

Sermon preached by the Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 9th Sunday after Pentecost, August 11, 2019.

Our lessons this morning are about “excessive worrying.”

Abraham (**Genesis 15:1-6**) worries about who will be his heir, given that Sarah, his wife, at that point, is childless. God assures Abraham that indeed there will be an heir: “Look toward heaven and count the stars ... so shall your descendants be.” And it was so.

In the Hebrews lesson (**Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16**), the author references Abraham. This time, though, the worry is not about an heir, but about the land promised to Abraham and his descendants. Here again, the promise is fulfilled. It took some time, but God kept His word.

In Luke’s gospel (**Luke 12:32-40**), Jesus promises his disciples that if they sell their possessions and give alms to the poor, they will be blessed. In this particular lesson, the outcome is not clear, only that the disciples “must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Well, we can appreciate, can’t we, why Abraham and his descendants and the disciples would be worried. We worry about matters of far less significance than children and homeland and time, sometimes to the point of exhaustion. Of course Abraham and his descendants and the disciples were worried. We would have worried too under the circumstances of the family future and the family homeland and personal responsibility.

The question is not whether we worry, but are we worry warts? Or are we just run of the mill human beings? Are we excessive in our concerns, or are we in the normal range?

My guess is that we are both. We worry about all sorts of things, from consequential to insignificant. But worry, we do. And – this is today’s point - imagine the depth of that worry if one cannot call on God for assurance.

I don’t mean outcomes that give us what we want, but outcomes that at least are considered. When we pray “Dear God, I am worried about such and such,” I want

to be reasonably sure that God is at least hearing me. The answer might not be what I want, but at least I was heard. That's really all I can ask for. "Be there, God, please. Listen to me, please. Hear my prayer, please."

If we cannot achieve that level of trust, our concerns multiply, because there are severe limits to what we can do on our own, as opposed to the generous limits within which the Creator of the Universe operates.

We don't know what goes on in God's mind. We're not even sure if God exists, much less listens intently to the prayers of billions of people. But we try hard to believe that God is engaged, especially when we learn of the possibility that the beyond-our-comprehension Creator of the Universe is offering us in Jesus a pathway that is within our reach. Not God to human, but human to human. Incarnation. Flesh to flesh.

Now we're cooking. We're locked in. We're seeing things more clearly. And one of the manifestations of this enhanced clarity is the assurance that when we pray "Our Father," our Father is listening and considering and devising a way of letting us know what steps are next for us. Usually there is work involved on our part. "Dear God, help me, please" is followed quickly by some questions: what kind of help, what are you doing to help, are you sure that it is help that you need, or just encouragement?"

Prayer is a challenge. Even though it appears to be a natural instinct, it's still a challenge. In part, because we're never sure, are we, that someone is listening and suggesting and guiding? This is why it's important to gather with others seeking a conversation with God. There is corporate prayer, where we mortals have the same or similar concern, but there is also private prayer, where we mortals worry about our particular situation, our loved ones, our fears.

Somehow God sorts it all out. That's our belief. That's what Jesus taught us. That's why our manifold worries are addressed in manifold ways. From today's gospel: "Jesus said to the disciples, 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.'"

That phrase, and the One uttering that phrase, is our assurance that, whatever the nature of our prayer, it is received and processed. Somehow, someday, God

figures us out. Now, it's our turn. Listening is a huge part of prayer. Not just us talking, but the One to whom we are talking assuring us, often in language that goes something like this: "This is what I want you to do to ease the situation about which you are worried. It's an assignment, a take-home assignment. Completing this assignment will help provide direction. If you are still worried, come see me again. My office hours never end."

Today's psalm (**Psalm 32:12-22**) is a good one to keep on our bedside table. Every verse of this psalm is assuring. "Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and our shield. Indeed, our heart rejoices in him, for in his holy Name we put our trust."

In terms of assurance – and that's what we crave – it doesn't get much better than this psalm. It helps take the edge off all those issues that trouble us. Whether it's grace at mealtime or getting together on Sunday mornings or taking a walk in the woods or volunteering time to help someone else or keeping a diary or calling a friend or falling on our knees with no one around, prayer is good for the soul.

And we're not talking about a day of prayer, an hour of prayer, or a moment of prayer – though all these options are good ones. No, we're talking about a life of prayer. There will be moments in this experience when we will get angry with God and plead with God and even demand God's cooperation in what we want for ourselves and others. And that's all okay. God can handle this level of anger. And when we're finished with our rants, we probably will hear God say, "And what's on your mind today, as if I didn't know."

Do I ever worry that this whole notion of a God who hears our prayers and responds to them in some manner is mere wishful thinking on our part? Yes, I do. And I suspect you do as well. But, you know what? My experience is that the more I question the efficacy of prayer, the more convinced I am that prayer really is God's gift that allows Him to stay in touch with us and we to stay in touch with Him.

How else would we do that? What other avenue is available? If there is another avenue, I would love to know about it. Of course, the first step in expanding my understanding is to offer a prayer: "Dear God, help me. Show me more, please, and thank you in advance."

Could this be an example of the end is the means, and the means are the end? I think so, but an easier summary might help. And maybe we have such a summary in today' Collect: "Let your loving kindness, O Lord, be upon us, as we have put our trust in you." Yes, I think this will do. God has a role, and we have a role. How clever of God, and how beneficial for you and me. Amen.