

Creation, Anxiety and the Sabbath Voice of Jesus

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Gen 2.4b - 22, Psalm 23, Philippians 4, Matthew 4.1-11

“Be anxious for nothing,” writes Paul in this week’s epistle, “rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!”

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want, he makes me lie down in green pastures . . . He restores my soul,” says David.

David and Paul’s words echo those of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, where five times (!) he tells his followers, “Don’t worry about your life.” Don’t worry about food. Don’t worry about clothes. Don’t worry about money or the morrow. Don’t worry about anything at all, for God knows what you need.

Who doesn’t long to live like that — free of anxiety and full of joy? It’s easier said than done, but possible nonetheless. We all know people who radiate genuine and not merely superficial joy.

This week I have been reading the nature poet Mary Oliver. I’ve particularly enjoyed her two collections of poems *Thirst* (2006) and *Swan* (2010). With thirty books of poetry and prose, a Pulitzer Prize, and a National Book Award, the *New York Times* described Oliver in 2007 as “far and away, America’s best-selling poet.”

What surprised some of Oliver’s readers is that, after the death of Molly Malone Cook in 2005 — her partner of forty years, much of her poetry became what one critic called “overtly Christian.” In her book “Thirst,” for example, there are poems about Gethsemane, the Eucharist, prayer, the donkey that bore Jesus into Jerusalem, “the strange, difficult, beautiful church,” and “Six Recognitions of the Lord.” Oliver’s love of creation has led to worship of the Creator: “You cannot cross one hummock or furrow but it is His holy ground.”

If you’re a person who inherited a worry gene, and you see yourself in light of this week’s epistle about joy and anxiety, you’ll especially appreciate the candour of Oliver’s poem “I Worried,” from her book *Swan*. Like all great poets, she’s able to describe what we ourselves experience.

I worried a lot.
Will the gardens grow,
will the rivers flow in the right direction, will the earth turn
as it was taught, and if not, how shall
I correct it?

Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven,
can I do better?

Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows
can do it and I am, well,
hopeless.

Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it,
am I going to get rheumatism,
lockjaw, dementia?

Finally I saw that worrying had come to nothing.
And gave it up. And took my old body and went out into the morning,
and sang.

Some of our anxieties stem from an exaggerated sense of responsibility for things over which we have no control, like redirecting a river or instructing the sun. We also worry about the past we can't change, about things done and undone.

Some of Oliver's other worries are more concrete, like deteriorating eyesight from staring at the printed page for fifty years. In other poems Oliver laments unrequited love, brokenness, darkness, and "the dull, brutish ways of humankind." Loving another person is fraught with complications, she observes, and sometimes she gives in to "my sudden, sullen, dark moods." In "Six Recognitions of the Lord" she confesses:

When I first found you I was
filled with light, now the darkness grows
and it is filled with crooked things, bitter
and weak, each one bearing my name.

So, our sluggish spiritual progress can cause worry. Then there are what Oliver calls "all the imponderables for which we have no answers."

We all have our own worries, some imagined and some very real. Will my son get a job? Why was my daughter struck with a depression so dark that she quits school? The purest and most powerful form of fear, says the Australian poet Les Murray in his book *Killing the Black Dog: a Memoir of Depression*, is what he calls "intransitive" fear — fear that has no direct object. The deep dis-ease of "I fear" is far worse than the episodic "I'm afraid of X."

The presence of joy does not require the absence of fears. The apostle Paul admitted to his "conflicts without and fears within" (2 Corinthians 7:5). And the fifth century desert father St. Makarios of Egypt had wise advice: "I am convinced that not even the apostles, although filled with the Holy Spirit, were therefore completely free from anxiety . . . Contrary to the stupid view expressed by some, the advent of grace does not mean the immediate deliverance from anxiety."

Nor does joy require favourable circumstances — a bigger house, a better car. We all know rich people who are miserable and poor people who radiate equanimity, dignity, and joy. This counter-intuitive reality, which is so evident when you travel in the two-thirds world, is one of the many gifts that the rich can receive from the poor. Why are these people, in such abysmal circumstances, so joyful? And why am I, so privileged, agitated and empty?

