

BIRDS AND LILIES

A Sermon by the Rev. Janet L. Abel
Preached on Sunday, November 22, 2015

Bringing Lao Tzu up to Date

My sermon, entitled “Birds and Lilies,” is derived from the Sermon on the Mount, and this is a Thanksgiving service and sermon. Saved in my computer is a saying from a much-earlier era that bears a parallel to Jesus’ famous sermon. It is one of my favorites, by a man named Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, who lived in the 6th century BCE. Once in a while, I bring up this message of his on my computer:

“If you are depressed, you are living in the past. If you are anxious, you are living in the future. And if you are at peace, you are living in the present.”

This is a bit simplistic perhaps, but I think there is some truth to it. Think about it. What do you spend much of your time thinking about? Thinking about myself, it depends, but often I have such thoughts running through my mind. Sometimes they are about the past, and that’s especially so at this time of year. As we go into the holiday season, we often find ourselves thinking about the past.

“Yesterday,” sang Paul McCartney, yesterday was better because (fill in the blank): My husband, my wife was alive, the kids were young, I had that job, I lived in that place when I was a kid, and so forth.

Is It Depression? Is It from Regret?

I have a resident whom I visit frequently. She will not get out of bed. She could. She could get in the wheelchair. But she will

not, even though I’ve tried to get her to do so. She doesn’t want to be in a room with people, so she eats her meals alone. She lies stuck in bed all the time, and she really can’t walk.

The only time she interacts with people is when the nurses come to administer care and medication or when a couple of us visit with her. She won’t play cards. She won’t watch TV. I finally got her a large-print Bible, and she does read that.

We’ve gotten to know each other well, and she’s peppering up quite a bit. She is starting to write her life history when she feels like it. She remembers her past, which was quite vibrant. So when I first met her, I thought her depression was due to the fact that her life is so very different now than it had been.

This is a lady who was stationed in Washington, D.C., during World War II. A WAC once showed me a picture of her in uniform, and you should see it. She looked terrific. She had a very exciting time in Washington. Then she was sent to Detroit, where she met her husband. They moved to Binghamton and raised a family. They are grown now, but her husband is gone.

And yet the depression seems to center around something that she had done in the past, something that she’s alluded to over and over again. “God can’t forgive me, Janet, and that’s why I’m so sad.” When asked “Why can’t he forgive you?” she won’t tell me. I just know she is filled with regret over something. Regret is an emotion

that affects some people really hard as they think about the past.

Even so, Nostalgia Can Be Great Fun

Sometimes at lunch some of us try to think of theme songs from old television shows, especially ones that you can sing. We compete to see who can remember the words to such hits as “Green Acres.” If you’ve forgotten, here are the lyrics:

Green Acres is the place to be.
Farm livin’ is the life for me.
Land spreadin’ out so far and wide,
Keep Manhattan, just give me the
 countryside.

New York is where I’d rather stay,
I get allergic smelling hay.
I just adore a penthouse view,
Darling I love you, but give me Park
 Avenue.

The chores.
The stores.
Fresh air.
Times Square.

You are my wife.
Goodbye city life.
Green Acres, we are there.

A lot of us seem able to remember oldies like this even if we can’t remember what we did yesterday. Yet we can remember every word of a song from bygone days. Have you noticed this phenomenon of the memory?

For instance, here’s the introduction to The Adventures of Superman. Do you remember it?

“Faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

“Look! Up in the sky! It’s a bird. It’s a plane. It’s Superman!” That was easy. Now it gets hard.

“Yes, it’s Superman, strange visitor from another planet who came to earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men. Superman, who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel in his bare hands. And who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way. And now another exciting episode in the adventures of Superman.”

That goes back 35 years, and I can still remember these lyrics and much of the Superman introduction.

Nostalgia. That word is fun, but it literally means remembered pain. They might be painful memories, but they can also be great memories.

