

Whatever.....!!
Philippians 4: 2-9
Don Lincoln

A favorite old story goes like this: Two men dressed in airline pilot uniforms walk up the aisle of the plane from the rear entry door. Both have on dark glasses, one has a guide dog, the other taps his way along the aisle with a white cane. Nervous laughter spreads through the cabin as the men pass by the passengers, enter the cockpit, and close the door. Not much time passes and the engines start.

The passengers glance nervously around, searching for some sign this is just a practical joke. But no indication is forthcoming. The plane is backed out of the gate, and begins to taxi. They arrive at the start of the runway, the engines are wound up, and the plane begins to hurtle down the tarmac.

The people sitting in the window seats see there's a river just past the end of the runway. As it begins to look as though the plane will plow right off of the end of the runway and into the water, screams of panic fill the cabin. And just at **THAT** moment, the plane lifts smoothly into the air.

The passengers relax and laugh a little sheepishly, and soon retreat into their books and magazines. Meanwhile In the cockpit, one of the blind pilots turns to the other and says, "You know, Bob, one of these days, they're gonna scream too late and we're all gonna go right into the river."

The joke, as so many, raises tension in the hearer's mind, and then releases you from that anxiety with laughter. The great anxiety reducer – laughter. But no sooner had I finished laughing when I heard that joke, than I immediately wondered, "How in the world are they going to land?"

Anxiety. These are anxious times. Probably some of the most anxious times any of us have experienced. And anxiety and the worry that comes from it can be exhausting. And can be debilitating.

Paul is writing to an anxious community – a congregation facing both internal and external pressures. In chapter four, Paul returns to the problem of dissension he wrote about in chapter two, using the very same admonition he directed to the entire congregation, to now address two individuals. Evidently Euodia and Synteche, two **leaders** in the Philippian Church, who have led faithfully next to Paul, are having some kind of dispute.

We do not know the substance of the issue – remember, we’re reading someone else’s mail. But clearly both Paul and the Philippians know what it is, and we can be sure the dispute was not inconsequential because Paul brings it to the attention of the whole church in his letter to them.¹

We know from the rest of the letter that the Philippian church was also being attacked from outside by those who disputed the foundations of their faith; those who want to stamp out this fledgling congregation’s way of life in the midst of this Roman colony – they didn’t like the way they were acting.

So, the Philippians are dealing with both external threats and internal strife.² And flying in the face of this double trouble, Paul writes to them, "*Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice! **Do not worry about anything**, but in prayer and thanksgiving let your requests be known to God and the peace of God which passes all understanding will be in your hearts and minds.*" (Phil 4:6)

I thought about that – receiving that message and having that letter read in the middle of the congregation and if they’re anything like you and me, I can imagine at least some Philippians gathered there in that church responding, “Yeah, right!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Don’t worry about anything? Whatever, Paul!”

“Listen Paul, the rough places in our lives aren't being made plain, the crooked places in the world aren’t straight, and everything in the world seems to be going to hell in a handbasket.

So really Paul? The peace which passeth understanding has done exactly that – passeth us right by. “Rejoice....always? Paul, do you have any idea what these last months in my life have been like?”

Remember, Paul DOES know. "Rejoice in the Lord always," Paul wrote – from a dark stinking jail cell, awaiting trial and possibly death; behind bars, sleeping with rats, wondering whether he'd be drawn and quartered, thrown to the lions, or turned into a human torch on one of the roads into Rome.

“Rejoice in the Lord.” Do you and I get it? As Pastor Ann emphasized in her sermon two weeks ago. Rejoice in what? **IN. THE. LORD.**

Paul does not say rejoice in your life or rejoice in your circumstances. Because he knows if that is where you and I look for our joy, our hope, our peace, we will be disappointed. Because prosperity and happy times and all the other potential reasons for rejoicing cannot be counted on to continue always.³ Paul is holding fast to an invincible joy, which does not depend on the circumstances of the moment. The ground for Paul’s joy is one thing and one thing only and he said it over and over in this letter: it is Christ.

Listen to how Paul says it: *“I know what it is to have little; I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things – In other words I can live in any circumstance – through Him who strengthens me.”* (Phil 4: 12-13). In plenty and in want, for richer and for poorer; in virus and in health..... Jesus is still LORD. You and I can do all things through **HIM** who strengthens us, who upholds us.

