

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
Peace in Anxiety
Philippians 4:4-7**

Raise your hands, how many of you ever get nervous? How many of you ever have something to worry about? How many of you ever get anxious about the future? How many of you are sitting next to somebody who's already fallen asleep and they haven't raised their hand? We live in a world that is filled with anxiety. Last week Rich Phenow and the Lay Care team started talking about how we offer peace together as a community in times of sickness and death. Today I'd like to talk about how you move from living with that knot in your stomach, that constant sense in normal times that if it hasn't gone wrong already, it will soon. Next week Matt Moberg is going to come and talk about how you get peace in the middle of the storm. When there is reason to be frightened, how do you cope and do more than cope?

We live in an anxious world. Antidepressants are the most common medication prescribed in the United States, over 270 million prescriptions a year. When I did the reading for this, I read that one in five adults in the last three years has taken some form of mood-affecting medication for either depression or anxiety. This is up 22 percent in the ten years from 2001 to 2011. An anxious time in an anxious world. The sales of Prozac, Klonopin, Xanax, Ativan and Valium are the tip of a multibillion industry to bring a peaceful feeling in an anxious world. And that's not talking at all about all the other mood-altering stimulants you can buy that are not quite as legal or at least as helpful.

I think we live in an anxious world as the statistics tell, but what sticks is when you see something in action, so I thought I'd give you a visual example. I'll start with this. What's this? It's an alarm clock. That's right. As a matter of fact, it's an alarm clock that's going to go off. I'm not kidding you. It's about to go off. [Ringggggggg.] An alarm clock is not a really optimistic name for something to start the day, is it? I mean, it would be nice if they called it the opportunity clock. Why didn't they call it your daily resurrection clock? This is your greet-the-day clock. We don't call it any of that. We call it an alarm clock. I looked up the definition of alarm in the dictionary. An alarm, it says, is a sudden fear caused by the realization of danger. So when you wake up every morning with the dreaded sound of the alarm clock going off, it's like saying, danger, Will Robinson, danger is coming! Run! Once you're awake, what's the first thing that you do? You turn off the alarm clock, right? It's done its job.

Imagine if the alarm clock went off and you woke up and slapped at it, but you didn't quite get it turned off and the sound kept going all through your day. You take a shower and the sound keeps going. You go to breakfast and that sound keeps going. You get in the car or on the bus to go to school or work and right at the most critical moment of the trip, you hear the sound again. All day long it keeps ringing and ringing. You're sitting at dinner together with your family and the sound keeps going. It is driving you crazy. You go to an evening meeting and the sound

keeps going on and on and on and on and it seems like you are the only one who hears it. The strange thing is, that's how people who live with anxiety feel. Many of us who are anxious just get used to the sound. It's like background noise in our lives. It's always there. We live in a world where anxiety seems normal. The purpose of an alarm clock is to wake you up, but then we turn it off. It's done its job.

An anxious thought or a worry should be like that. There's a purpose to anxiety or worry or fear. It points to something that you need to take action about. It should spur us to take action, but then we turn it off like we turn off the alarm clock. The problem is that often you take the action but don't turn off the alarm. You continue to worry. Many people just let anxiety keep ringing in their lives.

I want to start by saying this is not a lecture in stress management. I have no desire to help you manage your life so that it can be more pleasant. That's not what this is about. Anxiety is so toxic, so powerful, that the command not to be afraid or fearful or anxious is the most frequently repeated command in the Bible. The reason I think that it's repeated all the time is that we live with fear all the time and that anxiety cuts you off from the touch of God more than just about anything else. Let me say that again, I believe that anxiety, fear, and worry cut you off from the touch of God more than just about anything else in your life.

