

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/27/2011, Epiphany 8A
Isaiah 49:8-16a, Matthew 6:24-34
God's Providence

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²⁸And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. (Matthew 6:28-29, RSV)

And so it is that Jesus gives us strong reason for hope in this world. He promises us that our God, who forgets not the birds of the air or the lilies of the field, will certainly not forget us. Our part, then, is to do what good lies before us, and to entrust the rest to him, who will not fail us.

Many years have passed now, but I still remember the summertime mountain meadow I chanced upon as a young man hiking in the Rocky Mountains. I was traveling alone, up and down the mountains, treading over the stones, working around the boulders, day and night, managing my food and water, pacing my strength, doing the things natural for those moving by foot in the mountains. And then I chanced upon a valley with a stream that had been tamed by a beaver dam, creating a small lake with a meadow with wildflowers and honey bees and so on. That meadow was a place and a few moments of refreshment for me. "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow..." There wasn't another soul in sight in that meadow, but there were wildflowers there, and God had arrayed them beautifully - more beautifully than the kingly robes of Solomon of old.

My wife, Carol, loves wildflowers. She enjoys hiking, and part of her joy in being in the hills, the mountains, and the meadows are the flowers of the fields - the buttercups, the bluebonnets, Jacob's Ladder, the fragrant herbs. She gets down close to the ground with her camera and takes pictures of them: Mayapple, Columbine, Cornflowers, Jack in the Pulpit, Ladyslipper, Lily of the Valley, Violets, Indian Paintbrush, and Purple Night Shade. Such flowers are beautiful, but fragile and ephemeral.¹ Those wildflowers always put Carol in mind of our Maker's generosity and extravagance. Our God is the truly prodigal One -- the one who lavishes beauty and care on earth, adorning even the out-of-the way lilies of the field with beauty. And are you not more valuable than these, Jesus so tenderly asks:

¹ This paragraph on Carol's love of wildflowers comes from my sermon of 12/8/2002, The Second Sunday in Advent.

Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? (Matthew 6:30, KJV)

My aim in this sermon is to relate this teaching about the lilies of the field in Chapter Six of our Lord's Sermon on the Mount to Chapter Five of that magnificent sermon. Throughout this lovely, long Epiphany Season, we have been dealing with the Fifth Chapter of St. Matthew. We have been working our way through it, verse by verse. We have noted the high morality of that Chapter, the way our Lord would have us discipline not only our conduct but also our feelings, how he would have us refrain not only from adultery but also from lust, to refrain not only from murder, but also from wrath, and how, in general, he bids us onwards toward purity of heart.

Now, in this Sixth Chapter of St. Matthew, we learn the *cause of the courage* in which our Lord would have us walk. For it does take courage to do the things taught by Jesus. It takes courage to turn the other cheek, to walk the extra mile, to lend generously, and to give alms. It takes courage to purify the heart, so that we withdraw as best we can from the ways of lust and anger. Altogether, it takes courage to take up our cross and to follow our Lord. So, Chapter Six is important. The discussion of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field is important, because they speak of our Maker's extraordinary care for us. He will never forget us, nor neglect us. He watches us with keen interest as we try to obey the high preaching of Jesus, and in the end, we will do ourselves no harm by taking up the cross and following Jesus. If our Maker forgets not the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, he will not forget us as we strive to live for Christ.

Let me compare the relationship between St. Matthew Chapters Five and Six to that between the first two parts of Luther's *Large Catechism*. There are six parts all together in Luther's catechism: the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, Holy Communion, and Confession. In this year's midweek Lent liturgies, I mean to work my way through all six of these parts. But now I want to focus on just the first two.

In my opinion, Luther has a brilliant idea about the relationship between the Ten Commandments and the Creed. He argues that the Creed helps us to obey the Commandments. His logic goes something like this: It is hard to obey commandments - any commandments - unless you know something about the heart of the commander. I mean to speak more about this during a midweek Lent sermon, but for now, I want to focus on this simple idea: If my commander hates me, then it is rational for me to disobey him or her, especially in times of threat, temptation, or hardship. But if my commander loves me, and if I am persuaded that his commands are carried along by love for me, then I have good reason to obey his commands, even if I am weary or tempted.

Likewise, in our Lord's Sermon on the Mount. In Chapter Five, Jesus gives us some high commands. They call for the best in us. They call us to love even our enemies, to turn the other cheek, to give alms, and to seek purity of heart. Toward

the end of his sermon, Jesus will acknowledge that the path he commends to us is a hard one:

¹³Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Matthew 7:13-14, RSV)

But now, in this Chapter Six, Jesus gives us reason for courage. He gives us good reason to walk the high path and to enter by the narrow gate. He reasons with us about virtue, reassuring us that he will not neglect us or fail to catch us as we try to live by his preaching.

