

Direction for Anxious Hearts Sermon – March 22, 2020

Unprecedented. That's a word I have heard a lot over the last 10 days. It means unparalleled, unequaled, unexampled, and like nothing anyone has seen before now. We have been living through unprecedented events recently. You know all the details. You know the concerns. You know the struggles. You know the uncertainty it has left us in at this time. Sometimes when we face uncertainty what we really need is something familiar. And so we are adjusting our preaching over the next several weeks to go to some familiar passages to find something we can hold on to right now. So look with me in your Bibles or on your Bible app at Philippians 4:4-7:

Read Philippians 4:4-7 (ESV): *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Prayer:

While my wife Julie Lynn was pregnant with our first child, Landon, she was on bedrest for several weeks in advance of the birth. That meant there were a lot of things I had to do to keep the house functioning while she was taking care of our soon to be newborn son. One day in the midst of my harried activity doing more than one thing at one time, I accidentally bumped the shelf above the toilet and a full roll of paper towels dropped directly into the open bowl. Within seconds, all of the water that was in that toilet had been sucked up into that roll, as it bloated to twice its original size. I was both amazed and horrified at the same time. In fact, to this day I will never leave a toilet lid open! I learned my lesson.

That roll of paper towels is a lot like our hearts in uncertain times like this season right now. The uncertainty of what is happening now and the unknown reality of what lies ahead creates anxiety that our hearts suck up like water. So what do we do when we find this anxiety growing in us? Is there anything we can do?

This passage I just read to you from Philippians 4, may be a familiar one to you. But you may not know that the guy who authored it—Paul—was in prison at the time. And the people he wrote it to—the believers in Philippi—they were dealing with some relational divisions on the inside and false teachers trying to distract them from the outside. They were facing uncertain times just as we are today. Paul writes to this faith community in order to bring them encouragement. Not just so that they will know something but so that they can do something with it. Specifically, in this part of the letter, he wants them to know wholeheartedly that **because Christ is with them they can rejoice even in uncertain times.**

Right in the midst of their uncertainty, he tells them they can rejoice. You see, joy is a key element stirred up in people when the gospel is at work. It is the most reasonable response to the gospel that says we are more sinful than we realize and at the same time more loved than we can dare to dream. And why would they rejoice? Because the Lord is with them. They now have the presence of Christ and that does something in their hearts. It actually allows them the ability to direct their hearts in the midst of uncertainty. In fact, we see in this passage three specific ways that Christ's presence works in our hearts to produce this rejoicing Paul is talking about in verses 4-5.

Let's look together at how can we direct our hearts when they soak up the anxiety of uncertain times.

First, we must embrace the potential we have in Christ. Notice that in verse 6 he tells them not to be anxious about anything. Actually, in the Greek, that word "anything" isn't there. And it's a directive he makes here. So he is simply and forcefully saying "Don't be anxious!" This is a command. Now this doesn't sound all that helpful at first to people who are struggling. Think about it, how does it work when you tell someone to do something like this? It only works if the person is actually able to do it. It is not at all helpful if the person is unable to do so. I want us to see that what Paul is saying here is that IN CHRIST we now have the potential, the opportunity, to no longer be anxious. We don't have to suck up that anxiety into our hearts in uncertain times. Because of Jesus.

A few years ago when my oldest was a senior in high school, he was working on some pretty high level math. The teacher knew this math was beyond the level of what most of the parents of the students would be able to understand. So she had given all of her students her cell number so that if they got stuck they could call or text her even late into the evening. One night I passed my son sort of paralyzed over his math book and a long equation. He was stuck but he didn't want to bother his teacher, so there he sat trying to figure it out. All he needed to do was text or call his teacher. The potential was right there for him to solve this problem, but unless he sent the text or made the call he would remain stumped. We find ourselves in the same place sometimes with our anxious hearts. Rather than embracing the potential that is there for us in Christ, we just remain paralyzed in our anxiety.

