

I was recently looking at a list of the 100 most common phobias...No. 2 on the list is fear of dying. Fear of dying is #2. What do you think is people's no.1 fear? Public speaking....Does that sound right? ...This means to the average person, if you are part of a funeral, you would rather be in the casket than giving the eulogy...There was one phobia I was surprised didn't make the list: **homiliphobia**: That's a fear that the deacon's going to preach too long...Any *homiliphobes* out there ?

.....OK, speaking of fears, can you guess which command appears most often in the Bible?: *Be not afraid (do not be afraid, fear not, stop worrying)*, over 300 times!...You think maybe God is trying to tell us something? ...*And* many times that command comes from the mouth of Jesus, as in today's Gospel scene....Jesus had already given instructions to His closest disciples – the 12 Apostles – to prepare them for their mission, warning them that there would be enemies who would be out to arrest them, even kill them..."I am sending you out as sheep among wolves," He said...After having told them about the dangers they would face, He commands them three times: "Do not be afraid."...

Those words Jesus spoke to His disciples as they prepared to take His Gospel out into a hostile world, are also meant for us 21st century disciples...None of us are likely to face the troubles, persecutions and perils those 1st apostles would face,...but some of us right now -everyone of us eventually - will have troubles in our lives that cause anxiety and worry, and fear about what's ahead...The message Jesus is communicating today is, "Don't be afraid."...He knows how fear can take control of our lives and cause us to miss important opportunities and blessings...He's telling us we don't have to be afraid,...Listen again to the last two vs of our Gospel: "*Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father....Even all the hairs of your head are numbered. ...So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*"...In those two verses, Jesus gives us two powerful reasons why you and I can say, "I am not afraid."

1st, we can say, "I am not afraid because if God cares about a common, little sparrow who falls to the ground, He will certainly care about me when I fall,...when I fail, when I am afraid of what's happening or of what will happen."... We can easily imagine a little sparrow that is hatched and lives its life in obscurity, ...and after a few years falls down dead;...nobody on planet earth notices or cares...But Jesus said the Father notices,...and the Father cares...and so, there is nothing that can ever happen to us of which God is not aware...In fact, not only does God know what is happening to us,...and what is going to happen to us, ...the truly amazing thing is that He cares what happens to us...We matter to God more than we could possibly imagine...And how should we respond to this?...Jesus said, "Do not be afraid...Don't worry, don't be anxious...Because the Father is watching over you at all times, in every situation...There isn't anything or anyone who can separate you from His care, His love...As Paul. wrote in his Letter to Romans:

..."*Who shall separate us from the love of God?...Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or danger or the sword?...No, I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, nor anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"...That says it all.

There's a cute little poem that reminds us of what Jesus said...It goes like this: *Said the robin to the sparrow, "I'd really like to know; why these anxious human creatures rush about and worry so."*...*Said the sparrow to the robin, "I guess that it must be, that they have no [loving] Father such as cares for you and me."*...But we DO have a loving Father who cares for you and me.

And when we are struggling with the troubles of today, or fearing the troubles of tomorrow,...we should recall these comforting words from that old Gospel song: *If His eye is on the sparrow, I know He's watching over me.*

Jesus gives another reason why we can say, "I am not afraid."... "I am not afraid, because if God knows something as trivial as the number of hairs on my head, He must know everything else about me as well...He not only knows, HE CARES!...The Bible tells us in 1 Ptr, "Cast all your fears on the Lord, because He cares for you."...Notice it says **ALL** your fears...We make a mistake when we think that what we are dealing with isn't important enough to bother God with. ...There is nothing too small or insignificant to bring to the Lord...If He cares about our hair, he cares about everything going on in our lives...

Have you ever stopped to realize that the same God who created the universe,...the same God who put the stars in their place...knows you PERSONALLY? So much so that He's numbered the hairs on your head...Did you ever go and get a haircut, and the person doing the cutting says to you, "Hey, did you know that hair #273 has a split end?"...Of course not. But that could happen if God was your barber...
...Now just for fun, reach up and pull a hair out of your head (make sure it's your own)...Do you realize what we just made happen in heaven?...God's huge data base with all the statistics concerning the number of hairs on our heads just got updated...That's how closely the Father watches over you and me.

The point is God knows things about us even we don't know...and God knows us better than we know ourselves...In the beautiful Psalm 139, the psalmist declares, "O, Lord, you have searched me and you know me...You know when I sit and when I stand,... my going out and my lying down;... You know all my thoughts...You are familiar with all my ways...Before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely, O Lord..."
...There is nothing going on in our lives that falls outside of God's constant care for us... There is nothing that can happen to us without God's knowing and without Him right there in the middle of it..

Ok, so Jesus tells us to not be afraid because the Father is watching over us...Now, He doesn't say that if we give our fears over to God, that our troubles, pain, and suffering,...will go away...That certainly did not happen for the Apostles,...and it won't happen for us...What Jesus wants is for us to hand our fears over to the Father....and to trust that He will give us the faith, the strength, the courage, whatever we need to get through the troubles, pain and suffering that are part of every life,. and to trust that the suffering is producing something good in our lives, something we might not see right away, something only the Father knows.

One last thing...Now, this can happen with any of us...Too often it happens with our young people...From the time we get up in the morning, we feel battered by an uncaring world which seems to say, "You don't matter...You're just a face in the crowd...If you disappeared it would make no difference to anyone."...If you ever feel this way,...IT'S A GREAT BIG LIE!...YOU do matter to God... You matter so much that He gave the life of His Son, Jesus Christ, in order to save you from sin and make you part of His family.Before this world came to be, God was thinking about you, making plans for you, ...plans to show His love to you, and to care about you in every possible way,...both now and thru eternity.

So let this little prayer be on our lips in good times and bad: *Lord, I am not afraid. Because if Your eye is on the sparrow, I know You're watching over me. AMEN!*

