

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
January 31 & February 1, 2015
Rich Phenow
Peace in Grief
Isaiah 43:1-7**

Last night if you were here we had such an incredible night of laughter! It was an amazing night. It's obvious that Michael Jr. didn't realize I was a pastor because at one moment he called me, of all things, Kenny Rogers! I'm sure glad he didn't say I was like Colonel Sanders! The other thing he did was, he asked me to jump. I jumped as high as I could and he said, "Next time it would be great if your feet left the ground." We must have needed to laugh, partly because of a gray, long winter and maybe we needed to laugh because we're entering this new series called Peace in an Anxious Age.

The question I want you to answer this morning is, what are you most worried about right now? What's keeping you up at night? What's consuming your mind and your heart right now this morning? Anxiety and stress are very real by-products of this fast-paced, techno-savvy world we live in. We worry about so many things. For some of us, it's denominational issues. We are worried and anxious that CPC somehow might change and lose its character if we go to ECO [A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians]. There's anxiety around our economy. Is it really at a healthy place? For some of us, bills are piling up, our credit card debt is huge and we're in stressful jobs. For some of us, it's death. We are anxious and worried about the death of a child, the death of our spouses or parents, the death of a friend or of a marriage through divorce. Some of us are worried about our health or our healthcare insurance. We're worried about cancer and heart disease or we fear the outbreak of Ebola or measles or whooping cough or flu. Some of us are consumed about our diets, not enough fiber, gluten, yay or nay, mercury in our fish, meat or vegetarian. And some of us are worried and anxious about our children, about our babies, about our kids growing up well and going to the right schools, or the best schools, or to the right college. And maybe you're a grandparent and you're worried that your grandchild isn't being taught the principles and values that they so desperately need to navigate in this world. Possibly you're anxious about your spouse spending too much time on the internet, on Facebook reengaging old friends—perhaps a high school or college sweetheart. We're anxious about identity theft and about computer and cell phone hacking. Is it safe to use my credit cards or will these cause a breach of my personal information? If you're in your golden years, you may be worried about falling and breaking a hip and you're asking the question, does anyone really care about me anymore? Am I needed or relevant?

I personally worry about those who text and drive and those who drink and drive. We feel stress about so much. We feel as though there's an escalating sense of gun violence. There's rampant racism and terrorism and domestic abuse. There are sex crimes and the exploitation of our children. There are school shootings and out-of-control bullying. Wow, there's so much to be anxious about in our age! The disease that I see so many of us suffering from is a disease I call hurry sickness. It's a disease that I, too, battle with. There is this big illusion that by multitasking,

walking faster, or doing email while I'm talking on my cell phone, that somehow I will buy a little more time. I'm going to be able to get everything done and have time to get more done. We talk faster and we text faster. We drive faster and read faster and listen faster and over all, just communicate more and faster every way possible but face to face.

Social psychologist Meyer Friedman defines hurry sickness as “a continuous struggle and unremitting attempt to accomplish or achieve more and more things or participate in more and more events in less and less time” As we know, anxiety, stress and hurry sickness can manifest itself in many medical conditions. Just to name a few: high blood pressure, strokes, fatigue, overeating, depression, alcoholism, and the hardening of our arteries (which is what my wild rice soup does for us as well). We can have ulcers and insomnia. I'm actually feeling anxious about all the things I could be anxious about. Every one of us deals with things to be anxious and worried about. It's something that we all have in common this morning.

Oftentimes those anxieties and those worries become fears, fears that debilitate and immobilize us and block us from seeing God's love and grace at work. When we are consumed and myopic and focused on ourselves, we forget God's promises that He speaks into our lives. What are you worried about right now? Let me share with you what God's response is to this very real human condition that we all face. Listen to God's Word, what God Himself is saying through the prophet Isaiah in chapter 43.

¹ Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you.
I have called you by name; you are mine.

² When you go through deep waters,
I will be with you.
When you go through rivers of difficulty,
you will not drown.
When you walk through the fire of oppression,
you will not be burned up;
the flames will not consume you.

³ For I am the LORD, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior

⁴ . . . you are precious to me.
You are honored, and I love you.

Did you hear that? That is the very same God who created Israel, who chose them and called them His children and redeemed them and protected them and walked with them through the desert and the wilderness. Because of Jesus, God calls you by name this morning—Adam, Sarah, Jim, Lance, Mary—and promises to be with you. We are told not to be afraid, but that is so much easier to say than to actually do. It's because the very things that we worry about cause us to withdraw and to isolate ourselves and cause us to feel alone. We have a tendency to look around and say, “Ohhhh, the Thompsons, they have it all together” or “The Magnusens, they have it all together.” The truth is that we tend to compare ourselves with others. We say everybody else looks okay. They are packaged so well, but not me. No one can understand my fears, my suffering and my losses and my tears and my worries.

The year was 1981. At the age of 24, after two years of youth ministry, I left this church and flew to Homer, Alaska to work on a commercial fishing boat. I got on the boat in Alaska for the first time and I will never forget what that was like. For four days we were on 35-foot swelling seas, seas where you go way up and then way down and you feel like you're on a roller coaster.

