

REFLECTION – February 12, 2023

Civilla Durfee Martin, a noted speaker and songwriter, was born in Nova Scotia in 1866 and died in Atlanta in 1948. She has provided one of the most influential and often-recorded gospel hymns of the 20th century entitled: “His Eye is On the Sparrow.” Early in the spring of 1905, Civilla Martin, accompanied by her husband, the Baptist minister Walter Stillman Martin, was on a lecture tour that landed them in Elmira, New York. After speaking to a church congregation, she was requested to visit a homebound couple, Mr. and Mrs. Doolittle, who had once been the pillar of that church. At first, Mrs. Martin, was hesitant to accept the invitation. Going to a strangers’ home, particularly of two sick ones, was not part of her agenda. She was not keen on visiting a house that was dark and foreboding and perhaps the illness of the couple would affect her in many ways. But she accepted the request and went.

As Civilla Martin and her husband arrived at the home, they were surprised to find that Mr. and Mrs. Doolittle were not what they expected them to be. In fact, they were happier, more cheerful, more hopeful than anyone the Martins had seen. Mrs. Doolittle had been bedridden for twenty years. Her husband was an incurable cripple who had to propel himself in a wheelchair to do his business. The house was not dark but bright with open windows overlooking the sky and trees and birds. When Civilla asked the secret of their positive energy, Mrs. Doolittle lifted a shaky hand, pointed out the window and replied: “It’s those little birds. If Jesus takes care of them, I know he will watch over me too. His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches me.” The beauty of this simple expression of faith touched the hearts and sparked the imagination of the Martins, particularly, Civilla. The hymn, “His Eye is On the Sparrow” was the outcome of that experience. The next day, she mailed the lyrics to Charles Gabriel, a famous composer of gospel songs, who wrote a tune for it.

The themes of trust in spite of fear and sorrow, and a profound sense of being under the care of Jesus, who is a “constant friend,” offered the African-American community comfort during the Civil Rights movement. The refrain seals the theme: “I sing because I’m happy, I sing because I’m free”—words that would speak to everyone, but especially African Americans. Notable versions of this song include recordings by Shirley Ceasar, Marvin Gaye, Whitney Houston and Jessica Simpson, to name a few. But the most stirring rendition of this song was associated with black actress-singer Ethel Waters, who loved it so much that it became the title of her autobiography in 1950.

What is the message of this song for us today? Sparrows are all around us. Those little brown birds seem to be everywhere. Because of their size, they do not draw attention easily, unlike the large, majestic eagles or the beautiful red cardinals. Some bird watchers are not really interested in sparrows. These birds seem to be mundane, unimpressive, unimportant. But they are ever present. Jesus in the gospel of Matthew notices the sparrows. They were part of the first century landscape. They fly freely with no worries about when or where to get food and shelter. They do not dread what comes next. They just live one day at a time.

Jesus knew too well what Matthew's listeners were going through. It was fear that gripped the community of believers. Fear of the ruling power, fear of starvation, fear of death. Jesus taught that the sparrows of his day would be sold in the town market for a penny, but not one sparrow was forgotten by God. A symbolic way of saying that if God cares for the sparrows, so too, are human beings who are more valuable than sparrows. Trust is a big word in this passage. We may not be living in fear of what's under the bed or the fear of heights or walking in dark alleys. But some of us are scared of what lies ahead of us – illnesses, losing a loved one, a failing marriage, financial troubles. Then there's the global fear of what's happening out there – natural disasters, wars, pandemics, evil dictators. There are times when we are exhausted and feel that we are going nowhere.

These words in Matthew are a reminder for us to take heart. Trust in God's love that something good will happen. Trust that someone will be there to help you. Trust that new mercies will come each day. Trust that you are never-ever alone. Let's take inspiration from the words of Nancy Rockwell: "God's good will, blessing, mercy, and truth seem always to be hidden and needing to be brought into the light. Sometimes shadows are inside us, sometimes in the world around us. And fear can be everywhere. But all things are possible with God, the angel and Jesus both promise that."

I know it's an old-fashioned way of talking about faith but it worked for Jesus. It worked for the first century believers. It certainly worked for songwriters like Civilla Martin. It works for me. And I hope it works for you too! If God's eyes are on the sparrow, I know God watches over us. Amen.