Introduction to the Scripture:

**Psalm 139** is one of the more well-known and well-beloved psalms. It speaks of the pervasive presence of God, and his intimate knowledge of us, which offer us an outsized measure of hope and comfort in the face of adversity and trial.

*You have searched me, Lord,*

 *and you know me.*

*You know when I sit and when I rise;*

 *you perceive my thoughts from afar.*

*You discern my going out and my lying down;*

 *you are familiar with all my ways.*

*Before a word is on my tongue*

 *you, Lord, know it completely.*

*You hem me in behind and before,*

 *and you lay your hand upon me.*

*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,*

 *too lofty for me to attain.*

*Where can I go from your Spirit?*

 *Where can I flee from your presence?*

*If I go up to the heavens, you are there;*

 *if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*

*If I rise on the wings of the dawn,*

 *if I settle on the far side of the sea,*

*even there your hand will guide me,*

 *your right hand will hold me fast.*

*If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me*

 *and the light become night around me,”*

*even the darkness will not be dark to you;*

 *the night will shine like the day,*

 *for darkness is as light to you.*

*For you created my inmost being;*

 *you knit me together in my mother’s womb.*

*I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;*

 *your works are wonderful,*

 *I know that full well.*

*Search me, God, and know my heart;*

 *test me and know my anxious thoughts.*

*See if there is any offensive way in me,*

 *and lead me in the way everlasting.*

**Matthew 6:25-34** is part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount which also includes the beatitudes and the Lord’s prayer. Here, Jesus imagines a life that lives this day and each day in confident faith in God who knows and responds to all human needs. The heart of faith recognizes and welcomes the Kingdom of God as a gift and places all of life in the hand of God. Jesus says:

*Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing?*

*Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore, do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed, your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

*So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.*

**Sermon**  Don’t Worry About These Things

The story goes about a man who for several years had been having trouble getting to sleep at night because he feared burglars. One night his wife heard a noise in the house, so she went downstairs to investigate. When she got there, she did find a burglar. "Good evening," she said enthusiastically. "I am so pleased to see you. Come upstairs and meet my husband. He has been waiting 10 years to meet you." (William Marshall, *Eternity Shut in a Span*)

Or have you seen that meme with a photo of Steve Carrell’s character from *The Office*:

Last night? I didn’t get much sleep, but I did get a few hours of anxiety in.

Worry can be crippling – can’t it? In this passage the word “worry” is sometimes translated as “anxiety” which is really just a fancy word for fear. A better translation here is “preoccupied with.” Hear these words again with this simple substitution:

*Therefore, I tell you, do not be preoccupied with your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. And why are you preoccupied with clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, … So, do not be preoccupied with tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring preoccupations of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.*

I love how straightforward these verses are. Some parts of the Bible are confusing and complicated – but not here. This is not one of those passages which could be interpreted in several ways – Jesus says it clearly: *Don’t worry about the basics of life – Seek first the kingdom – and these things will be added*.

It’s important to point out that he isn’t saying don’t care for these things, or that you should ignore these things. Jesus is not saying that these tangibles – clothing, food and drink – are unimportant. On the contrary, they ARE important and so he provides them for us. It’s our preoccupation with them that he warns against. Keep them in perspective. Don’t WORRY about them. There’s a big difference.

And then he tells us how, verse 33: *But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*. I learned these words in a song: Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness. And all these things will be added unto you…

And so the question is before us: How do we keep all the competing interests in our lives in proper proportion? Knowing what merits our attention and how much of it…What we should prioritize and what we should let go…

I have a friend who makes a habit of starting her day with a prayer. One day, when things were particularly hectic, her 4-year-old son said, “Mommy I don’t think you’ve prayed yet today, because you’re acting awfully crazy.” And she realized he was right. She had hurried her way into her day without praying first as she normally did.

Seeking God’s kingdom FIRST is really matter of priorities. And while it might sound like a simple saying – well, actually it is quite simple – put God first – still it’s not always that easy.

And this is not Jesus’ *Power of Positive Thinking*. He is not offering a glib platitude. This is not a formula for how to get all the things we want in life. Remember, the last sentence of this passage is: “Today’s trouble is enough for today.” He knows the daily struggle.

In fact, the entire Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5, 6 and 7) is the blueprint for what life in God’s kingdom looks like. That’s why in the beginning of chapter 6, when teaching us to pray, Jesus invites us to pray, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

And remember the context of the Middle East 2,000 years ago – people truly lived day to day. Without refrigeration and preservatives, they did gather their food daily. Which is why Jesus’ prayer also includes... “Give us this day our daily bread.” (v.11)

So tend to your daily duties – and know that God is providing for you in both big and small ways. Because the kingdom of God is life now, lived in relationship with God and each other as a reflection of His love for us.

And when we are aware of the Kingdom of God all around us, then we will also be driven by a sense of hope rather than worry.

In this way, our faith is not something tacked on to our lives – an hour on Sunday morning at 54 Walden St. or on zoom/YouTube. It’s not a “red telephone” to God, who, like a superhero, will swoop in to save us when whenever we get into trouble.