Think about it. Anxiety robs me of my joy. It makes me more self-preoccupied. Anxiety makes me less attentive and less loving of other people. Anxiety makes temptation look attractive because I want to do anything that will help me escape this inner pain. Worry erodes my ability to be grateful for what I have. Fear increases my irritability. Anxiety destroys my ability to grow because growth involves change and "This is already bad. I don't want a change." Anxiety can poison our relationships as a community because when we are anxious, our focus is on ourselves. I can't really love you if I'm anxious. Maybe worst of all, if you are on the road of faith, anxiety paralyzes our ability to trust God. More than any other factor, fear or worry or anxiety is what keeps people from saying *yes* to God. Over and over God calls people, challenges people, and more than anything else, anxiety causes us to say, *uh, no*. Fear keeps us stopped and that's why God so often says, "Don't be afraid."

Again this week we've been reminded, by the events in the Middle East, that there are things to fear. Horrific stories are coming from there of children in their mid-twenties who are killed and of people in captivity who have been burned to death. It's not surprising that people in prison would be afraid or anxious. Decades ago I read a letter from a prison in Rome that was so powerful that I memorized a part of it because it speaks to me when I am afraid. This is part of what it says.

⁴ Always be filled with joy in the Lord. I will say it again. Be filled with joy.

The letter goes on,

⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you [Philippians 4:4-9].

I often have to refresh my memory, but that has sunk deep because it offers a different kind of life for an anxious world. The guy's in prison, but what marked his different kind of life? It seems to me that instead of anxiety, he is filled with joy. His life is marked with joy. "Be filled with joy. I say it again, be filled with joy." A different kind of life. How do people know him? Apparently they think of him as somebody who is known by everyone as a gentle person. Would people say that you are a gentle soul? He says, "Be gentle with everybody for the Lord is near." So it seems that his different kind of life is marked by joy, lived out in gentleness, and that these people actually sense that God is near them. Wouldn't you like to live like that instead of with a knot in your stomach?

I think it starts when you define what anxiety is. Let me give you a thought. This is how I would define anxiety. Worry and anxiety result from a heightened sense of vulnerability on the outside and a diminished sense of control on the inside. As it gets tighter and scarier outside, I have less and less sense of control inside. That is where my anxiety comes from and I need to address that or it will only get worse.

I want to say two things at the start before I jump into how you go from anxiety to joy. The first is that I think we should not confuse the everyday anxiety of life with depression or anxiety that is rooted biochemically. Some people struggle all of their lives and this is not a spiritual issue for them. It is a biochemical imbalance and they need treatment and they need chemicals and that is not only appropriate, it is inappropriate to say that if you have struggled with chronic depression all your life, take two prayers, it will be better in the morning. That's just wrong. Research makes it clear that when it comes to anxiety, there's a certain percentage of the population that is genetically predisposed to be more anxious. You see it among yourselves. You all handle anxiety differently.

You could draw a bell-shaped curve about anxiety. There will be certain people on the far right, who almost never get anxious. They are genetically predisposed to be risk-takers. Their brains and nervous systems aren't very sensitive to adrenaline or to other stress modulators. It takes a large amount of risk just to keep these folks from feeling bored. These are the people who jump out of airplanes and bungee jump and wrestle with alligators. They are even brave enough to do karaoke. They are not only non-anxious-seeming people, they get bored really easily.

Folks in the middle of that bell curve are set up for normal experiences of joy and anxiety but there's often that little tuning fork going inside of them. Then there are people at the other end of the curve who are very much affected by subtle changes in adrenaline. They would be the folks who struggle constantly with fear or worry or anxiety or depression. Their brains are extremely sensitive to adrenaline. They get more concerned about whether they have gotten the right food at the store and are they still pleasing everybody than somebody else does about jumping out of an airplane. It is just the way we are born. That's No. 1.

I think the second thing I'd say about anxiety in a Biblical sense is that we get the wrong idea that if we would just pray or pray better, God would take away our problems and we wouldn't be anxious any more. But Paul's in jail. Notice that when he said, "Present your requests to God," he doesn't say, "and God will remove your problems." He said, "Present your requests to God with thanksgiving and God will give you peace." Not that your problems will go away. And I've

got to tell you, that's better! Because if you can have peace in good times, who cares? What you need is the ability to not to be consumed with anxiety when things are going badly. The apostle Paul says, "Good times or bad, you need to learn the secret of contentment and peace." So if you are really serious, if you really want to overcome anxiety, you will want to learn to shut the alarm clock off and you are going to need a couple of tools.