Think of a mother and father helping a child to walk for the first time. The child is uneasy about the matter. The child is not so sure about this business of standing on his own two feet, standing on her own two feet, without mother's hand to steady her, with father close at hand, but not quite holding her. Mother and father beckon the child onwards. With joy they hope for these first steps. Do you think they are going to let the child fall and hurt himself? Do you think they are going to turn away and become pre-occupied with other things as their child ventures forward for the first time? Yea, even they might forget, but God will not forget us as we take our steps forward into a holy life. It is as our First Lesson so beautifully puts it:

¹⁵Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. ¹⁶See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; (Isaiah 49:15-16, NRSV)

This promise, my friends, is quite literally so. The LORD says, "Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands.

Sometimes I do funerals when the funeral director alerts me in advance that there will be few people present for the funeral -- perhaps because the person moved down south long ago, but has returned home for the funeral, but no one remembers. Or perhaps because the person is so elderly that they have outlived their generation and family. Once I did a funeral for someone for whom the only people present were two nurses. But I knew the elderly person had been baptized and I knew of her faith, and so I was able to refer to this text about the Lord never forgetting, even if mother and father should forget. I referred to the nail prints in the hands of Jesus and said that the one who had died was firmly engraved on the hands of God, that he could not look at his own hands without seeing each of us, for it is for us that he died!

It is natural for birds of the air to fly. It is natural for a flower to burst forth in color. It is natural for you and me to follow Jesus, no matter how high and strange

the path might be. It is what we are built for. It is what we were baptized for. As St. Paul puts it:

¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10, RSV)

Now, in the time that remains to me I want to speak of a solemn subject. So far, I have been praising the preaching of Jesus about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, arguing that the attention and care that God gives to all his creatures gives us a reason for courage in stepping forward into a holy life.

Now I want to offer an important clarification: Judging by the life of Jesus, I think we must conclude that Christian *hope* is compatible with fear, even with *anguish* of spirit. My chief evidence is a story toward the end of the very Gospel we have been reading. Now, in St. Matthew Chapter Six, Jesus speaks so very sweetly about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. But twenty chapters later we shall find that the ability to go forward into a holy life does not always spare us from sorrow and fear, for Jesus himself was not spared these things. And so we read of our Lord's anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane, in St. Matthew Chapter Twenty-six. As I read this passage aloud, ponder it as if it were your own life, as if you were a young man or a young woman who knows that your end is drawing near. You might have hoped for your threescore and ten years, but you know the Betrayer and the guards are already gearing up and heading toward you, and you sense that you are not going to live to be half that normal span of life:

³⁶Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder. ³⁷And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy. ³⁸Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me. (Matthew 26:36-38, KJV)

Another of the evangelists, St. Luke, intensifies this description of sorrow by speaking of the sweat on the blessed brow of our Lord:

⁴⁴And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. (Luke 22:44, KJV)

Where is our Lord's preaching about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field now? Everywhere present! It is the decisive thing. For human flesh and blood can hardly take the step that Jesus took without some *hope*. If Jesus is going to step forward into the grasp of the soldiers, who will whisk him away to be interrogated and crucified, then how else can he do so than in the quiet confidence

that when he has done all he can do and his own strength has run out, then nonetheless, he is in the hands of his heavenly Father and of the Spirit, and so, in the end, he is unconquerable!

And so it is that Jesus is able to press on through his fear and anguish of spirit into his great prayer of surrender:

³⁹And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, *but as thou wilt.* (Matthew 26:39, KJV)

This is important to me because some of you face heavy burdens as you try to follow Christ, and each of us faces such burdens at some time in life. At this time in your life, you might be staggering under the weight of disappointment and opposition as you try to live a life pleasing to Christ. You face temptations. “There are other ways of living a life,” you might well say. “Why should I remain true, when the one I have counted on has been untrue? Or, why should I decline this shady practice, when others are turning to it? Or, why should I remain faithful with my friend or my child, when I am about worn out and have suffered so many blows I fear I am about to fall down and hit the mat?”

The things of life can be so complex and so individual that the preacher dare not preach too broadly, too abstractly, about the cost of discipleship. Some of your struggles had best be settled by your own judgment, or in consultation with trusted friends, or in private pastoral conversation with me or another pastor.

All of that is true, and yet I do not want us to lose sight of today’s Gospel encouragement. Our God’s capacity to watch over the things of earth is immense! He watches over the birds of the air, he clothes the grass of the field with beauty, he numbers the very hairs of your head. Do not imagine that you can venture forward into some goodness and into some holiness of life without our God noticing you. Aye, and not only will he notice, but he will save you, and one day you will be glad that you did the best you could to take up your cross and follow Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.