Joy is not an emotion that I manufacture by willing myself into a good mood. It's a gift from God when we "cast all our anxiety on him because he cares for us" (1 Peter 5:7). Paul calls it a fruit of the Spirit.

Joy is "never in our power," said CS Lewis. He described it as an "unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction . . . I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world." pleasure, in his view, is the counterfeit of joy.

Genuine joy, says Oliver, is irrepressible. Joy intrudes upon us at unlikely times and in the darkest of places. We shouldn't resist it. In her prose poem "Don't Hesitate" from her book *Swan*, she writes:

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate. Give in to it. There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be. We are not wise, and

not very often kind. And much can never be redeemed. Still, life has some possibility left. Perhaps this is its way of fighting back, that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world. It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins. Anyway, that's often the case. Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb.

How do we make this transition from anxiety to joy? Listen to the words of Jesus in Matthew ch. 11.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Pause with me a moment, if you will.

Imagine yourself apart from your title, your wisdom, your intelligence, your capability, your drive, your effectiveness, and imagine yourself responding to the One who invites you to rest, the One who is gentle and humble of heart.

What is it that makes us weary? While there is a weariness that comes from the sheer demands, physically and emotionally, of our daily lives, I suggest to you that Jesus is naming something much deeper here, when he speaks of weariness and heavy burdens.

So, what is it that makes people like us weary and often anxious?

I submit that it is trying to live a life that is against the grain of our true humanity, trying to sustain a life that is against the grain of our true vocation, being placed in a false position so that our day to day lives require us to contradict what we know best about ourselves and what we love most about our life as children of God. Exhaustion of soul comes from the demand that we be other than we truly are, as such an alienating life requires too much energy to navigate and sustain — overly busy? overly anxious? one more task to fulfil, one more parish council meeting, one more report to write, one more house to clean, one more meal to prepare, and on it all goes.

What of our relationships? Our partners? Our children? Our families and friends? Our sisters and brothers? More expectations mount up . . . there is always one more thing to do, one more person who needs us.

Does this mirror the truth of creation? Creation, Jesus tells us, is full of God's abundance, neither fretting nor failing, but rather trusting in Divine faithfulness.

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? 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? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? 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. But 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? Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

True creatureliness abandons the anxious futility of imagining that we can take the place of the life-guaranteeing God. We grow weary in ministry and life because we fail to accept that we cannot guarantee the life of anything or anyone. We can only seek the God whose righteousness sustains us.

What Causes People to Bear Such Heavy Burdens?

Could it be that we are coerced by our calling? We are driven by demands to succeed? Could it be that we are responding to the endless echoes of some Pharaoh in our inner or outer world? Pharaoh, with his insatiable, enslaving demands?

Reflect, if you will, on the Pharaoh narrative. The Israelite slaves were constantly silenced, they dared not speak their pain. This is how Pharaoh's power works. It silences us, or when we speak, our words are so guardedly and carefully placed, they have no power or passion. We become disconnected from our true selves, and our true vocation — the anxious weary who try to compensate for the lack of abundance by making more bricks!

As long as we live in the regime of Pharaoh, we will never make enough bricks, and we will never face our own pain, or that of those around us.

Jesus invites people like us — the anxious weary — we are invited by the gentle One of humble spirit to leave our contradictions and enjoy His rest.

The Way of Sabbath Rest: COME — TAKE — LEARN — REST

To Come to Jesus is to name the contradicted life of anxiety and break the silence of coercion, to break the patterns of denial and become 'truth-tellers'.

1. Truth about pain in the world.
2. Truth about pain in ourselves
3. Truth about the newness of the Kingdom of God and the way of the Crucified One.
4. Truth about the hope of Jesus and His resurrection

Come to Jesus, for as David said, "In His presence is the fullness of Joy, at his right hand are pleasures for ever more"