Then Paul uses a surprising military term here – the peace of God “will stand sentry watch” over your hearts and minds. Because the peace of God stands guard, the church can rejoice. Because God’s peace is on duty, we do not have to be anxiously scanning the horizon for new threats.⁴ That’s how Paul can say to us, “Rejoice in the Lord!” Invincible joy.

Do you and I get it? Do we understand what he is saying to the Philippian church? The peace which the Philippian church can know – the sense that all is well – does not have its source within – after all there is dissension. Nor does it come from without – for there is opposition. The source of this peace and joy is God.

Preacher William Sloane Coffin says it this way: “Biblically understood, joy is that which still stands firm when the last shreds of happiness have been scattered on the winds like thistledown. Joy is that which still blazes when the sorrows of the world sweep over you like a sea; for while happiness is human; joy is divine.”⁵

Happiness is fleeting feelings. Joy is theological truth. A truth in which you and I can abide. Pain is short-sighted, and in the scheme of eternity, short-lived. Joy is big – and generous – and eternal. And Paul reminds us, it is ours not just in eternity; it is ours now. So REJOICE!

I need to tell you, I DO find NT Wright’s comments in his lecture on this text very helpful when he talks about worry and anxiety. He suggests that Paul would say to us, don’t pretend not to be anxious. Having no anxiety is the goal, but Paul’s assumption obviously is that we DO have worries, because he tells us what to do with them!!

Since we have them, we are to go to God, make the request, and let God know what we need. Go to prayer; go back to God; bring ourselves to God – in honesty, with our real anxieties – let God know what we need. Once we’ve prayed, to let it go. We need to let the worry go. We’re not called to have no worries – but simply to know what to do about them.⁶ Give them to God; then God’s peace will stand guard over you and me. Paul knows this. He is writing from personal experience – IN PRISON!

Chris Clark, our youth director – has put together a virtual blog gallery – a creative outlet for students to respond to the following question in whatever creative form they would like:

How has this pandemic and moment of social upheaval changed or transformed you? It is not public yet; it will be at some point. But he gave the staff a chance to view the initial input from a few students.

One student wrote a poem – almost prayer-like – here’s part of it:

*Time starts to fly,
As well as trickle along
The days are so short
But so terribly long*

*I wish I could go back
To the time we could touch
I want to hug and high-five
Is that too much?*

*I miss the connection
You make with two hearts
That’s more difficult now
From six feet apart*

*I want to smile at strangers
Without the barrier of a mask
I want to see someone’s full face
Is that too much to ask?*

*Moving forward we all
Face simple trials
like using eyes and up
to convey happy smiles*

*But what we have learned
During this time of confusion
Is that happiness and hope
Are **NOT** an illusion*

*During a time of worry and woe
We bring out our best
This time will go by
And we will pass God’s test.*

Happiness and hope are not an illusion. I think she is speaking about joy there. And even in the midst of worry and woe, God enables us to be at our best.

Paul's prescription to the Philippians is prayer – to know God, to know God's peace, to know that **GOD** is flying the plane, and thus to live – whatever the circumstances you are in – without undo worry or care.

And of course – Paul reminds them **in the same breath** – living without undo worry or undo anxiety or undo care frees you and me to care for others. Just as Paul – **IN PRISON** – is caring for the Philippians.

“Let your gentleness be known,” Paul writes. The word in the Greek actually means magnanimity; or concern for others. In other words, what Paul tells us, is when you and I are freed from concern and worry and anxiety – from being consumed with care about ourselves – we are actually freed to care for others. **We bring out our best** – as that student wrote.

Paul offers the Philippians in their day **AND US** in our day an alternative to endlessly orbiting around our own sufferings, our own concerns, our own anxieties.⁷ He then adds his own, “**WHATEVER.....!!!!**”

“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable – think about these things; keep doing these things.” “Freedom from worry,” Paul says, “enables us to think and do the things of God.”

Make my joy complete, Paul writes in the second chapter. How? By having the same mind as Christ. Willing to serve. Self-emptying. Not anxious, but filled with peace, and because of that concerned for the other. For then, sisters and brothers, you and I will find ourselves living in God's invincible joy. May it be so. AMEN.

1. Fred Craddock, *Interpretation Commentary on Philippians*.
2. Allen Hilton, *Feasting on the Word Commentary on Philippians 4: 4-7*
3. *ibid.*
4. Craddock, *op. cit.*
5. William Sloane Coffin, sermon “Rejoice in the Lord Always,” December 17, 1978.
6. NT Wright – Paul and His Letter to the Philippians; Small Group Edition; www.udemy.com; section 4.
7. Hilton, *op. cit.*