

“The Narrator”
September 18, 2022

Matthew 6:25-34

I know a number of you in this congregation have read books or blog posts written by John Pavlovitz. Although he spends his time these days speaking and writing and not working in a church, John Pavlovitz is an ordained Christian minister. And his provocative words are widely read by a number of followers. Not long ago, Linda led a book study here at our church using his most recent book, *If God is Love, Don't Be a Jerk*. And I read his posts frequently when they appear in my email box.

John Pavlovitz tends to focus his themes on faith, politics and social justice. Not only how those three things intersect in our world, but how often they fail to intersect. What I don't typically read from him are blog posts that stray away from those themes and into themes that are more personal.

On Friday, September 9th, however, John Pavlovitz posted a blog entry entitled, “A Letter to the Editor.” When I saw that title in my inbox, I was intrigued enough to open it right away and read through it. Sure enough, the post had a very different feel to it than one of his typical posts. And I made note of the wisdom it contained.

I offer to you what John Pavlovitz wrote in his blog nine days ago as individual and collective food for thought at the outset of a new program year here at Wapping Community Church:

“If someone says to you, “Well, I have some good news and I have some bad news, which do you want first?,” how do you usually reply?”

Often our response actually has to do with our fatigue level, how we feel emotionally or physically at the time, or the recent events of our lives. Some days we want to get the bad stuff out of the way early and have the good news as the “dessert.” Other days, we need something good to prepare and strengthen us before tackling the bad news—like carbo-loading before a big race.

Of course, given the choice most of us would probably like to avoid the bad news altogether. That is not a permanent option at this point, unfortunately. We can't fast forward through the difficult things, we can't sidestep the painful, and we can't get around the suffering and the sadness in this life. Lately, it can seem like the bad news is relentless, like everything is trending downward, like it's all getting worse and worse. But that's the key word, “seems.” It appears that way from where we're standing, from the particular perspective we have and the lenses we are looking through. In the velocity at which we are living and the amount of information we're processing, we have to make snap judgments about what that news flying by our eyes means: is it good or bad? Is it part of the spiral up or spiral down? Is it confirmation of our greatest fears or is it cause for courage?

We are people who live inside a very specific and unprecedented story—and we are the narrators of that story. The world moves and people do things and events take place and we decide what that all means and the implications of it. We all continually editorialize the information in front of us; deciding whether it is bad or good, and letting that decision shape the developing story we tell ourselves. Maybe you've been guilty of putting a negative slant on the headlines in your head and feeling hopeless as a result. The truth is, there is always agency in the small and close and here and now and doable. That is the ever-present good news.

So today's message is really a letter to the editor to you: The truth is, no one gets to decide for us what is bad or good. With the countless events that happen every day, at the end of that day we still have a choice on what the headlines of the story will be.

Today, spend some time thinking, reflecting, meditating, praying or discussing you as the narrator: what the story you tell yourself is about America, about your faith, about the future, about people you disagree with, about your own worth—and may you write some good news.

The story is developing...John Pavlovitz.

At the core of what he is saying, John Pavlovitz is talking about trust. In part, I think, he's inviting us to trust ourselves. You and I each have our own lenses through which we filter what we see and hear. But sometimes, the best practice is to spend time filtering out the things that weigh heavy on our hearts and minds. While filtering in what inspires us and lifts us up.

That's what I appreciate about this blog post. The reminder that each of us have the capacity to edit our own lives. We can each be the narrator of our own lives. Even when it feels like our lives are spinning out of control. Even when the world around us is filled with chaos and violence and inhumanity. As John Pavlovitz concludes, we have a choice when it comes to what the headlines of our story will be...

The other thing John Pavlovitz is referring to, as I read between the lines, is trusting in God. Rather than getting caught up in the relentless, daily swirl of information and stress and anxiety, God invites us to place our trust elsewhere. To live our lives with a measure of confidence, believing God holds us in God's arms even when all the signs and all the news seem to tell us otherwise...

A long time ago, Jesus talked about trust in what was his own version of an ancient blog post. In fact, today's Scripture lesson from the Gospel of Matthew may well be the most beloved passage about trusting God in the entire New Testament.

Of course, just because they're beloved doesn't mean the words don't cause us to raise our eyebrows a little bit. Because what Jesus said in Matthew's Gospel, while wonderful to imagine, doesn't hold up to scientific logic. It's not true, for example, that

all the birds flying through the air on God's earth are well fed. Just as it isn't true that all the lilies planted in God's earth reach their fullest beauty. We all know there are droughts and other catastrophes that cut the lives of birds and flowers short every day...not to mention human beings.

It's unrealistic to claim that those who seek first the kingdom of God find without variation that all things necessary in life are added to them. And what about the concluding idea in this morning's lesson? Is Jesus really advising us to not be concerned about tomorrow? Isn't there something to be said for careful planning and preparation so we're ready for what comes next?

On the other hand, if we read what Jesus said poetically and not scientifically, birds and lilies become symbols. Larger than life symbols of God's steadfast providence. Instead of getting caught up in the logical, scientific idea that not all birds and lilies survive, Jesus' broader, poetic point encourages us to rest in the calm reassurance that God cares deeply for all living things...

It helps to understand that Jesus originally spoke these words to his closest disciples. A group who abandoned their vocations and their families and possessions in order to follow Jesus. The first disciples had no choice but to trust in God. Like birds and lilies trusting God to take care of them and help them flourish, the disciples had to put their trust in the care of people moved by God. They counted on the goodness of others to provide them shelter and food and hospitality as they traveled Galilee.

Despite the fact that Jesus' words had particular meaning for the disciples who followed him, however, they also have meaning for us generations later. And what better way to end this morning's passage than the last line in today's Scripture lesson, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worry of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

There's something homespun and slightly humorous about Jesus' final words of advice. I imagine some of you have probably heard the old adage that goes, "don't borrow trouble." I suspect that nugget of wisdom comes directly from Jesus in this Scripture lesson.

Indeed, it doesn't do much good to borrow trouble. There's not much point in draining away hope and strength and joy from today because we're focused on tomorrow. Especially since whatever anxiety we have about tomorrow may not come to pass. Meanwhile, we've missed out on any blessings today might hold.

And even if tomorrow holds troubles of its own, as I imagine Jesus said with a wink of his eye, why not wait until tomorrow to deal with them?

Lots of good advice today worth pondering and putting into action, I think. Set aside the worries and the bad news. Choose to be the narrator of your own life. And put your trust in God who holds today and tomorrow and every day. Amen.

