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Look at the Birds of the Air
Consider the Lilies of the Field

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on
 The Eighth Sunday After the Epiphany, February 27, 2011

“Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.” These are some of the most beautiful and beloved words of Jesus. He asks us to open our eyes to the amazing, abundant, blooming and buzzing world around us. Look at the birds of the air. What a marvel! I remember my grandmother spending hours looking at the birds in our backyard. She knew all about their songs, the color of their feathers, their flying and flitting about. They were a particular joy to her in her old age, as was her faith. I remember her being especially concerned about the birds who were “not smart enough,” as she said, to fly south in the winter. She would fling handfuls of birdseed over our snow-covered backyard so that they would have something to eat. What a generous and caring God we have who even gives us grandmothers to feed the birds that are too stupid to fly south in the winter!

Consider the lilies of the field. Jesus points us to the vibrant colors bursting from the flowers of the field: they are even more glorious than the clothing of Solomon, the symbol of royal splendor. I remember hiking high into the Canadian Rockies a few summers ago, and being overwhelmed with the intense reds, yellows, and purples of the alpine wildflowers. They seemed to glow in the August sunshine. Surely no earthly king has ever been more beautifully arrayed than an alpine meadow.

Look at the birds of the air. Consider the lilies of the field. They don't sow. They don't reap. They don't toil. They don't spin. Yet God not only provides for them, but lavishes upon them a beauty that stops us in our tracks. If we would but look at them. If we would take time to consider them. Time to consider how generous and gracious God is. To take the time to think about all the ways God has provided for us and cared for us. It is good to put aside some time to consider our many blessings and to thank God for them. Look of the birds of the air. Consider the lilies of the field. These are beautiful words.

And yet, as beautiful as this passage is, I also think it is one of the most challenging things Jesus ever said. I don't think this passage has ever turned up on a list of the hard sayings of Jesus. After all Jesus is telling us to look at birds and flowers. But there is a zinger in these words. In good Jewish fashion, Jesus is making an argument from the lesser to the greater. Jesus is saying, look at these lesser things, birds and flowers. They don't worry about their life,

and yet, see how generous God is to them. Now you, my listeners, are greater in God's sight than the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. If God is this generous to these lesser creatures, how much more so will God be generous to you, you who are more valuable in God's sight than birds and flowers. Jesus asks us to consider the birds and the flowers so that he can speak to us those most challenging words: Do not worry. Jesus says, "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. . . . Look at the birds, 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 . . . if God cloths the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow thrown into the oven, will he not much more cloth you." Don't worry about what you will wear. Don't worry about what you will eat. Don't worry about your life. All the worrying in the world won't add a single hour to your life.

These are hard words. Especially in today's world. Many people have characterized our time as *An Age of Anxiety*. Now there are a lot of anxiety disorders which are a serious type of mental illness for which people need to seek good and competent professional treatment. But there are also the worries and anxieties of life that affect all of us, for which we don't need to seek professional care, but which cause us to lead diminished lives, lives not marked by the abundance and richness that God desires for us, but rather are constricted and lessened by constant worry and concern. As Jonathan Davidson says, "All too frequently, anxiety crushes not only your spirit and your potential, but your ability to take care of your mind and body." Looking at the birds in the air and the lilies in the field is one thing. Not worrying about my life is another thing all together. A hard thing.

It is also a true thing. A deeply true thing. The kind of truth that doesn't simply call for one's assent. It's the kind of truth that confronts us. The kind of truth that calls us to change. The kind of truth that religious folks talk about as conversion, the lifelong process of dying to the old self, and rising to new life. It is a call to turn away from worry and fear to faith and trust. The hard truth that Jesus confronts us with is that we are not in control. It's that old problem of wanted to always be in control, which is basically saying that we want to be God, because God is the only One who is always in control. Our worries and our fears are but the expression of this desire to be in control, this desire to be God.

But, as Jesus keeps reminding us, we are not God, we are not the one's in control of the universe. So to those of us imprisoned by our fears and worries, Jesus tells us to consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. They do not work to try to secure their lives, and yet God graciously provides for them. How much more so will our good and gracious God care for us. The flipside of worry is trust. Trust, that even though we are not in control, God is. And not only is God in control, but God is a good and generous God, who loves you even more than he loves the birds and the flowers.

And this is good news. Good news that calms the worries of our fearful hearts. Because God knows the things we need, we can trust God to take care of the future. And in this, there is freedom. Not only freedom from our anxiety and worries, but also freedom to live life and to live it abundantly. Jesus doesn't call us to trust in God and then do nothing. Rather he says, because God knows what you need, "strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well." We are freed from the worries of trying to secure our own destinies, so that we might live into the reality of God's Kingdom. This is a Kingdom that Jesus characterizes as marked by peace, forgiveness, and love. Jesus is calling us to stop worrying about the future and to start living lives of peace and forgiveness and love right

now. As the old hymn puts it, “seek ye first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all these things will be give unto you.” Jesus calls us into a life of freedom and love and forgiveness trusting that we are ultimately in the hands of a good and generous God.

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