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Wildflowers and Birds?

Matthew 6:24-33



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How many times have you heard these sayings? But Jesus was a master wasn't he? So eloquent -- His expressions are embedded in our hearts and minds. We can almost feel his teachings about the lilies of the field.

“Consider” the lilies of the field. The Greek word for consider – *katamánthou* – means to ‘examine closely’ or ‘look carefully.’ King Solomon in all his glory never wore clothes as beautiful as the *krinon* -- the wild lilies of Israel.

Jesus also said, “Look at the birds of the air.” – *peteinon*, ‘flying or winged animals’ – “They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns but your heavenly father takes care of them. Are you not more valuable than them?”

Wild flowers of the field; Flying birds of the air; Can you see them? Can you feel them? This is Colorado -- You can almost taste their beauty.

What lessons can Jesus, the living God, teach us about life if we closely watch the birds of the air and carefully examine the flowers of the field – if we “stop to smell the roses” if you will?

As you know, I love the Internet. I love Googling around for all kinds of facts and statistics – some of them are even true! So I went searching for wild lilies of ancient Israel and voila! I found several good sites including one commentary proposing that the lilies of the bible could probably have been part of the *genus allium* – wild garlic!

Turns out there are over 250 species of this flower in the Middle East, from Turkey to Iran. Dr. Ori Fragman-Sapir, head scientist at Jerusalem University Botanical Gardens, says that “Alliums are characterized by a tall, erect, inflorescence – word of the day, the complete flower head of a plant including stems, stalks, bracts, and flowers – they’re “umbrella-like,” he says, “all of the flower stalks emerge from one point.”

In other words, the wild lilies or wild flowers in scripture probably didn't look like what we think of today as lilies.

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I have some pictures here of a few of the species of wild allium that grow around Israel.

Slide 5

Imagine Jesus bending down, picking one of these flowers, and carefully considering the intricate beauty, slowly turning the flower in his fingers, relishing the beauty in the moment.

Jesus said, “Look -- carefully -- at the wild lilies. See the long stem. The white petals are lovely – so delicate. Can you feel the stem between your fingers? Can you smell the fragrance as you bring it up to your nose?”

Let’s look at the next one:

Slide 6

Remember our new word: ‘inflorescence’? It really is like an umbrella -- all the flower stalks emerge from one point. Imagine Jesus picking this flower and saying, “Consider the lilies of the field” – this lily...

Are we too busy to look carefully at the wild flowers of the field? Are we so caught up in our busy lives that our hearts are no longer captured by the beauty and intricacies of wild flowers?

What lessons does God want us to get from this? What lessons do we learn about life when we pause for a moment and look closely at wild flowers? The texture, the repeated symmetry, the detail...

How about this one?

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It almost glows. Notice the color – so many shades of purple. Do you think that Solomon himself in all his splendor was ever more beautifully dressed than this almost magical flower?

Slide 8

Or this? Have you ever seen a coat or dress or any article of clothing more delicate or graceful – more lovely than these lavender petals with the green centers?

Why do we worry so much about clothing and what we're going to wear? Doesn't the Creator clothe the flowers in splendor? Won't the Creator also care for us, then? Today's Gospel lesson emphasizes God's loving care for us the way a faithful gardener lovingly nurtures the plants in their own garden.

And "look at the birds of the air," Jesus said, "they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" The word here is *peteinos* for flying or winged animals.

The most common birds in ancient Israel were ravens and sparrows. Jesus talks about sparrows specifically in Matthew 10 when he says, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from 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."

Do not be afraid, he said.

Naturally, I looked online for pictures of birds common to Israel, the birds Jesus was likely pointing out when he taught this lesson.

Apparently, the most common bird in Israel is the lowly sparrow. You probably have them at your house. Have you noticed them? My mom sure did. She had birdfeeders all over the yard when they lived in the mountains and even when they moved down into the city. She loved her little sparrows.

So did Jesus. Jesus learned from them. Jesus knew that our Creator took loving care of the sparrows, and would take care of us.

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Consider the sparrows. Look carefully, he said, at God's lowly sparrows. Do we have the time? Are we too busy to stop and look? There are life lessons that God wants to teach us when we watch the lowly sparrow. Do you think that God cares for this little fellow?

