

Last night while I lay thinking here, some Whatifs crawled inside my ear and pranced and partied all night long and sang their same old what if song: Whatif I'm dumb in school? Whatif they've closed the swimming pool? Whatif I get beat up? What if there's poison in my cup? Whatif I start to cry? Whatif I get sick and die? Whatif I flunk that test? Whatif green hair grows on my chest? Whatif nobody likes me? Whatif a bolt of lightning strikes me? Whatif I don't grow taller? Whatif my head starts getting smaller? Whatif the fish won't bite? Whatif the wind tears up my kite? Whatif they start a war? Whatif my parents get divorced? Whatif the bus is late? Whatif my teeth don't grow in straight? Whatif I tear my pants? Whatif I never learn to dance? Everything seems well and then the nighttime Whatifs strike again!"

Well, that, if you don't know, is a poem called "Whatif" by Shel Silverstein, somebody my kids and I love to read, love his poetry. Some of the Whatifs in Shel's poem here would cause us to laugh. They're silly, they're childlike, and very obviously unlikely to happen, like your green hair. On the other hand, some of the Whatifs are totally serious and legitimate, like getting sick, dying, divorce, war, and suffering. Just like in the poem, if we allow the Whatifs to gain a lot of room in our minds, we'll always find plenty to worry about, especially at midnight. But still, you might say, the world is really kind of a mess right now. Have you seen how crazy things have gotten? In fact, there's way more to worry about than our minds can even handle, like this child in the poem.

It doesn't take any imagination these days to get caught up in the Whatifs, and in our gospel lesson, Jesus identifies a worrier, somebody caught up with the Whatifs that many of us can seriously relate to: Martha. In Martha's worry Jesus stops her and says to her, "Martha. Martha." See how he has to get her attention? He has to say her name multiple times. That's the same way I get my kids' attention at home. Then He says, "You are worried and distracted by many things." But I can just as easily hear Jesus saying to me what he did to her. "Rebecca. Rebecca, you are worried and distracted by many things." Because it's true. I am. I worry about a lot of things. I have so much weighing on my mind on any given day, it seems like.

Our world, for instance, our water supplies, our oceans, our wildlife, and extinctions, the rainforest, the climate, our government, safety in schools and in public, mass shootings, racism, violence, the rise of white supremacy, the national debt, the refugee crisis, COVID, another pandemic, division in our nation, human rights, extreme poverty. I mean, not to mention worries at the more local level, like just worries for our church and our members or my kids and our family. In truth, we have a lot we can or could be worried about. There's a lot of concerning things going on in our world. So I'm not going to tell you there isn't anything to worry about. Not. But I also know that too much worry can be crippling and have detrimental effects.

In fact, the English word "worry" comes from an old German word *würgen*. *Würgen* originally meant to strangle or to constrict, literally to prevent someone from getting air and breathing. Worry has come to mean, in our minds, more mental distress about something impending, but worry, like its origin, can have still that effect of constricting and strangling us in our daily lives. With so many legitimate things to worry about, we have to wonder, what is the antidote to our worries? And I believe Jesus offers us an alternative to that kind of endless worry, because Jesus says in this text, He says, "There is need of only one thing."

And that one thing he's referring to in this story is what Mary has chosen to do. She has sat at Jesus' feet and is just listening to Jesus' words. To sit at one's feet at that time equals discipleship. Mary was practicing her discipleship of Jesus by simply being present. And I think Jesus sounds a little bit like some kind of Buddhist master when He uses that phrase, "There is need of only one thing." The practice of being present to the here and the now, of having a mindfulness that is not distracted or busy or hurried or worried, but focused on the present is a teaching we find in religions in all forms of meditation, including in Christian centering prayer. Mary chose to sit still in the moment at the feet of her master, Jesus. She is present to Him. She's present to what He's saying, and to His teachings.

We too are called to the one thing. We need to stop, to put aside our mini tasks and distractions and each and every worry, even if only for a little while, and

instead sit at Jesus' feet, hear what Jesus is saying to us. As followers of Jesus, we are called to spend time with God regularly every day. And if we can't manage that, we should start by trying it at least a few times a week and work our way up. To pray, to read some scripture or maybe a devotional or holy book, to come to worship, to commune with Christ in the Eucharist, to be present to God and God's presence regularly. Jesus is here in our midst. Jesus is in the bread and the wine. Jesus is in the church. Jesus is in our homes. Jesus is in the scriptures. Jesus is in our places of work. Jesus is in our yard. Jesus is everywhere we go, just waiting for us to stop what we're doing, like busy Martha, and to sit down at His feet to just be with Him.

I was looking at all these incredible images that have come back from the new James Webb Telescope this week. I'm sure many of you have. And I was just struck, right, in seeing the thousands of galaxies in our universe, looking out at lights that have been captured from over 13 billion years ago. I was in awe and also felt insignificant, wondering how is it that God cares about little old us over here on this one tiny little planet in this one little galaxy, like that picture of the pale blue dot. But then I recalled, of course, that God, the one who made us and all this vast expanse of interstellar space, also sent Jesus to us, God incarnate, to show us just how much we are loved and cared about by our creator, to remind us that we matter to God, that God shows up for us.

Maybe we could show up for God? Because God's here. God is present. I had a wonderful week. I always do with children from Vacation Bible School. And I was reminded of a previous Vacation Bible School that I had when I was rector of St. Alban's. On that very last day of Vacation Bible School, I had placed a large Jesus doll that I was given charge of temporarily by the diocese. I think Jesus was making his rounds, this doll, through the churches. And I put Jesus on the corner of the baptismal font. When the children came in for worship, I asked them if they noticed anything different. One boy, little boy, named Caesar, raised his hand and said, "Jesus is here." And of course pointed to the Jesus at the baptismal font.

And so then I asked the kids, I said, "Yeah, yeah." And I said to them, "Is this the first time Jesus has been with us this week?" And there was this pause from

the children, and then suddenly they all burst out at the same time, as if they'd all been enlightened in the same moment, "No. Jesus has been with us all week." Out of the mouths of babes. And the kids and I talked about the fact that Jesus is. He's always here. We just don't always see or remember that beautiful reality. Jesus is with us today. God is with you wherever you go, wherever you are at this very moment. It's been said that when Joan of Arc was questioned about how she knew whether the voice of God she claimed to hear was merely a voice in her head or was God's, she responded by saying, "Well, how else do you think God talks to us?"

We may have to listen for the still-small voice of God, but we aren't going to hear that voice if we don't let go of our worries long enough to stop and sit and listen and be present. The world is really messy. We face real, real dangers, and I wish it were different. But dwelling too much on the Whatifs and worries can really get us stuck. So while, of course, we must act and plan ahead and be responsible people, we can do that in faith, trusting that no matter what happens, God is with us and will help us through it, knowing that Jesus is right here now, today.

We can say like the psalmist dared to say, "We do not fear when the earth shakes and the mountains tumble into the depths of the sea. God is our strong refuge." We are worried and distracted by many things. The worry threatens to strangle us. But there really is need of only one thing, and we can choose the better part and sit at Jesus' feet alongside Mary and let go of the Whatifs. Thanks be to God.