



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Keep Calm and Carry On

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*Do not fret because of the wicked;
do not be envious of wrongdoers,
for they will soon fade like the grass
and wither like the green herb.
Trust in the Lord and do good;
so you will live in the land,
and enjoy security (Psalm 37:1-3).*

Not a week goes by now, it seems, without some new disaster or upheaval occurring, either in this country or around the world. Last week a truck driver killed more than 80 people and injured scores of others in Nice, France, when they gathered to watch the Bastille Day fireworks. Then a coup attempt in Turkey threatened more instability in a country that hosts two million refugees from Syria and an airbase used by the United States to launch attacks on ISIS. And those are just the most conspicuous headlines, on top of all the other disturbances in the news and the everyday stressors already going on in our personal lives.

We see this never-ending parade of troubles and it's tempting to give in to a permanent state of anxiety. But we need to resist that temptation, because going there only makes things worse. Jesus himself reminds us that being anxious doesn't help. "Can any of you add a single hour to your span of life by worrying?" he asks. It's a rhetorical question, since we know that anxiety actually shortens our life and makes us miserable in the meantime.

The truth is, we're never at our best when we're anxious. Our animal instincts, whenever we feel threatened, drive us toward the three famous f's: fight, flee, or freeze. Those impulses might keep animals alive in a state of

nature, but they're not very helpful in our modern human social environment.

Fighting thrives on anger, after all, and people don't think straight when they're mad. How many times have you heard someone say, or maybe you yourself have said, "I didn't mean to do that. I didn't mean what I said. I was just angry." Anger and fighting cloud judgment and ratchet up conflict, while fleeing doesn't help much either. We can't solve our problems by running away from them. And freezing is just another form of paralysis.

I've been watching anxiety gather like a great dark cloud in recent months, so I was struck when I ran across the 37th psalm the other day: "Refrain from anger and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it leads only to evil." The psalmist speaks to the spirit of our times from 3,000 years ago, and this is yet another example of how the Bible came to be the Bible. So many of that book's insights are timeless, because human nature hasn't changed very much since the Bible was written. And neither has God.

Fretting leads to evil for all the reasons I just mentioned. We don't think straight when we're anxious. Fighting only breaks things and hurts people, as they say in the Army, and we still have to figure out how to live together when the conflict is over. Running away from problems or being paralyzed by them only lets matters grow worse. All sorts of evils are compounded by our fretting, which is why we need to "keep calm and carry on," as our title for today suggests.

I didn't make that phrase up, of course. It comes, as you may know, from a slogan the British government used to help people through the darkest days of World War II. That

was when Germany seemed almost unstoppable, and London was being bombed every night, and it was not at all obvious that the English Channel would be wide enough to keep the Wehrmacht from crossing over and making the United Kingdom just one more province of the Third Reich.

It's no coincidence, I think, that the slogan is appearing on all sorts of posters and T-shirts and the Internet again today. It's not just nostalgia but an epidemic of anxiety that has people looking for something to reassure them. Naturally it would be good if we could all just say the right words and stay calm, but the question is, where do we really look for hope and courage and peace of mind when the world around us seems so chaotic and threatening?

I read a magazine called *The Week*, which, as the title implies, recaps the week's news and offers commentary across the political spectrum. It's not a bad way to keep up with different perspectives, though you can pretty well predict what the *Wall Street Journal* and *National Review* will say on the one hand, or Paul Krugman, for example, on the other. The magazine's editor always offers a little commentary in the beginning, and last week he started off confessing that he found most of the news to be pretty depressing. Casting about for some sign of hope, he lifted up the Juno space probe that recently entered Jupiter's orbit and the ongoing advances in medicine as examples of human potential. We have science, he says, and that means we're smart, so maybe we can place our hope in human intelligence after all.

I have to say, if human intelligence was all I had to hope in, I'd be even more depressed. As an historian and lifelong student of human nature, it seems to me that the

main reason for putting your faith in humankind is that you don't have any place else to put it.

We all need to believe in something. We need some sort of god, and if we're unwilling to believe in the God of the Bible then we'll elevate something else to the status of divinity. Among the candidates that are always running for the office of god are Reason, Nature, Science, Country, Party, Mammon, Humanity, and Self, along with Religion, which is not at all the same thing as the God it claims to worship and represent.

The Bible calls it idolatry when we elevate anything that isn't God to the status of a god: the place where we put our ultimate trust and fundamental faith. In fact, the first of the Ten Commandments says, "I am the Lord your God ... you shall have no other gods before me." It's the first commandment because everything else follows from that.

Whoever or whatever is the object our deepest devotion determines the way we order our lives. Lots of people live as practical polytheists. They may claim to be Christian—or Muslim or Jewish, for that matter, the other familiar monotheistic faiths—but in fact they worship different gods in the way they live. You can tell, because whenever the God of the Bible comes into conflict with Mammon or Country or Party, for example, it's God who has to give way to other priorities. That, in a nutshell, is why Christianity has such a bad reputation in some circles: because our faith gets blamed for things people do that are really driven by their devotion to some other god.

We worship whatever we truly believe in. That's where we find comfort and peace and strength, and we delight in the object of our devotion. So misers meditate on

their money and Narcissus gazes at his own reflection, lending his mythical name to a real and increasingly common personality disorder.

People who worship the one true God learn to delight in God, and find pleasure in pleasing God. We delight in other things too, but the more we grow in faith the more our other pleasures are ordered and shaped by our devotion to God. We start to think more about other people, and care about their well-being—not just friends but strangers as well. We become more willing to share what we have, because we know that makes God happy. Over time, we learn to want what God wants, and the more we do that the more we discover that life is good after all.

Then something else happens, more or less automatically, as a result of worshiping God and learning to live for God. We find that the more we trust in God the less the worries of the world are able to undo us. We see how all those other gods that people worship fail, because ultimately they're just as vulnerable as we are. They may offer some hope in the short run, but in the end they all fade away. Only God is eternal. Only God has the power to make all things new. Only God can bring life even out of death itself.

Once we come to depend on the one true God, nothing else can fundamentally threaten us. No matter what goes on around us, we really can keep calm and carry on—not because we have a healthy bank account, or because we've built up some strong arsenal for defense, or because humans sent a satellite all the way to Jupiter, but because, as the psalmist says again, “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”

Among the best-loved children's stories is still C. S. Lewis's series *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Many of us read them when we were young, and now we read them to our children or grandchildren. It's easy to forget, though, the context in which they were written. Lewis first imagined the idea in 1939, so it's no coincidence that the series begins with four children leaving the city on a train to stay with a professor in the country because the city is being bombed. Like all good children's stories, *The Chronicles of Narnia* speak to grownups too. If you remember the first book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, you know that it's been winter for a long time in Narnia, while the White Witch has ruled and people and animals have been anxious and afraid. But Aslan, the great gold lion, is on the move. Spring will come again to Narnia, and among its harbingers is the hope that stirs in those who meet Aslan personally and come to trust in his power and his goodness.

Lewis wrote those stories in a time and place where people did their best to keep calm and carry on, even when prospects looked bleak and there was plenty of reason to be anxious about an unknown future. But the future is always unknown, isn't it? We can face it anxious and afraid, or we can be calm and confident in the power and goodness of the One who holds the future in his hands.

We have our responsibilities in the meantime, of course, because God enlists us to do God's work in this world. But we don't need to fret. That only leads to more evil. "Trust in the Lord and do good," the scripture says. And Jesus tells us that the eyes of God are on the little sparrows, and even more, the eyes of God are on all of us.



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