

What are you worried about?

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There's a new movie that came out this weekend. 2012. Maybe you've seen the ads for it. It's the latest in a long line of Hollywood end-of-the-world movies. John Cusack plays a father with two small kids trying to avoid what seems to be the inevitable catastrophe caused by solar flares and shifting tectonic plates, all predicted in the ancient Mayan calendar. Okay, it's far-fetched, and typical of the reviews so far are that it's, quote, "a cheesy, ridiculous story."

That reviewer goes on to say, "Its computer-generated scenes of the world falling apart are both impressive and ludicrous. " The White House, St. Peter's basilica, the skyline of Los Angeles and New York, and even most of the Himalaya Mountains all come toppling down. Yes, it's corny, yes it's been done before, and yes, John Cusack and his two little kids – and probably the family dog -- will save the day. Yep, it's corny, ludicrous, and far fetched. And my son Lucas and I love such trash and we can't wait to see it!

Most of us don't expect the world to come to an end today, although frankly it could and Jesus promises that in fact it will one day. But most of us don't get up in the morning, have our coffee, then head off to work thinking, "This is the day the Lord has made, and it probably will be the last."

No, we don't think the world will end today, but the truth is: we often live as if we DO think that tectonic plates may be about to shift or that solar flares are about to do us in. I'm talking about how we so often live our lives wrapped up in anxiety and worry. There are probably lots of things we can blame it on: 24-hour cable news, too much junk food in our diet, the Packers bad season, global warming, I don't know. But I do know this: I see an awful lot of people who are wrapped up in worry and anxiety.

One thing about our worrying is that most of it is unproductive and useless and is about stuff that's never gonna amount to much anyway. The mountains out of molehills kinda stuff. I remember the story about the old man, lying on his deathbed, who said that he had lived a troubled life, most of which never happened.

I remember as a child living in a time when many people feared that a nuclear war was imminent. Some folks, like my father, were deeply worried. He even began building a bomb shelter, by digging a hole underneath our house, where we could seek shelter. Of course, nuclear war is a possibility that responsible citizens had better be concerned about, but I don't think you should spend your day worrying about digging holes under the house quite yet.

But often our worries are about real things, real threats, real dilemmas, real needs.

Our Old Testament lesson today tells the story of Hanna, a person wracked with worry and anxiety. She was one of two wives to a man named Elkanah. Her husband loved her dearly and treated her well. But Elkanah's other wife wasn't so nice. She had several children and enjoyed rubbing it in on Hanna because Hanna had no children. On and on this cruel treatment went, for years. Hanna was wracked by worry, longing, and humiliation ... with her rival gloating and chiding her ... this wasn't the kind of thing she could not just shake off, pull herself together, move on, get a life, don't sweat the small stuff. The text says, *Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat.*

From Hanna's story and from our other lessons today, I believe we can learn everything we need to know about dealing with worry and anxiety in our lives. Here are four things that you can do.

1. **Pray fervently** – it's not good, nor is it being honest, to just stuff your problems away, pretending there's nothing wrong -- nor is it healthy to go round and round in circles suffering year after year from unproductive worry and anxiety. Hanna put up with the taunts from her rival for years, being humiliated, feeling ashamed. Finally she did something about it. She turned to God. She prayed and she prayed intently.

2. **Realize that others may not understand you.** Let's return to our story of Hanna. She was in bad shape. She was a nervous wreck. Her husband was a good guy, but he was just a guy. He said to her, "*Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?*" A typical insensitive, clueless kind of guy thing to say. Then, at the end of her rope, she went to church to pray. The text says, *She was deeply distressed and*

prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. There she encounters the priest, a very good man named Eli. But when he sees her intently pouring her heart out in prayer, he thinks she's drunk! The priest Eli says to her, "*How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.*" This would almost be funny if it weren't so sad ... and so true. When you're struggling and worrying, sometimes even your best friends won't understand you.

3. **Realize that institutions may or may not be able to help you.** I'm not saying don't get medical help when you're sick, don't get your car checked out at the garage, don't call 911 when the burglar's breaking in. But I am saying that you can be certain that God is working, even when the greatest human efforts fail. In today's gospel, Jesus has just come out the temple in Jerusalem with his disciples. This group of small town boys had just been in town a couple of days. Their heads must have been spinning at the sights and sounds of this great religious city. And in the center, atop a hill, sat the temple, one of the wonders of the ancient world. Its gleaming white marble walls were almost blinding in brilliance to visitors arriving even a long way off. The temple was a new project, a rebuild of the ancient second temple built 500 years before. King Herod had completed this project at great expense and the use of an estimated 10,000 workers. His ulterior motive, of course, was sinister: to placate the Jewish citizens and keep them from rebelling against his cruel policies. The disciples are blown away by the magnitude of this building, and gasp: "*Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!*" Indeed, the individual stones of the temple were mammoth, each weighing between 100 and 500 tons. That's 200 Buicks!

But Jesus doesn't let them to get swept away by all the grandeur. He replies: "*Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.*" And of course, 40 years later, the Roman emperor, fed up with the Jews, had his army completely destroy the temple and kill all the priests.

Then Jesus assures the disciples and us. He says that despite all the bad things that will happen, and bad things will happen: people telling you lies, violence and wars, rumors of war that will make you want to dig a bomb shelter, nations in conflict, natural disasters, famines. In fact the most rock-solid things you can imagine, like this magnificent temple, which looks like it'll be here forever – these things will crumble and disintegrate. But in spite of all these things, know this! "*This is but the beginning of the birthpangs,*" Jesus says. What we're going through in this world is like a birth: sometimes painful and scary, but it will turn out as something beautiful and rewarding. Jesus' words are clear: God has a plan. And it's a big plan. So big that we may not understand it. In fact we may be scared to death as our world and our lives seem to spiral out of control. But God has a plan. And ultimately – and you and I are all part of this – it will be like a new birth. This is a promise, and it won't come from temple builders or kings. It will come from God.

4. **Give thanks to God for everything, see his hand in everything.** NASA reports this week that they have found water on the moon. Lots of it, according to the report, 25 gallons, which back in the dry southwest where I came from, would be declared fair sized lake. So we've found water on the moon. Apparently this is very significant. However, they still haven't commented on how the fishing is. Which we'll need to know before we invest more money in sending people there.

But there is no life on the moon, or anywhere else outside of earth, as far as we can tell ... life is precious, life is rare, life is a gift. And what a precious gift life is ... how come it's often so hard for us to see this? How come we so often focus on what we don't have ?

Hannah's prayer that we read where the psalm usually appears this morning captures how she views God's activity in the world. Listen to how she sees things: "*My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.*" Hanna sees all things under the authority of God. All things. That includes everything you are worried about.

So, what are you worried about this week? What burden are you carrying? What keeps you awake at night? What disappointment have you been carrying around?

You have heard the Word of God this morning. They are true words. They are the words of life. Our opening prayer says, "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" them. Build your life on the truth. The truth that there is a loving God who cares for you. A God whose mercy endures forever. A God who opens his arms to us over and over again. Who never abandons us or leaves us orphaned. A God who has a plan for us.

The worries and anxieties that hold you down – whether they're mountains that have been built out of molehills, or whether they're about real problems – give them to God and let him hold them, and let him hold you. AMEN.

