



## THE BIRDS OF THE AIR

Matthew 10:24-39

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Today's passage feels like whiplash, and it begins with some incredibly difficult words:

...If we deny Jesus, he will deny us...

...If people call me Lord of the Flies (Beelzebul), you should expect no less...

...I have not come to bring peace but a sword...

...One's foes will be one's household.

Then he swings to words of soothing grace:

...whoever welcomes you welcomes me...

...you are of more value than many sparrows...

...God has counted the hairs on your head...

...if you give even a cup of cold water to a little one in my name you will not lose your reward.

These wildly divergent messages from Christ serve a very specific purpose. Like a military commander who "puts the fear of God" into his troops, Jesus is anticipating the potential weak-kneed response that may come in the months ahead. Jesus is trying to prepare his followers for the incredibly difficult time before them that will include scorn, exile, and torture.

Maintaining the faith will require a fully centered and clear trust in him that understands the implications of being his disciples. His words and ways are turning the world upside down and, if they stand with him, they too will face severe opposition.

In our own lives, more than we might realize, our faith is tested daily as well.

- Being honest in a world filled with prevarication,
- being generous in a world of greed,
- being accepting in a world of judgement,
- being centered in faith and acknowledging Jesus as Lord

are as counter cultural as the faith of the first-century Christians.

In the midst of these warnings and promises there is, in the center of this section, a brief but beautiful picture Jesus paints.

I researched this sermon at Princeton Seminary, where I go twice a year to do the groundwork for six months of sermons. As my eyes blurred from endless articles and my mind scrambled by Greek I have long

forgotten, I occasionally needed a distraction to relax my mind. God provided it through the beauty of creation.

I sat right next to a window overlooking a bird feeder and a bird bath. There were dozens of birds coming to look for seeds and splashing in the bath. The sheer variety at this feeder was remarkable!! I counted 20 different species!

One was small enough to fit in your pocket; brown, black, blue birds; long beaks and short beaks; ones that clutch the seed in their feet and tap it with their beak and ones who swallow in a gulp. I looked at this scene as I read Jesus words,

*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

His words led me to think about the many ways these birds are cared for. Dozens were hopping around the branches of the trees God gave for shelter, eating seeds grown by the Lord, splashing in the water that literally rained from the sky, and basking in the warmth of the sun.

The birds are so beautiful; 10,000 different kinds crafted with such a marvel of variety; their songs delightful; their work so ardent. As I sat there I could see all the amazing ways that God has created and provided for these splendid animals.

Incredible. Amazing. Wonderful.

And yet Jesus says you are of much more value than they. As much as God put into birds, and it is considerable, God has put much more into you.

I can see this throughout my life, perhaps you can as well. I can see the threads in the tapestry of my life that God has knit together to shape who I am...in my parents and brothers; in the people of the churches I have served who have taught me so much and made me so glad to be a pastor with such incredible people; how God put Wendy and me together; blessed me with the

gift of my children, everything. I look back and I am so filled with thanksgiving.

I can see how God brought this church to do His work; how the DR came to pass, the work of Mobile Meals; the Shepherd Center. God weaves people of this church in and out and through this world. As we look back we can see those threads that were invisible at the time.

Jesus assured his followers of their heavenly father's profound care because the world they lived in was filled with danger, much more so than in our time, a whole lot more, a mountain more.

Leprosy, starvation, conscription, crime on the roads, early death, debilitating disease at an early age, things were much, much worse across the board. They were beset on three sides by those in authority being spun, oppressed and manipulated by Rome, the Sanhedrin, and all Herod's minions.

Don't be afraid of those who can kill the body, Jesus tells them. Many people could do this in their time and murder was one of the leading causes of death in many parts of the ancient world. But Jesus tells them that being killed is not the worst thing that can happen to you. The one to fear, the one to listen to and obey, is God in heaven – and that God, with all the real power, is in fact the God who loves you.

Thus, despite all the very real evil they confronted on an almost daily basis, Jesus tells them in no uncertain terms: DO NOT BE AFRAID! DO NOT WORRY! DO NOT BE ANXIOUS! As much as God cares for the birds of the air, God loves you so much more.

Whatever you face, in ways you cannot grasp, God is watching, molding, caring. We do have real reasons to fear in our time as well. But whatever they are, they were worse in Jesus' time. If you find yourself in fear, in anxiety, and worry remember the birds of the air.

Jesus' words should give us a sense of security about the world. Don't toil or spin ourselves into a tizzy from every headline or volatile report or story of mistrust. It's all too easy to do. In high school, all the talk of nuclear war had practically paralyzed one of my friends in fear. Every time there was a lightning storm he thought the world was coming to an end. Don't get me wrong. Nuclear war is something to fear and diligent work for peace is essential. But, as followers of Christ, the storms of life should not buffet us about as if we were being tossed on the waves of the sea.

Being able to trust in Jesus is the gift he gives us. Soothing our fears and worries is a blessing from above, especially when life is hard. But with the gift comes a call and command.

Even more than not being afraid is to become Christians of courage. Since we are not paralyzed by fear, we can be mobilized into action, actively standing up for God's beloved children. Take the 20<sup>th</sup> century Swedish diplomat and world leader Dag Hammarskjöld, called, by John F Kennedy, the greatest statesmen of the century. As the United Nations Secretary-General, he flew into places of danger to work for peace and died on one such mission when his plane crashed.

Hammarskjöld wrote, "We are not permitted to choose the frame of our destiny. But what we put into it is ours. He who wills adventure will experience it – according to the measure of his courage. He who wills sacrifice will be sacrificed – according to the measure of his purity of heart."

The recent terror attacks in London showed this type of courage. The headlines in the United States, after the attack, said London was reeling from the assault and living in fear. The English thought these headlines were rather amusing, after all they had been through in the two World Wars of the last century. London was standing brave and filled with resolve to not let the terrorists define how they would live their lives. One man was asked if he would stay away from that area and he said absolutely not. The very next day he was back eating at a local establishment.

As Christians we cannot "stay away". We receive this courage from our Lord; who is with us and tells us don't fear those who can kill the body; the one with true power is with us; counting all the hairs on your head.

Because we don't need to be afraid we can boldly act in God's name. Our courage is to be directed by the word of Proverbs 31:8,

*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,  
for the rights of all who are destitute.  
Speak up and judge fairly;  
defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

These words were addressed to a king by his mother. The task of a leader is to defend those most vulnerable. All of those called by Christ are to be leaders in our town, country, and world.

Like the early Christians, expect the walk of faith to be very difficult at times. But don't lose hope. As carefully and beautifully as God cares for the birds of the air, Christ cares for you so much more! Given your soul is in the hands of your loving, all-powerful Savior, go forward with a heart filled with courage, out of love for those who need it the most. Amen.