



Following Jesus

Sermon Outline

“Birds of the Air, Lilies of the Field”

Summary and Text

Matthew 6:13-35 points us to the meaning of simplicity as a lifestyle and faith choice. Following Jesus’ call to focus on God’s abundance, we can shift our attention from our own worrying and fears to the needs of others. God’s call, “Look here,” shows us God’s kingdom and invites us to learn and change.

Text

Jesus taught them, saying, “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 strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Matthew 6:25-33

Sermon

A year ago tomorrow my dad died.

Following a week of sorting his possessions among five siblings and celebrating his life with a memorial service at his church, I returned home to the Northwest. All I wanted to do was to get on a ferry boat and stand on the deck as the boat pushed across Puget Sound. All I needed was to look at the huge sky and ask, “Where are you now, Dad?”

Deep in my cells—that were also my Dad’s cells—I knew I had to get outside and seek my Dad there. That’s where my Dad, the farmer, always went. Outside. To God’s creation.

Seagulls like to swoop down onto the top decks of the ferry boats, scavenging for stray popcorn or French fries. Sometimes they fly at exactly the same speed as the ferry and, seated inside, you can look out the window and be eye to eye with a gull.

Look at the birds of the air. Consider the lilies of the field. They are the keepers of the promise, the clues to our existence. What I needed that day was simple—to be comforted, to wonder, to get a sense that my dad was okay.

The answers I sought in God’s creation that day were a matter of life and death. My dad’s death and what it meant; my life and how I could live it. Death shook away all the ephemera hanging on to my existence and focused my attention on what mattered. God simply holds us in the mystery; God cares for us when we are here and God continues when we are gone.

And we, the co-creators in God’s kingdom, are invited, commanded, and supported to do the same. MAKE IT SIMPLE. Care for all this and all these. Imagine lives beyond our own.

MAKE IT SIMPLE. Is it an illusion that we claim we want this supposed answer to our harried and sedated lives? Often we doubt that we can actually accomplish the goal of making it simple, because all the while we’re trailing along behind a life of further complexity, snapping at the heels of something more, we’re not sure what is important. Maybe it’s fitting in, feeling less scared, less in control, less secure.

Let me reassure you that we are absolutely right in wondering about our desire or capability to get beyond our fears in order to MAKE IT SIMPLE. We can’t. We can’t MAKE IT SIMPLE until we remember who could MAKE IT SIMPLE. Jesus Christ.

Jesus, who was God, knew our tendency to want to be God, rather than God's servants. Jesus knew that this heresy leaves us anxious and powerless. Jesus, the first of the "outdoor ministry" experts, decided to do a little pastoral care and values clarification with a whole crowd of people.

Jesus went up on a mountain to teach his people. When Isaiah heard the cry, "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings," and was told to announce to the people, "Your God reigns!" it was a call for renewal of the covenant relationship with God. The proclamation Jesus made on the mountain continues the fulfillment of the promises of God. Jesus sat down as a sign that he was ready to teach. Jesus covered so many topics—the kingdom, the law, prayer. Huge spiritual issues! And then, he got down to everyday life, to earthly concerns, really nitty-gritty stuff—like why we worry so much.

"Who are you going to serve?" Jesus begins quite clearly, knowing that the seeds of our worry are planted. "God or wealth?" Answering "Both/and," "I don't know," or "I'll get back to you" would not have been appropriate. Each person would answer that question with his or her life. Of course they would say "God" and so do we. Of course they would, in fact, serve wealth. And so do we.

We bemoan the fact that our modern lives are complicated, but life in Galilee at the time of Jesus included tolls and taxes, tributes and tithes that meant the difference between life and death for people who couldn't pay. "Who are you going to serve?" could have dire circumstances for the hearers of these words.

And these words have dire circumstances for us. Today, scientists and believers are looking at the birds of the air and considering the lilies much more closely than we have done in centuries. Our service to wealth and unrestrained progress has left our lives and the earth barren. We're dismayed to count fewer birds and lilies, challenged to learn and change. "Look around," the observers warn us today. "Look around," Jesus advised over 2000 years ago.

Those flitting birds; those swaying lilies. In their fragile existence they speak to our responsibility. But first the birds and lilies attest to God's abundance. God cares about our existence, now and in the future. Surely we can simply stop to remember that miracle, and live it somehow.

When Jesus offered such clear counsel to his hearers—*look at the birds, consider the lilies*—he pointed to scripture, to Psalms and Isaiah.

As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments. Psalm 103:15-18

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Isaiah 40:6-8

Jesus, the master teacher, showed those first students the simple truths; he shows them to us now. Jesus names the what, teaches the how, and reminds us of the why.

The what is anxiety. Obsessed with fear, control, and more avenues in which to spread our paranoia, we fall into the rut of believing that we are doomed because it all depends on us.

The how is a method to deal with our anxiousness. Jesus offers concrete advice—look around and see how to hush the fear, control and anxiety in your heart. Simplicity comes from looking out toward creation as much as it comes from looking inward at worry.

Jesus reminds us of the why. We are called to focus on Jesus precisely because Jesus did not focus on himself. Jesus chose to live simply and joyfully in service to others.

What replaces worry and fear? Ministry. Serving God and serving others. The life that is more than food and clothing. The outward direction that simplicity frees us to practice. We MAKE IT SIMPLE, trust God's abundance and shift our attention from our needs to the needs of others. We learn what the birds and flowers know: God's kingdom is here. We proclaim the salvation that comes with trusting God's care, shedding our fear, and serving God's people.

A year ago tomorrow my dad died. What a backward-and-forward statement that is. I'm anticipating a day in the near future when I will mark the past. As I searched for signs of my dad's new place in the kingdom amid seagulls and saltwater, I lived in the faith that ties us to all times, to Jesus' people on a mountain, to God's simple care and faithfulness proclaimed by a prophet. I simply remembered Dad's life well-lived and given to me, God's promises that shaped my dad's giving.

Look at the birds of the air. Consider the lilies of the field. Who knew that this was an Easter story?! Those lilies, adorned in their finest, they're Easter lilies. Jesus' death and resurrection proclaim the victory of good over evil. And in this story, trust wins over worry. MAKE IT SIMPLE—trust that God provides now and forever. Live like you believe it. Amen