About a week later I went out again and this time we were on a breaking sea. I was chopping up a 150-pound block of salmon heads, blood, and guts that had been left in the sun to get rancid and then frozen in the freezer. I'm cutting up this block of stink and I'm putting it into cakes for the crab pots we were going to use to excavate crab. I'm right near the diesel stack with the smell of diesel fuel blowing in my face and with the wind and the breaking seas, I started to get sick. I got so sick! I was so sick that everything inside of me came out except for my toes. It was the worst possible feeling in the world. We worked for two solid days through the night in the wind and the rain and the cold, soaked to the bone. I was exhausted. On the third night, we found this beautiful cove, this quiet area. I was so grateful to be out of the wind and the breaking sea. There was a calm that overtook me, a moment of incredible peace. In the three grueling days of treacherous weather, I had longed for a safe harbor in the storm.

Jesus said this to His disciples in John's Gospel, chapter 14.

²⁷ "I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid.

God's presence and God's power at work in our lives can give us a deep and lasting peace. Our world defines peace as the absence of conflict, but this peace is the confidence that in the middle of the storms of worry and conflict and pain and death, God is with us. We are not alone. We are not talking about a peaceful, easy-feeling nor some pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by, nor some serendipitous Hallmark-card kind of peace, but the security and confidence that nothing, absolutely nothing in all of life, can separate us from God's love through faith in Jesus Christ. Nothing can separate us from God's love!

The greatest way that God's presence and His peace come to us is when we are in authentic and honest and real relationships with others. It's a safe place from the storms of life when we can join with others and be open and share our worries and our fears and not hold them deep within. It's a place where people can experience healing and hope, the power and peace that the world can't give us, unexplainable peace where we can tell our stories of storms. It is a harbor where we can risk and talk about our doubts and our questions. We can even say, "Come on, does God really give a rip?" It's a place where we can share the secrets that very few know about us and be certain that we'll still be accepted and loved.

There are places like that here in this church where those very things happen in a holy and a very real way, where this intangible power of God and His peace is felt and embraced and enjoyed. It happens in Mom's Morning small groups and in Bible study small groups. It happens in care groups where couples are sharing their struggles with infertility. It happens in the prayer room where gifted and trained folks show up week after week to listen and come before God with you in prayer. It happens through folks who are in recovery of their own pain, not people who are recovered, but people who have received God's peace and want to share in it with you in and through our Lay Care Ministry. These are folks empowered and equipped to come alongside of you in the storms of life.

For me it happens in a 20-plus-year group of couples and families. It happens for me in two different small groups of men, one for over 25 years and one small group of men where we are growing deeper every time we meet. These are places where I can rest from the hurriedness, where I can be real, where I don't have to perform, but just be a semi-normal traveler on the road of life. In this group of eight, we are reading a book called *Living Thoughtfully, Dying Well* where Dr. Glen Miller explains how to make death a natural part of life. Three of the men in our group are battling cancer: brain cancer and bladder cancer and lung cancer. Two of us in this group are in remission, one has a compromised heart and one has a serious infection that has tormented his body. We just keep showing up week after week to listen, laugh, and do life together. We visit each other in the hospital and one caring, sensitive guy from our group stopped by a rehab center at 6:30 every morning for ten days to bring Jim a cup of Caribou coffee. We even make and serve a meal twice a month to about 60 or 70 at-risk youth through the ministry of TreeHouse.

We've become close in very real ways. We challenge each other and keep each other accountable and we're learning how to pray honest and heartfelt prayers. These wounded warriors give me a very hard time, which I honestly don't deserve. We are putting into practice the very words of Mother Teresa, "If you can't do great things, do little things with great love. If you can't do them with great love, do them with a little love. If you can't do them with a little love, do them anyway." We are just doing a lot of little things together and it's working for us. We're growing deeper. We've become safe harbors for each other in the storms of life. This is what Paul said in his second Letter to the Corinthian church.

³ God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. ⁴ He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us [2nd Corinthians 1:3-4].

God has shown us His comfort so that we can comfort others. Our pain and suffering gets used in our willingness to show up in the lives of others who are struggling. You might be in a season where you are feeling compelled and nudged and pushed to care for another out of the care you have received from God in your time of need. Maybe someone in your family or a neighbor or a friend. I want to encourage you to show up in their time of need. Or you may be in a place where you need to share some of the worries and anxious feelings you have or what's going on inside of you. Maybe you need to be reminded that you are not alone, that you need a peace that is not short-lived. Maybe you need to reach out with a little courage and try opening yourself up because you need someone to say your name, to tell you that you are honored, precious, and loved in the eyes of God, to provide for you a safe harbor in the storms of your life.

When you come along and discover someone in a hard-seeking place from the anxieties and the fears, what should you do? You should simply stop and listen. Try not to ask the person, "What I could do for you?" or "What do you need?" So often those who are suffering losses and those in anxious places have no idea what they need and those questions become overwhelming. I want to encourage you to just show up with a heart that speaks more than words and try not to say too much because most of the time, what we say is never remembered. Or simply say, "I don't know what to say. I just know I care." "I want to be here with you." "I'm sorry."