Rather our Christian lives are defined by Christ who orients our lives to God’s purpose, God’s values and God’s priorities. It is giving up our trust in our own resources and opening ourselves to the people God gathers as His church as we commit together to living differently – more generously, more compassionately – than others might.

There are a host of ways to handle our worries and our anxieties… self-help, psychologists, coaches of all sorts have practices and approaches to offer - each with their own angle or emphasis.

And yet even all of these need a center, or a foundation. And I think, Psalm 139 is just that. All the layers of worries and anxieties and fears are wrapped around who we are as a beloved child of God for whom Jesus died.

*For you created my inmost being;*

 *you knit me together in my mother’s womb.*

*I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;*

 *your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*

And not only has God made us, but He searches our hearts and knows them perhaps better than we know ourselves. So, there is nowhere we can go where God is not waiting for us. Wherever our worries take us - whether literally or in our minds - God knows and God goes.

*Search me, God, and know my heart;*

*test me and know my anxious thoughts.*

*See if there is any offensive way in me,*

*and lead me in the way everlasting.*

The story goes that after 30 years of building houses for a prominent land developer, Sam announced he wanted to retire, buy some land, and build a small home for himself and his wife.

Sam had hoped for a large bonus for all his years of service. Instead, his boss asked him if he would build one more house. He gave Sam plans for a lovely home located on a choice piece of land with a magnificent view. It was for a very important person, he said, and he urged Sam to do his best work.

But, because Sam was resentful, his heart was not in the project and his work was shoddy. He ignored architectural details and even substituted inferior materials so he could pocket the difference. When the house was finished, there was a big celebration for his retirement. And his boss gave Sam an envelope as a parting gift.

"At last, my bonus," Sam thought. But there was no check in the envelope. Instead, it included a key and a note: "For everything you’ve done - the house is yours!"

When we worry, we draw inward, we focus on ourselves, and we place a veil between ourselves and God, so that we’ll probably miss what He is doing. When we are preoccupied with the wrong things, we will miss the mark, and the blessings God may have placed right in front of us, and the blessings he has placed within us even!

Sounds simple, and maybe some days it is. But it can also be hard to trust Christ and his promise of a better life with him at the center.

Steve Timm, who did a tour of duty in the Iraq war says this about this passage from Matthew:

*Going to war and back is like pressing a reset button on your priorities. I suppose it's like surviving a serious illness. Some things don't seem so important. Who cares if the road has a pothole, as long as it doesn't blow up when you drive over it? Other things are more important – just ask my kids how many hugs they've gotten since I've been home.*

*Why should it take war or illness to put things in perspective for us? I'd like to believe that it doesn't have to, that we can read these words of Jesus and accept them. I'd like to believe we can get our priorities straight. I'd like to believe we could seek his kingdom first and not get "wrapped around the axle," as soldiers say, about the rest. We should be able to see what's important without needing to be shot at first, shouldn't we?*

*The only way for us to not worry is to trust that God has indeed provided for all our needs. Sometimes that's hard to see. Still we need to trust God enough to put him first.*

When the Pilgrims arrived in New England, they had no idea what lay ahead for them. If they had any vision of what their life in the new land would bring, I can’t imagine that it came close to what really happened. But they were living out of a Kingdom vision and calling on their lives and their church. They trusted that God would provide for them and bring them through.

Listen to this description of the Pilgrims' safe arrival at Cape Cod aboard the Mayflower by William Bradford:

*Being thus arrived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of heaven, who had brought them over the vast & furious ocean, and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof, again to set their feet on the firm and stable earth, their proper element.*

*Being thus past the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles before in their preparation,... they had now no friends to welcome them, nor inns to entertain or refresh their weatherbeaten bodies, no houses or much less towns to repair too, to seek for safety…*

*What could not sustain them but the spirit of God & his grace? May not & ought not the children of these fathers* [and mothers] *rightly say: Our* [parents] *were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness; but they cried unto the Lord, and he heard their voice, and looked on their adversity. Let them therefore praise the Lord, because he is good, & his mercies endure forever.*

Gratitude does not come easily, especially when we are caught in the grip of anxiety. Nor does gratitude come in a sudden conversion. It comes through a slow turning away from worry by intentionally stopping to find something, anything, for which to thank God. In the midst of worry, it can be a real stretch, and Jesus understood this.

Take something simple and common, Jesus says, for which to give thanks: a bird, a flower, a blade of grass. Anything will do: a breath of air, a dog’s loyalty, a glass of water. It is the small stp of moving out of self to notice something or someone beyond the self that matters.

Jesus wants us to notice what is in front of us, to believe that God is present and to be thankful. Because by adopting a posture of gratitude, we will discover God’s abundance - right in our midst.

Now that’s Good News as we head into the week of Thanksgiving (which for many is a time of worry and anxiety!)!

The Lord will provide what we need for the day or even just the moment. Jesus says,

*Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?*

You are!

And praise God from whom all blessings flow!
Amen.