First, you will need a problem because if you never have a problem, you never have the opportunity to learn how not to worry about it and you never grow, so let me ask you this. How many of you can think of a problem in your life? How many of you looked at the person next to you and thought that that person probably has a problem in their lives? How many of you would raise your hand and say that the problem in your life *is* the person who is sitting next to you? Let's not raise our hands! That's a different sermon altogether. But you need to think of a problem that consumes you. Now remember, anxiety results from a heightened sense of vulnerability to the outside and a diminished sense of control in my heart.

How does that play out in the way that I live my life? I got an illustration from a friend. He said life is a lot like this. What's this? A bowling ball. Friday morning I came up with this and wrote an email to the elders and the deacons and the staff and in literally eleven minutes, 14 people offered me a bowling ball. Really, people? I'm this kind of bowler. That's me. But my friend said that dealing with anxiety is like bowling. You get set, you plan, you strategize, you get ready for your problem, you get lined up, you get going, then all of a sudden, boom, you let go. Now there's nothing you can do about it, right? But what do we do when we're bowling? We're back here and the ball's down there. We've let go, but we can't let go. The ball is dragging us down the alley. We're going like this. That's anxiety. That's you. You're having a hard time letting go, but what do you put in its place? That's where the apostle Paul's help comes in. A person living in prison should be filled with anxiety, but instead, he is filled with joy.

How does that happen in his life? Well, Rich talked with the kids about the first thing that's imperative if you are going to replace anxiety with joy. The first thing is that you will talk to a God who is always present. "In every situation, with thanksgiving present your requests to God." In other words, talk to God about everything. Some of you think, "Oh, no, God doesn't want to know how weird I am" or "I'm going to be late for a meeting." God wants to know. As a matter of fact, God already does know. But talk to God about everything, and for me, the key in this is that when we talk to God, we would be reminded of the past and give thanks for it. We would be reminded of what is going well and give God thanks for His faithfulness. We would root our requests for the future in our growing sense that God has been here all along. Unless we talk to someone bigger than we are, life will always crush in on us. If we open our lives to someone bigger, there are opportunities.

That's where it begins for the apostle Paul. He says, "Talk to God who is always present" and then he says to reboot your mind. Like a computer that's gotten stuck, reboot your mind. In another place he says, "Be renewed in your Spirit by the transforming of your mind." "You are thinking about the wrong things. You're obsessed with what is scaring you. Instead you ought to be focusing on whatever is true and noble and right and pure and lovely. Anything in your life that's excellent or praiseworthy or admirable, think about these things." It will take you away from here and move you to here. Now as soon as you're here, you're going, "Oh! I guess *all* of life doesn't totally suck." Then gravitation sucks you back here. Think about something that is true and noble and right and pure.

This community is founded on the idea that I am not supposed to be the Bible teacher and you the Bible listener. This community believes that we are hearing God speak to all of us through God's Word and one of the most important reasons for you on a daily basis to read even this much of what God says to you is that it's the primary way that God gets true and noble and right and pure and lovely and admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy thoughts into your mind. Because otherwise, it's the garbage of the internet in, garbage out. It's the garbage of the news in, garbage out. It's the gossip at the drinking fountain in and garbage out. What is your source for what is true and noble and right that will refresh your mind? Not distracting it from the reality of life, but reframing the reality of life.

Two soldiers are in the same tent and one says, "We are all dead. They have 10 times our number. We're all going to die." And the other one says, "We are the scouts of the mightiest army in the history of the world, baby. We're going to win!" They are in the same situation but they see different things happening. That is what the apostle Paul says. Talk to the God who is always there. Keep this in mind. Worry results from heightened vulnerability on the outside and diminished control on the inside. That's what Paul learned. Paul learned it really did not matter where they put his body in prison. It really did not matter where his body was because his mind could not be trussed. It was free. At the core of his being there was a spring of living water that kept him fed. Talk to God and reboot your mind. You will move from anxiety to joy.