We assume that our words can remove the pain and the anxiety or the losses, but by just being there, you become a tangible reminder that the one in your midst is not alone. You represent the greatest manifestation of God's grace and comfort. My motto is, just do whatever God puts on your heart. If you need to apologize and ask forgiveness, do that later. Just show up and shut up. Bring a meal, a bag of food, cookies, weed a garden, clean a house, just go and sit in silence. Mother Teresa would say, "Just do it anyway! With big love or little love!"

Let me give you a living illustration of what I'm talking about this morning. About four years ago a little two-year-old, a red-headed, sweet boy, happy, fully loved and fully alive would come up here and sit on these very steps for the children's sermon. Beautiful, little Chase Peterson died in a tragic accident, a devastating loss for his parents, his grandparents and aunts and uncles, an incredible loss for this church family. Here are his parents Mandy and Brett Peterson four years later sharing their story. Please watch this video with me.

[Video begins. To view, see link below]

[Brett:] I think at some level every parent probably walks that fear in their minds, you know, the thought of the loss of a child. But I don't think you fully comprehend the pain associated with it. It's almost like words just wouldn't do it justice. It's really hard to describe.

[Mandy:] From the time of his accident, over and over I would keep repeating, "Come, Lord Jesus, come." Those were the words that came and I just couldn't stop saying them until in the back of the cop car, I remember that the cop said, "You know, He's listening. Believe He's listening." And all of a sudden there was this feeling that came over my whole body. It was unexplainable, like I knew everything was going to be okay."

[Brett:] When the tragedy first happened, I think that the river of peace was really small, but it has different stages in the grief process. It widened. But there was nothing that gave me more peace than not to worry. I remember such a strong sense of Him saying just like, "I'll do the work of putting it back again. Your heart's broken. It's shattered. I'll do the work."

[Mandy:] People stopped their lives for us. There were women in the kitchen, preparing food. Furniture was being rearranged. You could just tell that God held us safe because we felt very cared for and loved. And to this day, people still show up at our door.

[Brett:] God knew our daily bread and just brought it through people and it was like the greatest manifestation of, I think, God's grace through people to us. I felt like there was no other way to describe the people's response than that it was God's grace. What we could absorb. You top of just enough that you could take it and He did that through people. It wasn't because we had just enough faith or we had it all together. He just showed up, you know.

[Mandy:] For me, I just learned to live with life day by day and allow God's presence to come out when I interacted with people.

[Brett:] It has made me far more sensitive to respond to others and to try to have a

deeper understanding of others' suffering through that. If you're not going through your own, there's somebody else's He's going to invite you into. We realize so much of where we're at today is about stewarding in this story. We're hearing of people specifically saying, "I came to Christ through this story." We just see so little, right? And He sees it all. What does that mean to God when someone is spiritually dead, not alive?

[Mandy:] I just picture God and faith, just the whole Kingdom smiling because there are all these people now who are being affected. Even though I'm not holding Chase right now, I smile that God is and I will someday, but He's also going to be holding these other people.

[Brett:] On the other side of grief and tragedy, you see He's faithful. He's faithful.

[Mandy:] Pure joy!

[Brett:] Yeah!

[Video ends.]

We're grateful to God that He gave Brett and Mandy the courage to share that powerful story, the story about a pain that is a parent's greatest fear, that they can just move back and they can see where God has shown up. They have a perspective that God was with them and they now have this mind-blowing peace that the world couldn't give them. I have certainty that God is still there. Life is full of hard mysteries that we don't understand, but God sees and can explain it all. Now they live more in the present moment and have a sensitivity and deeper compassion for those who suffer.

Chase's father Brett had heard it said that God gives us visible signs to sustain us. Early one morning before work about 5:30, Brett finished praying in Chase's room and was leaving the house. He heard God say to him, "Walk along the side of the house." It didn't make any sense, but he did it. Immediately his eyes met this rock propped up against the foundation of the house. Brett was holding it in the video. It's in the perfect shape of a heart yet a part is chipped off and Brett started weeping. He knew it was God saying, "Your heart is shattered and broken, but I'll do the work of putting it back together." A simple rock but, oh, so profound! God is in the business of putting hearts back together, especially through relationships.

So what are you worried about this morning? Do you need to hear God say your name? Do you need to be reminded that you are precious and loved and that God will give you this mind-blowing peace, this peace that passes human understanding, the peace that only Christ can give us through relationships? Let's pray.

Holy and awesome God, thank You so much for repairing the broken hearts of all of us, our shattered and broken hearts filled with anxiety and worry and fear. I pray that we will see Your grace and Your love for us and that we will experience that grace and love as we open ourselves up to others as we share our stories. Help us, gracious God, to be safe harbors for others in the storms of life. Help us to show up with hearts that say little but are full of compassion. Thank You for Your goodness and Your mercy this day. I pray that You would help us to trust You and that You would be with us, restoring us. Thank you for Your power and Your gentle mercy and for Your love. Help us to show up. Amen.

Link to video shown during this service: <https://vimeo.com/118142679>
(Mandy and Brett's story)

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.