



Reflections by the Lake Devotions for an Unordinary Time

From the Sermon Archives of Gaylord Lehman
Carol Lehman Lucas
May 8, 2020

Since my father, Gaylord Lehman, died in 2013, I have had numerous requests from friends, family, and his many fans to curate and compile his sermons in some form. This ambitious project would be aided by Dad's meticulous sermon filing system in which he indexed his sermons by date, scripture, title and theme, such as the obvious – Advent, Easter, Joy, Love – as well as the less obvious – Carolina Basketball!

Dad's strength as a preacher came in his marrying of "Sunday Words" to our "Monday World." He believed in making God's word relevant to our everyday lives, where the rubber meets the road. I often wonder what he would have to say about the current state of our world if he were alive today, and I set about searching the archives for a clue, which came in the form of a sermon delivered on February 27, 2011, at Pinetops Presbyterian Church, which I have reproduced here in its entirety.

The answer to that question, as you will see, is that Dad would advise us to deal with our anxiety one day at a time, with "glass half-full" optimism and gratitude for our blessings in life.

I hope you will enjoy "hearing" his words again.

Xanax for the Soul
A Sermon by Gaylord Lehman (based on Matthew 6:25-34)

If you walk through Wal-Mart or Walgreen's, down the aisle where all the acid distress and anxiety relief items are, you'll find an abundance of remedies: Prilosec, Zantac, Pepcid AC and the long-time favorites Tums and Rolaids. Remember "How do you spell relief?" There are over-the-counter remedies that will either pick you up or calm you down, depending on your need.

Or, sit down with your doctor and tell him how tough life has been lately and how stressed you are with the pressures of life and chances are he will say, "Let me write you a prescription that will have a calming effect and will help you over this rough spot in your life." Chances are it will be Xanax (or its generic), now the number one prescription when the present seems rough and the future is fogged up with anxiety. We should be grateful for all medication that helps us cope with life.

Anxiety is an inevitable part of life. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said three times, "Do not worry." I wonder what he was getting at when he told his disciples, "Don't worry about your life. Don't worry about what you are going to eat or wear. Look at the birds. Your heavenly Father feeds them and you are much more valuable than they are. And look at the wildflowers, which many people never even see. Solomon himself wasn't decked out in the finery of these little flowers. So don't worry about what you will eat or drink or what might happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes."

Not worry? Are you kidding? Isn't it absurd to tell the young wife of a soldier about to be deployed to Afghanistan not to worry? No matter what Jesus said about the birds and the wildflowers, she's going to worry. Anxiety is written all over her. The best we can say to her is that her husband will be "in our prayers." But we get the nagging feeling that he can be "in our prayers" and still be in the path of a roadside bomb or an insurgent attack.

At first glance, Jesus' words about the birds and the lilies, lovely as they are, don't seem very compelling to us today. Birds and lilies don't worry about life. Birds don't have mortgages and car payments. Wildflowers don't have medical problems and college tuition payments to keep them awake at night. So Jesus seems to be suggesting an unrealistic strategy for a complex world. He says, "Look at the birds." To which we reply, "But look at the bills."

There's a certain absurdity about this "be-not-anxious-about-tomorrow" scripture. Because if you have a history of heart trouble in your family and you have already had one heart attack, you are going to be anxious. If your loved one is taking chemotherapy to curb the spread of cancer and the outcome is uncertain, you are going to be anxious.

So what's Jesus getting at here? One thing he is not saying is that we should just trust God and the future will take care of itself. The insurance policies in your drawer for life and fire and health and long-term care reveal a proper concern lest we become a burden to others in the future. The farmer sprays his crops. The quarterback throws endlessly in practice during the off-season. People concerned about tomorrow work hard to sharpen their skills today. There is nothing wrong with a moderate amount of stress. It keeps us alert.