One Regrets Memories; Another Is Joyful

I have another resident who lives right across the hall from the woman whom I just described. She’s 106 this year, our oldest lady, and she really is not sure why she’s still alive. Whenever I walk into her room and say, “How are you?” she invariably responds, “Why am I here?” in a strong Brooklyn accent. My answer is to tell her, “You know what? I don’t know. But I’m enjoying your company.”

Unlike the previous lady, this one reads, and she’s sharp as a tack. She watches TV with the words scrolling across the screen because she’s pretty deaf. At 106 years, that’s to be expected. She has traveled around the world, so she and I reminisce about her favorite countries. Her son has her photo albums, and I try to get her to ask

him to bring them in so we can look at the pictures together. She's got a lot of fun memories, and they seem to fill her with joy.

So we think about memories, especially this week when we're giving thanks as a nation, as a people, as families. What about giving thanks for everything good that has come our way and that has brought us to this moment right now, whether in church or at home?

Kooky Job Interviews . . .

I have to tell you that I've been reminiscing as I prepared for this sermon. I have a series of memories that I really do give thanks for and that I laugh about to this day because of the kooky job interviews I had between college and my career. I was down in Cape May, with an economics major and an English minor in my resumé.

And of course as I was graduating, I was thinking, "Who wouldn't want to hire me?" Armed with that dual degree in business and English, I can write but I can also go into business with a little accounting in my background.

Well, people weren't knocking at my door. I had to get out there. After a couple months of loafing on the beach, my mother said to me, "It's time, Janet, to start thinking about, you know, going on job interviews."

. . . In a Fly-by-Night Company

So okay, I got going. And there were many interviews and a few unpromising jobs. Among the ones I really remember, there was one with an investment firm, whose name I quickly blocked out. It should have been "Fly by Night," I kid you not. It was bad, and right in the middle of my interview, this guy took a phone call. "Oh-h-h. It's the

Federal Reserve," he said to me. "Would you excuse me, Janet, while I discuss with Alan Greenspan what I think the prime rate should do."

The prime rate is controlled by the Fed, and the interest rates that banks charge you for everything are based on the prime rate. So he had quite a conversation with the then-chairman, Alan Greenspan, about the prime rate, but I really didn't believe my interviewer was talking with him.

I have to tell you, I think he was just pretending to talk to the Federal Reserve because I could hear his secretary on the phone. "How much longer do you want me to be on the phone with you?" Honestly, I could hear this, and I'm just sitting there thinking, "Where's the door? Tick tock. Maybe it would be an honor to work here, but I don't think so." And then he gets off the phone. "Yes, we're very busy here in Vineland, New Jersey. And the Fed calls me at least twice a week." And I said, "That's nice" as I left.

. . . In a Firm with no Office

My next interview was worse. It was with a firm selling life insurance door-to-door. We met in a diner because the company didn't have an office. Red Flag number one. You learn, right? This isn't good. Next this guy wanted to send me to Peoria, Illinois, for my training. That was Red Flag number two as far as I was concerned.

And then office workers came into the diner to start their day. One guy who came in begged my interviewer for \$5 so he could make it to the end of the week. That was Red Flag number three. Right in front of me this guy said, "Can I have \$5? I want to get a cup of coffee." I thought, "Oh boy! I

don't want to sell insurance door-to-door on commission."

So I went to an employment agency in Wildwood, New Jersey. I was all of 22 as I sat down with this lady, and I never before have told this story from a pulpit. The lady says, "Let's look at the jobs. I see you have an economics degree and an English minor."

. . . In Rabbit Ears and a Cotton Tail

"How about the Playboy Casino, Janet?" I wish I was making this up. And I asked innocently, "Oh, is there an accounting position?" And she goes, "Not exactly. How do you feel about being a cocktail waitress?" I said, "Well, I don't think so. I don't want to be a waitress. You know I do have a degree from Douglass College of Rutgers University." She tries again, "What size shoe do you wear?"

