

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
February 18, 2024 – The First Sunday in Lent
Mark 1:9-15
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Some good Christian people dislike the season of Lent. They find it dismal and depressing. All that emphasis on sinfulness and how we fall short of living as God would have us live! You may feel this way yourself. This morning I would like to say a few words that I hope will invite us to a more positive attitude to this holy season. It is helpful to remember, through all this season as in all our lives, that our *telos*, our ultimate aim and purpose, is to grow in companionship with Christ.

Let's begin with an invitation from Jesus found in Matthew's Gospel (11:28-29): "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." In these words, Jesus invites his followers to companionship with him: "come to me." And he promises rest for the souls of those who take on his yoke, that is, who live according to his teaching.

I was praying with this passage from scripture recently, and I was blessed with an image. You have probably seen documentaries of some kind that show farmers in less developed countries plowing their fields, walking behind two oxen yoked together with a wooden yoke. I imagined a wooden yoke with one side over the shoulders of Jesus and the other side over my shoulders. As long as I walked in step with Jesus, the furrow was not easy to plow, but we did walk on, step by step, on the right path. But if I pulled away from Jesus and attempted to go in another direction, we made no progress at all, but were stuck where we were. If we desire the rest for our souls that Jesus promises, then we do well to listen to what he has taught.

Jesus' invitation is for all of us who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. Now there are many, many kinds of burdens in life and many reasons we may be weary. For now, I would like to look at how our refusal to live by Christ's teaching may add to our burdens and our weariness, using a common example, worrying.

Jesus taught his followers not to worry. In the passage from the sixth chapter of Matthew's Gospel – "Consider the lilies of the field" – Jesus tells us not to worry about what we will eat or drink or what we will wear or about what will happen tomorrow. Instead of worrying about these concerns, we are to "strive ... for the kingdom of God."

I am certain that everyone here worries. Food and clothing may not be on the top of our worry lists, but what will happen tomorrow surely has a place there. And I am certain that everyone who worries will readily agree that worrying is a burden, one which often causes us to lose sleep and become weary. It isn't at all easy to stop worrying. I've never found that I could stop worrying just by telling myself to stop. Jesus tells us not to worry but instead to strive – a strong, active verb – to strive for God's kingdom and God will take care of our needs, the needs God knows we have.

You may decide that during this Lent you would like to rest from the burden of worry. What spiritual practices might help you? Our Lord says, "come to me." That is where we can begin. When you find yourself worrying, try turning your thoughts to Jesus. Repeat the name of

Jesus instead of repeating the words that express your worry. You may wish to repeat the opening words of the 23rd Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want." Singing a favorite hymn may help direct your attention away from worry and to God. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God." "Amazing Grace." "O God our help in ages past." Or pray about the situation you are worried about. Ask the Lord to help you carry your burden. Try to hand your worry to Christ. You may try to break the cycle of worrying by an intentional practice of gratitude. Thank God for your blessings, slowly, one by one, the blessings of the past and the blessings of the present. Or prayerfully recall the way God has helped you in past troubles, through other people and spiritually. It may help you most to turn your thoughts and prayers to the needs of others, especially to those who are facing or coping with difficult situations. Ask God how you might help someone who needs help. These are all ways we might strive for the kingdom of God instead of growing weary with worry.

Jesus said, "I am gentle." Can you imagine Jesus as gentle? Do you experience Jesus as gentle? Often the passages we hear from the Gospels in our worship services do not portray a "gentle Jesus." Not when he denounces hypocrites, for example, as we heard on Ash Wednesday. We may see Jesus as critical and demanding rather than gentle. Perhaps it may be helpful for you this Lent to read through one of the Gospels and focus on the accounts of Jesus healing people and forgiving people. Focus on his compassion and ask Jesus to have compassion on you, for your difficulties and troubles and for your mistakes. Ask Jesus to have that kind of mercy on you.

Jesus said, "I am ... humble in heart." We who love Jesus and seek to follow Jesus are called to be like Jesus. We are called to be "humble in heart." What does that mean? The topic of humility of heart and spirit is complex. For now, let's follow the image of being yoked with Jesus. Humility might be seen as submitting ourselves to Jesus' way as we plow the furrow rather than pulling our own way. Jesus showed this kind of humility in the way he followed God's teaching and God's will. He modeled humility when he prayed to his Father, when he affirmed and taught the word of God already given in the Hebrew Bible, when he said in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Not my will, but yours be done," when he washed his disciples' feet the night before he died as an example for them and for us about serving others. Jesus did not go his own way, and we who seek to follow him will do well to follow Jesus' way rather than our own, when the two are not the same.

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

Will L. Thompson was a 19th century American composer who wrote many hymns and gospel songs. His best known work is a gospel song called "Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling." Hear these words of the first verse and refrain:

"Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me;
See, on the portals He's waiting and watching, watching for you and for me.
Come home, come home. Ye who are weary, come home;
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling, O sinner, come home!"

In Jesus' name. Amen.