I believe that Jesus' words about worry and anxiety mean that each day presents its own challenges, its own opportunities, its own possibilities. Jesus is telling us not to try to gulp down a

whole year at one time. Live it out one day at a time. Knowing that whatever tomorrow brings, it will also bring God with it.

There's an old "Peanuts" cartoon that has Linus, the philosopher of the Peanuts' gang, saying to Charlie Brown, "Life is difficult, isn't it, Charlie Brown?" To which Charlie Brown responds, "Yes, it is. But I've developed a new philosophy. I dread only one day at a time."

Let's scratch the word "dread" and insert the word "anticipate." That's the Christian approach. Anticipate one day at a time. Look forward to each new day.

The author of the Old Testament book of Lamentations, generally thought to be Jeremiah, was about as depressed as a person can get. The Babylonians have destroyed Jerusalem and carted off all the educated Jews to Babylon. For about forty years they have been living in exile, away from home and all the things they cherished. The author is besieged with bitterness and overwhelmed with despair. His hopes are crushed and he has feelings of abandonment. Then, amid his darkness, he finds one bright word of hope for the future. That one thought redeems this otherwise depressing book. He says, in spite of all his despair, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; God's mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is God's faithfulness." (Lamentations 3:22-23)

Our hope for our anxious moments, God's Xanax for the soul, involves several practical things. Let me give you four of them very briefly.

First: Realize that anxiety is a part of being human. Wherever we interact with life, there is stress. In our busy lives we all have the same zip code: we all live at the corner of Work and Worry.

The only people I know who seem constantly happy and have no complaints and no worries are the people who are suffering with Alzheimer's. They are generally content, have other people to meet their needs, and don't seem to have a care in the world. Their children are stressed, but mom isn't. She no longer interacts with the realities of life.

The second thing: Realize that what we call "happiness" is a state of mind. It has to do with our attitude, with our focus. You can see the glass as half-full or you can see it as half-empty. Half-full people are people who handle life's stresses with optimism and hope.

Third: Seek God's guidance and direction. I have some friends in Halifax County who have a large flower farm. She and her husband supply cut flowers to people all over this part of the state. Last summer's drought took its toll. Though they irrigated regularly, the lack of rainfall was still a severe problem. My friend said that she started praying, "Lord, please make it rain." It didn't. Not that week. Not the next week. Or the next. The good, gentle, all day rain never came. Finally, she said she changed her prayer and prayed simply, "Lord, help me deal with it." That's a great prayer for life: "Lord, help me deal with it."

Fourth: Express gratitude regularly. Learn to appreciate and savor the wonderful little things of everyday life. There's a common blessing that many people use at mealtimes. These words: "Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly grateful." Why not offer that same blessing before reading a good book, or before a concert, or before experiencing any of the special joys of life? I started to include a Carolina-Duke basketball game in that list, but then as a Carolina fan I realized that we may not be grateful for what we are about to receive!

So, in summary,
Realize that being anxious is a part of the human condition.
See your glass as half-full, not half-empty.
Whatever the problem, pray, "Lord, help me deal with it."
Express gratitude regularly for the wonderful and little things of life.
And remember that whatever tomorrow brings, it will bring God with it.

With some frequency, because of some drastic shifts in our denomination, Baptist ministers have changed to other denominations in mid-career (or in retirement). Some become Presbyterians; others become Methodists, or Episcopalians. One of my friends, John Claypool, after a noteworthy career as a Baptist, became an even more distinguished Episcopal rector. He tells of his growing up years when his family had this wonderful African-American woman who worked in their home. She cleaned, she cooked, she did the laundry, and did it all with a graciousness and style that everyone in the family appreciated. When she was asked why she was always cheerful and full of life, she would answer: "Ain't nothin' going to happen today that me and Jesus can't handle."

That kind of faith is Xanax for the soul!

(Note from GL: Because sermons are meant to be heard and are not religious essays prepared for reading, the written copy may sometimes stray from proper grammar and punctuation.)