Slide 10

Or this one? If God cares for the lowly sparrows of the earth – two for a penny in ancient Jewish society – won't that same God care for you and me?

...And ravens.

Slide 11

Jesus also talked about ravens. In Luke's version of this story Jesus said, "Look at the ravens." These are fan-tailed ravens. What lessons can we learn from God our Creator as we slow down a little to look and to consider the ravens around us? God takes good care of them.

Slide 12

Ravens don't work. They don't 'toil'. But God takes care of their needs. Won't the living God take care of our essential needs?

Then why do we worry so much? We worry about money, about food, about clothing; Is there something wrong with us humans that we don't trust our God who loves us -- who cares for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field?

The Gospel lesson today about the wildflowers and the birds is really about anxiety and worry. The Greek word is *merimná-o*, to take thought or be troubled with cares. Jesus asks us several questions in this text. Let's see if we can answer them:

- Does God our heavenly parent take care of the birds of the air?
- Does God the heavenly creator take care of the wild flowers in the fields?
- Can you add a single hour to the length of your life by worrying about it?

And then his closer, "So if God cares for you, why worry?"

My mom had a little sign on her bathroom mirror that said "Worry = Control." We worry because we think we can control what happens in our lives. And while we might have some control over a few things, you know what they say: "If you want to make God laugh, make plans."

Jesus said three words that I think we should write on our hearts – internalize – memorize. He said, "Do not worry." Simple, right? "Do not worry."

But we do worry -- plenty. According to a recent survey reported in Reuters (Roí-terz), 90% of respondents said that they were worried about how well prepared they were for retirement -- 90%. I get that. I even worry myself sometimes, and I remind myself what Jesus said, "...do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." That helps me get past the anxiety – living in the present.

Jesus wants us to grow past our worries. Why shouldn't we worry? Because God isn't some distant, untouchable, out of touch, deity who couldn't care less about our personal lives.

We have to get away from a "Vertical theology" they're calling it nowadays. Where God is "up there", we're "down here", and you know what's supposed to be "down there." Well, the vertical God concept isn't good enough. God isn't distant, or up there -- God is right here -- with us -- in the midst of all the messiness of life. That's what the upcoming Christmas season is all about, isn't it? "Emmanuel, God with us?"

A key line in the text for today is, "Your heavenly father knows that you need these things," – water food, and clothing. God, like the perfect parent, knows that we need the essentials of life. Remember, though, not to confuse needs with wants.

Then, in verse 33, comes the best part: "...strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Strive first for God to rule your life – turn it all over, and then all these things will be given to you. I think this is the verse that unlocks the whole lesson. Don't strive first for food, or water, clothing. Strive first to walk in the way of Jesus. Strive first to walk in right relationships with God, others, nature, and yourself. Strive first to live a life that is ruled by God, and the ways and values of God. Then, all this stuff will be given to you. Again – simple, right?

Thanksgiving is this week. This Thursday we celebrate the generosity of God for blessing us, and our nation, with prosperity and abundance. But what kind of abundance is it, really?

Because we're so blessed to live where we live, I'm going to close this message by showing a few more pictures I found of wildflowers of the Rocky Mountains. As you consider these pictures, remember that none of these flowers are found in the gardens by our house, requiring watering, fertilizing, pruning, or any dedicated care by any human gardener. These flowers' only caregiver is God, the Mountain Gardener. God had no help from any humans in growing these beautiful mountain flowers.

I'll ask some simple questions as I show these photos. You don't have to answer out loud, but feel free...

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Did God, the Mountain Gardener, create and care for these Indian Paintbrushes and will God care for them in the future?

Slide 14

Same question: Did God, the mountain Gardener, create and care for these blue lupine and will God care for them in the future?

Slide 15

Again, did God create and care for these lacy fireweed and will God continue to care for them in the future? BTW, the title of this photograph is “Colorado Elk in the Rocky Mountain National Park”

Here’s just a few more for the fun of it....

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“If God so clothes the grass of the field, ... will he not much more clothe you...?”

So here’s the challenge – and it’s simple, but not always easy: “...do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

Happy Thanksgiving. Amen.