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 All Saints Church  
 Mary Robert

*"Do not be afraid."*

*In the name of the God who creates us, who redeems us, and who makes us holy.*

For some reason unknown to me, the Lectionary Elves (the unknown people who pick the readings for the Revised Common Lectionary) skipped several verses that immediately precede today's Gospel reading that I think should be included. So I am going to read them to you, beginning with the 22<sup>nd</sup> verse of this same chapter 12:

Jesus said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. <sup>23</sup>For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. <sup>24</sup>Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! <sup>25</sup>And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? <sup>26</sup>If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? <sup>27</sup>Consider the lilies, 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. <sup>28</sup>But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith!"

You've heard these words before, right? (I've stopped at the end of verse 28.) They conjure up wonderful images for me - lilies of the field (I always think of Sidney Poitier and the German nuns in the movie of the same name), and birds of the air. God takes care of them, so why should we worry about our lives? But perhaps we have heard these words so often that we just take them for granted. Or, we might even just dismiss them as familiar phrases that don't really mean anything - like 'and they lived happily ever after.' Nice. But not really true.

After all, we have responsibilities, don't we? We have to take care of ourselves, our families; we have to do well in school so we can get into a good college and then get a good job, so we can provide for ourselves, our families; we have to earn enough and save enough money so that we can provide for ourselves in our old age and leave money for our children and grandchildren. We need to have clothing and food and shelter. And when we want something, we need to have the money to buy it, right? And then we need to be able to live in a good neighborhood, and drive a

big car so we can be safe on the road, and belong to the right clubs, and have another house to go to on vacations - at the beach, or maybe in the mountains where its cooler. Then...maybe a bigger house in town, with more bathrooms so no one has to share, and a big attic and garage to store the things that we've bought but don't use very often, if at all.

All those things make us worry. We are anxious. It's a fairly modern phenomenon, and, I am guessing, probably peculiar to Americans. A recent *Reader's Digest* article said that "an estimated 19 million Americans ages 19-54 (more than 13 percent of the population) experience debilitating bouts of anxiety," making it the most common psychiatric condition in the U.S.

So let's pick up at the 29<sup>th</sup> verse of chapter 12. But this time, we'll use the translation by Eugene Peterson called *The Message*.

Jesus continues, "What I'm trying to do here is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied with getting so you can respond to God's giving. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met."

(And continuing with verses 32-34): "Don't be afraid of missing out. You're my dearest friends! The Father wants to give you the very kingdom itself. Be generous. Give to the poor. Get yourselves a bank that can't go bankrupt, a bank in heaven far from bankrobbers, safe from embezzlers, a bank you can bank on. It's obvious, isn't it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being."

Do not be afraid. Did you know that 'do not be afraid' is the most frequent command in the Bible? Why, particularly in the Gospels, -- you know - the GOOD News - would Luke have an angel or Jesus or God say, "Do not be afraid" before delivering GOOD news?

Maybe it's because Luke knows that this good news - and many other words of Jesus - is not only good, but also difficult for us to hear, troubling, unsettling. We really prefer for things not to change. We like things the old way, not a new way. Do you know how many Episcopalians it takes to change a light bulb? Ten. One to change the bulb and nine to talk about how good the old one was. So when Jesus says, "Do not be afraid. *Sell your possessions and give alms*," he is zeroing right in

on our anxieties. Because our possessions - our stuff - gives us a sense of security, a sense of comfort. Our possessions give us a sense of our self-worth. To give them up is a scary thing to do!

But the kingdom that is being given to us is not about hoarding treasure for ourselves. Instead, it is a way of living where we give ourselves away in the service of others, over and over again. And by the way, the issue is not whether we have money or things. What is important is what we focus on and whether we are generous with what we have or not. If our focus is on God, then our stuff doesn't get in the way. We don't have to be afraid that something might happen to our stuff because we are willing to share all that has come from God to us. We know that everything belongs to God, and everything comes from God, and that the right use of what we have been given honors God.

It is God's pleasure to offer us a life in God's commonweal. That life is accomplished with the right use of our wealth. That life is accomplished with the right use of our possessions. That life is accomplished with the right use of ourselves in a sacrifice of love for our neighbors near and far -- the suffering, the disenfranchised, and the marginalized. The world has been turned upside down for the realization of the Good News. But we do not need to be afraid or anxious. Our hearts are with God and God is always with us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.