

"Don't worry about it." How many times have you heard those words, or something similar? (I lived in North Jersey for 20 years, so I heard the New York variant: "Fuggedaboutit!")

Those four words -- "Don't worry about it"-- used together are possibly the most useless words in the English language. They're useless, not because banishing worry is a bad idea. Generally, it is a good idea, and most of us worry far too much. But "Don't worry about it" is advice routinely ignored and impossible to obey. Or so it would seem.

The truth is, everyone knows what it is like to be afraid. We all have things that we're afraid of.

Fears start out when we are very young: fear of the dark, fear that mommy or daddy won't come back for you, fear of monsters under the bed or in closets, fear of bugs (I still have that one!). All sorts of things.

Fear continues into our teenage years with fears of things like rejection, humiliation and failure.

Adulthood continues the process. It is filled with fears that include fear of disease, in this case Covid-19 in particular, cancer, death, financial problems, broken relationships, loved ones getting hurt or sick, storms, crime, failure, aging—it's a long list of fears.

We all know what it is like to be afraid. We all also know that life can be risky and therefore filled with opportunities or reasons to fear or have anxieties.

There's a lot that can make us feel afraid.

Some psychologists like to draw a distinction between *acute anxiety* and *chronic anxiety*.

Acute anxiety, they say, is related to some immediate threat. For instance, if you go to work and your closest colleague that you've sat next to for the last three weeks is home with the virus, that's acute anxiety you're feeling. No surprise, there.

But, if you wake up each morning with a sense of dread, but have little idea where it comes from -- nor any idea when or how you'll get away from it, then chances are, you're a victim of chronic anxiety.

The Latin root for the word "anxious" is *angere*, which literally means "to choke or strangle." Should anxiety get its bony fingers around your neck for any length of time, you'll soon be gasping for air!

There's another English word that traces its lineage to the same Latin root. The word is *angina* -- the sharp pain that could precede a heart attack. Angina arises when a coronary artery becomes choked off by a blockage, keeping oxygen from reaching the heart muscle. To me, this indicates that Anxiety can kill you!

Another English word that grows out of this Latin root, *angere*, is "anger." In my experience, anxious people are often angry people, because, I think, anger threatens to choke the breath of life from their soul.

They lash out in an effort to remove the threat, whatever they imagine it to be. Anxious, Anxiety, Angina, Anger—the ingredients of the chronic anxiety that plagues us in these trying times.

With everything that's going on right now, we may imagine ourselves to be the most anxiety-ridden people ever. But a quick look at the Scripture passage this morning tells us that this has been going on since time immemorial.

Speaking God's word to the community of Israel in Babylonian captivity, our text reminds us: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you ... For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

Why was it that God spoke those wonderful comforting words to the people of Israel? Was it because they were lying in quiet green pastures beside still waters? No! Nothing could be farther from the truth!

It's even hard for us to imagine the suffering these people went through in the 5th Century BC. They had survived a war with the mighty Babylonians. That meant a long siege on the city of Jerusalem and then a battle where thousands of people died. After that, pillaging and murders. And then complete destruction of the city—tearing down every stone of its walls and huge temple.

After all that, the people who were left were uprooted, and forced to march hundreds of miles to the Babylonian capital.

What happened to those exiles is hard for us to wrap our brains around, because it is so far removed from our 21st Century experience.

Murder and death are bad enough. But I'm talking about the exile itself.

We're a mobile society, many of us willing to move clear across the continent, if work or family responsibilities demand it. But we can normally get back in a matter of hours.

Not only were those poor people uprooted and marched elsewhere, but you have to remember that their entire identity as a Jewish people was rooted in their theological understanding of being in the Promised Land.

The temple mount in Jerusalem was the spiritual center of their universe. They felt that God resided in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. Then, all of a sudden, everything is snatched away from them. The exiles were racked with worry. Not only were they in a strange country where they didn't know the language, but they also worried if they could still be God's chosen people if they weren't actually in the Promised Land.

How could they worship God away from their cherished temple? Their cry of despair is heard in Psalm 137:4: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

But it's not a song they were really worried about. How could God even hear their prayers? So God sent Isaiah to reassure them. Isaiah gives the people a word from the Lord: "I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."

God had heard their cries. This, of course, is the message we need to hear today as well.

We are not the first generation of human beings to feel inundated by worry. People have gone through hard times in the past. Just in the last one hundred years, Americans have survived the Spanish Flu, World War I, the Depression, World War 2, civil unrest during the Viet Nam war.

People worry. They feel fear.

Today's Scripture passage reminds us that we really do not need to fear. We can live without anxiety because God created us, God formed us,

God knows us better than we know ourselves.

Moreover, the text says God redeemed us, God calls us by name, and God says "you are mine."

So I think we all need to hear this indictment (and it is for all of us): **worry is a lack of trust.** If we truly believe that God says, "You are mine," then why would we be anxious about the things that cross our paths?

This doesn't mean that there won't be waters to pass through, or fires to put out, or pandemics to survive. But anxiety does not honor the God who created us, calls us by name and not only says "You are mine," but "you are precious to me."

Even Jesus questioned his listeners in the Sermon on the Mount.

He basically said, "Why worry? Will it add one inch to your height or one minute to your life?" No! In fact, worrying might shorten your height because your shoulders will be slumped. And worrying could shorten your life, because it can raise your blood pressure!

So how do we remember all these things when life right now feels out of control? I'm going to give you (perhaps again!) the best advice I've ever heard. Whoever said it is a genius in my book!

There's two days every week you don't need to worry about—yesterday and tomorrow. Yesterday has passed forever beyond our control. It is gone. Tomorrow is also beyond our immediate control. This leaves only one day—Today. Most people can fight the battle of just one day.

It's when you and I add the burdens of those two awful eternities—Yesterday and Tomorrow that we break down. I'm not sure who wrote this quote, but I believe it's in the AA manual: "Let us, therefore, live but one day at a time. And in that one day, God promises to be with us."

Paul questioned, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). Later in the New Testament, Peter wrote that we should "Cast all your anxiety on God, because God cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

Yes, there are worries in life, and yes, we may be tempted to look to all sorts of outside helpers to ease the anxiety. But there is only One who has the power to do that—God, who is love incarnate. God touches us and holds us with continual, loving care.

Let me close with this last short quote: "Unbelief puts our circumstances between us and God, but faith puts God between us and our circumstances."

Don't let unbelief get between you and God.

If we can put our faith in God squarely between us and our circumstances, we can kick the worry habit!