

*I Thought About You*

Psalm 131; Matthew 6:24-34

Whitefish UMC

February 27, 2011

† My dad worked for the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad when he met my mother in the mid 1940's. His favorite songs often involved trains in some way. When he returned from post-war Germany and my sister and I were born, he sang those songs to us. This song was my favorite:

† *I took a trip on a train, and I thought about you.*

*I passed a shadowy lane, and I thought about you.*

*Two or three cars, parked under the stars—a winding stream.*

*Moon shining down on some little town*

*And with each beam, same old dream.*

*With every stop that we made, I thought about you.*

*And when I pulled down the shade, then I really felt blue.*

*I peeked through the crack, to look at the track,*

*The one going back to you—*

*And what did I do? I thought about you.*

† Last Sunday night, I left late on the train to Seattle to visit a young friend who is like an adopted daughter to us. I loved seeing sweet Jen, eating sushi, and visiting a Korean spa. But what was supposed to have been a light-hearted time of fun and rest turned into another version of Sleepless in Seattle.

- † Jen and Tom and I share a lot of history—she dated our son in high school, and we have been through a lot together. Jen’s mother has been an invalid most of her younger daughters’ lives—and is not an “easy keeper.” Three out of five of the siblings have nothing to do with their mother anymore.
- † But Jen continues to try to help her mom without being overwhelmed with her demands. And that’s almost impossible. Because I love Jen, I worry about her, try to help in constructive ways, and then I get to go home to my own life and your lives. I left Jen in Seattle at the train station, from which she headed to the ICU of the local hospital where her mother lay awaiting yet another surgery.
- † So the train ride home, which I had so joyfully anticipated, turned bittersweet. I turned out the light, looked out at the swirling snow blown back by the speeding train, and gazed at the stars when they poked through the clouds. And I sang my dad’s song to myself.
- † I thought about my young friend’s dilemma. I thought about my own challenges and fears—my grandmother and my mother ended or are ending their lives with Alzheimer’s disease. I don’t want to be a burden to my family and have them turn away. And I thought about you and your burdens and dilemmas. I prayed fervently for us and for our world.
- † And then I started to cry. And that surprised me. Usually praying for each of you helps calm me. But not this time. Now why am I telling you this deeply personal story? Many of our homiletics professors tell us preachers not to speak about our own lives, to not make the sermon about us. And believe me, I don’t want this one to be about me.
- † I share my story with you because I am pretty sure it’s your story, too. I think you lie awake at night, and you may even cry trying to figure out how

to make your life and the lives of those you love work. And I hope you sometimes cry for the troubles of the world, as well.

- † And so we turn to the scriptures for today, because I am fairly certain that Jesus and his disciples shared our sleepless nights and tear-drenched pillows. I know the psalmists did. “My eyes are dim with weeping and my pillow’s soaked with tears...” begins a song by John Bell combining Job and the psalms of lament.
- † “Right after telling his followers to “be perfect,” Jesus tells them, “don’t worry” (Matthew 5:48, 6:25). In fact, he repeats himself five times.
- † Don’t worry about your life. Worry won’t get you anywhere. Why worry about your food, drink, and clothing? Stop worrying. Don’t worry about the future (6:25, 27, 28, 31, 34).



California poppies.

- † Don’t live like a Roman tax collector or the pagan Gentiles, says Jesus, who “run after all these things.” Instead of hoarding money, give it away. Instead

of obsessing about yourself, care for others. Beyond your prudent planning for the cares of life, abandon yourself to a God who is both infinitely powerful and intimately personal. After you've hedged every bet and calculated every contingency, enjoy the beauty of birdsong and the fragrance of flowers.

- † Live like what you believe is true, which in fact it is, whether you believe it or not — that God is like a generous father who knows what you need, and a nursing mother for whom it's impossible to forget her baby at her breast (Isaiah 49:15). Don't fret about the future but enjoy the present moment. And consider the psalmist for this week: "I have quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother" (131:2)
- † But why is that so hard? Daniel Clendenin, in his "Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself," writes: I probably qualify as a natural worrier. I've taped one of my favorite *New Yorker* cartoons to our kitchen cabinet. It pictures a man sitting in his living room with a look of panic on his face. He's dropped his book and his hair stands on end. He's yanked his legs off the floor and onto the chair, where he clutches them in a fetal position. There's a bomb on the floor that someone has tossed through his window. Shattered glass litters the floor as the fuse burns down. In the punch line, he confesses to his wife: "It's my fault — I wasn't worrying enough."



