

Putting Love First

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February 27, 2011

I will admit, this morning, to being enamored of the sing-songy quality of the old hymn, "God will take care of you."

**Be not dismayed whate'er betide,
God will take care of you;
Beneath God's wings of love abide,
God will take care of you.**

***God will take care of you,
Through every day, over all the way;
God will take care of you,
God will take care of you.***

It reminds me of a mother rocking her frightened child during a storm, of special moments in nursing facilities and private homes when one of the old faithful is near eternal life, of the 23rd Psalm's assurance that 'even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me' and of Isaiah's rendering of God's care that we share in funeral services and which Isaiah spoke to his own fearful people. There was a lot to be afraid of in those days. The northern kingdom, Israel, had been wiped out of existence by Assyrian military might, and it appeared that the southern kingdom of Judah could not hold out for long. 'The people were greatly in need of a message of comfort and hope, and Isaiah sought to inspire them with courage and cheer.' (quoted from <http://www.abible.com>)

"do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." (Isaiah 41:10)

***God will take care of you,
Through every day, over all the way;
God will take care of you,***

Civilla Martin explained the writing of this song early in the 20th century: "I was confined to a sick bed in a Bible school in Lestershire, New York. My husband was spending several weeks at the school, making a songbook for the president of the school. On a Sunday, her husband Walter was to preach in a town some distance from the school. Since Civilla became unable to attend because of sickness, he wanted to cancel his trip. While it was being discussed, their nine year old son said, "Father, don't you



think that if God wants you to preach today, He will take care of Mother while you are away?" Martin kept his appointment, and on his return home learned that Mrs. Martin had written a new hymn based on her son's faithful remark earlier that day, and within an hour, Mr. Martin wrote the melody. That very evening a couple of other teachers at the school came by, and they all sang the song together. It was subsequently published, in 1905, and has become a standard in worship for a hundred years since. (edited from web-based hymn story).

Our closing hymn has a sing songy quality, too, and it is no coincidence that it was also penned by Civilla Martin, who wrote the lyrics for "God's eye is on the sparrow" based In part on the scriptures we heard this morning. I'll quote her telling of the story behind this hymn.

"Early in the spring of 1905, my husband and I were sojourning in Elmira, New York. We contracted a deep friendship for a couple by the name of Mr. and Mrs. Doolittle—true saints of God. Mrs. Doolittle had been bedridden for nigh twenty years. Her husband was an incurable cripple who had to propel himself to and from his business in a wheel chair. Despite their afflictions, they lived happy Christian lives, bringing inspiration and comfort to all who knew them. One day while we were visiting with the Doolittles, my husband commented on their bright hopefulness and asked them for the secret of it. Mrs. Doolittle's reply was simple: "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me." The beauty of this simple expression of boundless faith gripped the hearts and fired the imagination of Dr. Martin and me. The hymn "His Eye Is on the Sparrow" was the outcome of that experience." (from Wikipedia)

Jesus said, in this continuation of the Sermon on the Mount, 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 strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." (Matthew 6:26-34)

Why should I feel discouraged
Why should the shadows come
Why should my heart feel lonely
And long for heaven and home

When Jesus is my portion
A constant friend is he
His eye is on the sparrow
And I know he watches me

His eye is on the sparrow
And I know he watches me.

It conjures for me images of old time tent revivals in small towns across the mid-west; faith-filled praise rising up from people finding comfort in the embrace of God, finding release from the often overwhelming troubles of the day, finding peace in the gospel assurance that we are never deserted, we are never alone, we are never in a place where God is not, even when darkness falls and sadness reigns and despair lurks in every corner and it feels like giving up will be easier than continuing on in circumstances that show no promise, no hope, no solution, no rest. God's eye is on the sparrow, and I know God watches me." Thank you, Civilla Martin, for two of the great songs of our tradition. They call forth the pastor in me. I admit again to being enamored of their sing-songy quality as they reach deep within my own soul to places in need of good news. I hope they reach yours, too.

But, and you had to know there would be a 'but' in all of this, I heard something else in the lesson today that needs sharing for the good of our common journey. It's important for us to seize the pastoral message and embrace it for the comfort it brings, but the message has a prophetic quality to it, as well, that is as needful as the other if we are to be well rounded in our Christian faith and journey.

Prophetic, you say? Yes. When I substitute taught the confirmation class a couple of weeks ago, I enjoyed conversation with the young people. They impressed me with their willingness to think, to listen, to be challenged, and to explore ideas unknown to them except as vagaries of church life alluded to in earlier years during Faith Circuit. We talked that day about one aspect of prophecy being that one in which a person comes forth to speak an unpopular truth that needs to be spoken and needs to be heard. This is the prophetic voice. One of the youth said, "Oh, like when your best friend is wearing a really ugly shirt and no one tells them but you walk right up to them and say, 'I hate your shirt.' That's an unpopular truth, a prophetic truth." I replied, 'sort of'.

But I have something more like this in mind. Imagine Jesus on the hillside before a crowd of poor villagers who have left their daily chores to hear the great preacher preach. They've set aside, for the moment, the oppression of over-taxation by Rome, the impossibility of living a lawful, holy life as defined by some of their religious leaders, the misery of the daily grind, the hopelessness attendant with being an occupied nation, again.

Jesus said, "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."

It might inspire the sing-songy, but it is prophetic truth spoken to desperate people: Even Solomon, with his access to fine food; even Solomon, with his access to the best housing; even Solomon, with his access to the finest in designer clothes; even Solomon didn't get any more or any less love and care from God than the lowest of the low, the most desperate of the desperate, the poorest of the poor, the least valued of the outcast, the sorriest of the sorry.

Jesus seems to say, "Even Solomon didn't get more or less love and care from God than you who are standing on this hillside with me this very day, so don't let your striving be for fine food and opulent housing and nice clothes. They won't deliver you from your hearts deepest sadness."

And there, confirmands, and all you beloved people of God, is the prophetic truth that challenges the comfort of the sing-song, that balances the assurance of God's presence with God's call to us to live deeper daily lives, that confronts us in our own day and age in our predominantly well-off communities. There is the prophetic truth that many of us will not want to hear.

Our own access to delicacies, our own best dressed selves, our own lavish homes, do not merit us or grant us any more or any less care and love from God than is given to the homeless man who used to sleep outside our Elmhurst City hall by the dumpster. Seek first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness.

Isaiah

49:8-11

Thus says the LORD: In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; saying to the prisoners, "Come out," to those who are in darkness, "Show yourselves." They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture; they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them. And I will turn all my mountains into a road, and my highways shall be raised up.

We, who have means and who have access, we are the builders of the road, the feeders of the hungry, the quenchers of desert thirst, the providers of shade, the givers of compassion, and, indeed, the singers of songs.

So let us sing, but let it be singing while working that marks our days of journeying with Christ. For while we are beloved, we are also blessed to be a blessing,

"do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."

Amen and amen.