uncertainty of the future. Things that cause stress.

I can generally fall asleep in good order but if one of the kids wakes me up – “Dad, my covers fell off.” “Dad, I’m thirsty.” “Dad, I have to go to the bathroom.” – I often have a devil of a time falling back to sleep. My mind starts spinning and then I may as well just get up and check my email or read a book or do a crossword puzzle. You’ll notice in these scenarios that they never call for Mom. That’s because they’ve learned that Mom’s a much sounder sleeper and it’s Dad who responds in the middle of the night. Mom has them well trained.

The things that most worry us do tend to grab hold in the middle of the night. It’s quiet. We can’t hide behind the wall of noise and distractions that get us through the day. The middle of the night leaves room for silence and silence leaves room for stress and worry. The things we’re able to avoid or deny during the day come creeping back up during the middle of the night. Worry strikes when things become still and we finally have a moment to think.

And then we wake up, come to church, and hear this passage from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus tells us not to worry. And at first glance that’s *really* not helpful. It’s like going to a doctor when you’re sick and having him tell you to just *feel better*. And it reminds me of the middle school gym teacher I had named Coach Spencer. His response to anything and everything was “walk it off.” I once banged my head on the concrete floor of the gym during a dodge ball game. And as I lay there half-delirious and writhing in pain all I could hear was the distant sound of Coach Spencer’s voice exhorting me to “walk it off.” Not helpful.

But Jesus isn’t just the spiritual equivalent of Bobby McFerrin: “Don’t worry; be happy.” Jesus isn’t selling spiritual escapism. And he’s certainly not denying that there is stress in this life – anyone who spent his life moving from town to town and being hounded by the authorities would have known some serious stress. Talk about being kept up at night.

And so we need to get at what he means by “worry.” The word literally means being pulled in many directions. Which is so often the source of our own stress – we’re over-committed, over-scheduled, and over-burdened. We are indeed pulled in many directions. And it can get to the point that we lose focus of the priorities of our lives. That’s what Jesus hammers away at over and over again. He knows how easily distracted we are and he’s forever bringing us back to keeping God at the center of our lives. It’s a message we can never hear enough because we are a distracted and forgetful people. Which isn’t necessarily our fault as much as it is simply the human condition.

But when we are rooted in Christ, suddenly life doesn’t seem so overwhelming. We may still wake up in the middle of the night but there’s a certain perspective that comes with being a

person of faith. We can still our hearts and souls through the confidence that we are not ultimately in charge and in control. It's pretty freeing to know that everything doesn't depend upon us.

In the Book of Job after all sorts of complaining and griping about his situation in life, a fed-up God looks at Job and asks, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" And God goes on for two chapters peppering Job with questions like, "Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?" And "Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?" The point is that we *weren't* there when God laid the foundations of the earth. We are not in control of the earth. We are not in control of our lives. We are not in control of our surroundings. We are not God. And the sooner we start acting as if we really believe this, rather than just giving it lip service, the sooner our stress level diminishes.

There's a Bob Marley song called "Three Little Birds" which I can't help but think of when I hear Jesus asking us to consider the birds of the air. This piece of the passage from Matthew speaks to the virtue of trust in God. Marley gets at the same thing through the metaphor of birds, albeit from the perspective of a Rastafarian. Birds rise and sing God's praises. They don't stress out about what they will eat or drink. "They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and yet God feeds them." And at night they once again sing God's praises. And so Bob Marley sings of the birds: "Rise up this mornin', Smiled with the risin' sun, Three little birds pitch by my doorstep singin' sweet songs of melodies pure and true, sayin', 'This is my message to you-ou-ou:' Don't worry, 'bout a thing. 'Cause every little thing, gonna be alright now."

The birds of the air can be an inspiration to us because of their ability to trust in God. Granted they have smaller brains than we do – hence the term "bird brain." But Jesus offers a solution to the stress in our lives: prayer. "Seek first the kingdom of God." In other words, focus on the things that are above, the things that matter. Not in an avoidance-kind-of-way. Not as a spiritual valium. But in a way that keeps us fully engaged with God. Which is why an active prayer life is the antidote to stress. But let me be clear: Prayer is not a new age relaxation technique. The opposite of stress and anxiety is trust in God and that's precisely what prayer brings. Not overnight but over a lifetime.

Jesus recognizes that life is stressful. Trust in God doesn't eliminate stress – it just keeps it in perspective. It keeps us mindful that life doesn't begin and end with us; that there are things beyond our control. And that recognition means that we don't have to become slaves to our worldly concerns. They will always be there but they don't have to control us – Jesus shows us a better way.