Wood duck drake.

- † Another cartoon taped onto our kitchen cabinet pictures a man alone in bed late at night. He's sitting up, scribbling on a note pad, and talking on the phone. In the caption he tells his friend, "When I can't sleep, I find that it sometimes helps to get up and jot down my anxieties." Every square centimeter of the bedroom walls is covered with dozens of scribbled worries — war, recession, killer bees, aging, calories, sex, balding, radon gas, and so on.
- † I love these characters with their exaggerated sense of responsibility. I make lists, then mark things off the list after I do them. I'd rather be an hour early than five minutes late. Brooding and internal soliloquies come naturally to me. My exterior demeanor is calm, but my internal engines are often racing. At night when it's time to sleep I sometimes can't find the "off" switch. To relax is a challenge. Overcompensation? That's my specialty. Obsessing about a trivial detail? I've perfected the art. As the cartoon puts it, just think of all the bad stuff that will happen if I don't worry enough." Well, Daniel, I used to worry like that, but

with a lot of work, a couple of good therapists, and sometimes some medication, I have come a long way. Why then, the tears?

- † I do believe that praying for those about whom you worry changes things—and it changes me, as C. S. Lewis is so right in saying. I believe that it helps the Holy Spirit come into a situation that only God can redeem. But sometimes God needs to hear our lament and our helplessness, and then God can transform us.
- † Now that doesn't mean that God just waves a magic wand and makes everything okay. We know that isn't always true.



Humpback whale.

- † “Not all of our worries are merely imagined, not by a long shot; some are genuinely real. There are many good reasons to worry. Among my friends and family are divorce, unemployment, eating disorders, bad mortgages, chemotherapy treatments, sleep disorders and struggling kids (who have great parents). And when we look at the larger world there are environmental disasters on an unprecedented scale, the

collapse of the housing and financial markets, rogue states, and the threat of nuclear terrorism.

† In the same issue of the *New Yorker* as the cartoon above (June 14 and 21, 2010), an article called "Fresh Hell" explores the boom in "dystopian fiction" among young readers. Perhaps it has something to do with the world they experience every day? "The typical arc of the dystopian narrative," writes the author, "mirrors the course of adolescent disaffection." These dystopian tales, he says, are about "the world being broken or intolerable."

† Although we manufacture some worries by projecting our anxiety onto the world, other worries are sane responses to an insane world. In either case, says Jesus, if you "live like a pagan Gentile" who's ignorant of the one true God and who worships false idols, or if you mimic the ways of the world like a Roman tax collector, then you're certain to experience disappointment.



Great Blue Heron.

† The gospel for this week anticipates our personal neuroses and our legitimate anxieties, but not in the way that we might want or expect.

Jesus, observes Diarmaid MacCulloch in his book *Christianity* (2010), plays by a different set of rules. In the gospels, observes MacCulloch, "Jesus is his own authority." The coming kingdom that Jesus announced "produced outrageous inversions of normality," like paying a laborer who worked only one hour an entire day's wages. Jesus subverts our cultural conventions and natural intuitions with a sense of relish. And such is his advice to us about anxiety."

† Don't worry about your life, says Jesus. Don't be afraid. The psalmist reminds us that our hope is in God from this time forth and forevermore. Charles Wesley's hymn that we sang a few minutes ago, reminds us that God's nature and name are Love. And that give us sufficient grounding for hope.

† A few years ago, when our son Carey bought his home up Pattee Canyon in Missoula, Tom put up a gate that is always left open to an old stone bridge over the creek. Tom routed the gate with these words from the farmer-poet Wendell Berry (born 1934) and his poem *The Peace of Wild Things*. Berry echoes the words of Jesus about the worries of life:

† When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars

waiting with their light. For a time

I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

† The world can be wild, but Jesus says that under the care of his Father it can nonetheless be a place of peace. How? If we seek first the kingdom of God, that upside down place where we share one another's burdens and joys in the challenges and the beauties of this life.

† As I boarded the train in Edmonds, outside of Seattle, a flock of great blue herons, nesting in a bird sanctuary near the station, rose up. Were they prayers for you and for our world? Yes.

† *I took a trip on a train, and I thought about you. Amen.*

Sources:

Jayson Bayasee, Feasting on the Word, 2010.

Daniel Clendenin, "Journey With Jesus, Notes to Myself,"

<http://www.journeywithjesus.net>

Johnny Mercer, "I Thought About You."

Wendell Berry, "The Peace of Wild Things," Collected Poems of Wendell Berry.