"Have you ever been asked this question on a job interview?" Uncomfortable now, I replied, "It's seven." And she pushes harder, "Well, okay, how do you feel about wearing rabbit ears and a bunny tail?" Honest to goodness! I just stared at her. I had never been a bunny type. I just wanted you to know, look at me. I mean my hair was darker then than now, but I don't think I want to be a bunny. Then she goes well, and she leans across the desk, and I swear this happened. She goes, "Can you do perky?" "This is as perky as it gets." I high-tailed it out of there.

. . . As Popcorn Manager with 10 Flavors

Moving on, there's a popcorn manager position in the mall at Atlantic City. So I go on that interview. Popcorn manager indeed! It was a kiosk. One of those little things in the middle of the mall, where they pop popcorn. And I said to the guy who was

interviewing me, "I was told this is a management position." And he tries like the last interviewer, "We have more than ten flavors of popcorn." I sighed, "Oh, well." I didn't become a popcorn manager.

. . . In a Bank and Then on to Seminary

Eventually I got a job in a bank and finally felt I was on my way in a good career — Marine National, which in turn was bought by Chemical. That's how I got to New York City. And then I changed my mind and made a decision to go to seminary. So here I am.

In summers I had many other jobs. I was a waitress for exactly one week. It didn't go well. I was a pinsetter in a manual bowling alley. Talk about the old days. Using a pen and paper, I set pins. It was hard on your shins. Then I was a chambermaid, dressed like a colonial maid. I don't recommend jobs that make you wear hats, but they did.

I was a housekeeper at seminary to earn pin money. In between taking Hebrew classes in summer, I cleaned rooms. And let me tell you, I learned a lot about the students. Some of the rooms were filthy, but I cleaned up after students studying for the ministry. I got to know the other room-cleaners at the seminary, who were wonderful people. One lady in particular was a very faithful woman. She had a shrine to St. Mary in her basement office in one of the dormitories, and she was a sweetheart.

Later on after seminary, I became youth pastor at Northminster, the church I first served when I moved here. I worked with Barry Downing. I wasn't the world's greatest youth leader, but I have much to give thanks for, especially the adults who

really hung in there with me. We took kids to New York City on church outings.

It was terrifying, keeping them on the same subway car and making sure they didn't get on the roof of the church where we stayed. I had one kid who wanted to get on the roof, and I saw my life pass before my eyes. She also wanted to get a tattoo. You always have a kid like that. She kept disappearing on me. But there were good memories as well. I learned from them all, though, and I laugh about them, even to this day.

So What About the Future?

Do we find ourselves primarily occupied about the future? As I thought about that, there are both the immediate future — what am I doing today? What am I going to do tomorrow? This week? — and the long-range future, which I think is where the anxiety can come in. But what about right here, right now, today?

Following in the path of the great Tao teacher Lao Tzu, Jesus' own Sermon on the Mount in Matthew is in clear agreement:

“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?” This sounds like worry, anxiety about tomorrow. “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.”

I Too of Course Agree in Principle

Look at the birds and the flowers. I love birds and flowers, but birds don't pay mortgages, and they don't keep up cars, and they don't have to worry about lots of stuff. Because that's it, isn't it? Thinking about tomorrow really can bring worry. It's usually filled with worry about tomorrow, even though 90 percent of the time tomorrow will work out just fine.

It's really hard to stay focused on today, but I am convinced doing just that is the real basis for true happiness, contentment, and peace. All those books that are written about happiness, I think that's the key. “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” Jesus said, “and all these things will be given to you as well.”

So when we find ourselves dwelling on the past or thinking about the future, how about saying thank-you for all of it, for all the lessons and the good times and love and pain and fun, all of it. And when we find ourselves thinking primarily about the future, try to let the worry go and think about today.

Again, Jesus gives us great advice: “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.”

So Happy Thanksgiving to each and every one of you. We are blessed to have another Thanksgiving meal here today, and we give thanks for that as well.

Amen.