Paul actually knew there was more to it than that and so he closed his little shtick here on anxiety with one more lesson. He said, "You have to see it to believe it." Talk to God, reboot your mind, and see it to believe it. "Whatever you've learned or received or heard, whatever you see in me, put that into practice." When you see it, you can do it and then the God of peace will be with you.

Do you know how most of the Letters in the Bible start out? They start out with this phrase: "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." People who followed the crucified Messiah, people who faced depression and resistance and jail and persecution and even death, the first words they spoke to each other, the first words they wrote to each other, were a reminder and a prayer for people to put on and live in the peace of Jesus. They really expected that that could happen. "What you've seen in me, do it." Paul says the result of this, of talking to God this way, of rebooting your mind, of seeing others who are doing it, the result of all this is a peace that passes understanding. A peace different from the world's peace. The world gives us peace through better advertisements, better medications, better opportunities. Paul says, "I want something that will guard your heart and your mind."

Paul knew what it was to be guarded. More than Americans, the people he wrote to were always surrounded by Roman troops. There were troops on many of the street corners, troops guarding the important buildings. Paul, however, saw troops 24/7. He was in prison with a guard on each wall of his cell and yet he says, "The peace of God is guarding my heart." He knew what it was to be guarded, not to have the circumstances get better, not to have the circumstances dictate his anxiety. You have to see it to believe it.

I saw that this month. I told many of you about a good friend of mine, Steve Hayner, recently president of InterVarsity, recently president of Columbia Seminary. He and his wife and my wife Laura and I were at a prayer gathering in D.C. at Easter. He got sick a little after that and went to the doctor and found out that it was pancreatic cancer, advanced. So for the last several months, not a half-dozen or a hundred of us, but thousands of us have been on this journey

together. At times he has shared his fear and joy, his anxiety and faith, as his body started to let him down. Steve and I are good friends. We're on the board of World Vision together and after every board meeting, I would send him a note about what happened and tell him that we missed him. Last Tuesday when the board meeting ended, I wrote him a note at the airport. The next evening he wrote an email in response. "John, this may be my home-going day. Thanks for everything. You can spread this. Joyfully, Steve." Thursday I read this and got back to him, "See you on the other side, my brother. Joyfully, John." That was Thursday and Steve died on Saturday.

Steve's been teaching me how to be joyful, how to sing in prison, how to find joy in a hospice bed. You need companions like Steve on the journey so that you don't have to fake it at the end when you are saying, "See you on the other side, my brother. Joyfully." That's why God brought us here, because seeing is believing.

I'm going to meet Steve again. I'm going to meet Steve here because this is the table of recovering worrywarts. This is the table of the anxious and the table is set with joy and the dessert is laughter and the main course is love that will not let us go. It always starts with the host saying, "On the worst day of My life, I ate with people like you and I broke the bread and I blessed it and I said, 'This is My Body broken for you.' Then I took the cup and I gave thanks to God and I said, 'This is for the forgiveness of your sins. When you eat this bread and drink this cup, when you come to this table, you remember My life and My death for you.'"

For those of you who are our guests, this is not a Presbyterian table. It is not for anybody who has their act together. It is for those of us with anxious hearts, who have come to believe that Jesus just may be the Prince of Peace. Jody Phenow and I will serve the servers and then if it's your time, come forward and take a piece of the bread and dip it into the juice and go around. I think there are going to be folks at either of the front ends who will be glad to pray for you and for anybody who has anxiety. If you have a friend who has anxiety and you would like to pray for them, that would be great, too. And if this is not your day to receive, then just let the music be God's gift to you. These are the gifts of God for the children of God.

With significant input from:

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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.