Now I also want to make clear for those who struggle with anxiety disorders, there may be additional help needed because of physiological or psychological issues that require our attention. God has given us those resources and we need to take advantage of those opportunities. But what we are talking about here is the regular reality of hearts that fill with anxiety in uncertain times. What Paul tells us that in Christ we can embrace potential freedom from slavery from worry.

Because Christ is with us we can rejoice even in uncertain times.

Another way we can direct our hearts in uncertain times is by embracing the POWER we have in Christ. In the rest of verse 6, this becomes all the more clear as Paul tells them that they must let their requests be made known to God. Again he is directing them here, he is telling them they can do this. But it is interesting how he tells them to do this.

First, he tells us to bring everything and he means EVERYTHING to God. From the smallest issue that has your attention to the most difficult decision that you can imagine, he wants us to bring it all to God. When something has grabbed a hold of you, he says bring it! Your thoughts, your feelings, your confusion, your doubt, your fear, your pain. All of it goes.

Now how do we bring it? He says we bring these requests through prayer and supplication. Here he is giving us the avenue for our requests. Now we know what prayer is but we don't often use that word "supplication", it simply means "bring urgent needs" or "making a plea". Paul is trying to help us see that we go to God in prayer, we go to God with our urgency. It doesn't just stay bottled up inside of us, it has got to be directed towards him. This may sound simple but in actual practice it is profound. Consider how much time you spend talking to yourself about what you are anxious about. It just stays in there circling around in your mind. It never gets redirected and therefore nothing ever changes within us. We remain unable to rejoice as long as we let our anxiety remain as thoughts and don't turn them into prayers.

He also says something about our attitude. Notice he says we share everything through prayer and supplication...WITH THANKSGIVING. We don't go to God with demands. We don't go to God because we deserve an answer. We don't go to God because we know better. We go to God knowing that we have standing with God only because of what Jesus did for us on the cross. We go to God thankful that Jesus died our death and lives our life so that we have access to him. We go to God grateful that our prayers are heard because Jesus is there with the Father on our behalf bringing our deepest needs to him.

So how are you doing with this right now? Check your heart. Are you full of anxiety? Are you wrestling with the messages and the images of our uncertain time? Take your thoughts, your fears, your feelings, your doubts—all of the—and take them to God. Let him take all of that on himself.

Because Christ is with us we can rejoice even in uncertain times.

There is one more way we can direct our hearts when they want to soak up the anxiety of uncertain times. We have seen that we must embrace the potential we have in Christ to not be anxious. We have also see that we must embrace the power we have in Christ not to be anxious. I will close with this last one. In order to direct our anxious hearts, we must to embrace the peace we have in Christ.

In verse 7, Paul tells this faith community living in uncertain times that the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard their hearts and their minds in Christ Jesus. So how do you and I embrace a peace that we cannot understand? We must recognize that the peace OF God we embrace comes from the peace WITH God Christ accomplished for us. The reason Jesus came to earth was in order to make peace between us and God. Since we were born in opposition to God, we needed Jesus to actually make things right with us and God again. And he did.

In 1993, Alvin Straight was 73 years old and had a brother named Henry who lived about 250 miles away. When Alvin heard that his brother had a stroke, he decided he wanted to visit and make things right since they hadn't been in touch for years. He could no longer drive a car due to his vision. He refused a ride. He refused to take a bus. And so with the only means available to him—a riding lawn mower—Alvin hitched up a trailer of supplies and hit the road to make things right with Henry. After several months of 5 miles an hour travel, camping along the road or with strangers, and ever-changing weather patterns; Alvin reconnected with his brother and made amends. Think about the effort Alvin went through to reconcile with his brother. The weather, the traffic, the mechanical breakdowns, the loneliness, and yet he went through all of that in order to make things right.

Infinitely more than Alvin, Jesus pursued the broken relationship between us and God. He crossed an enormous distance between human sin and God's holiness in order to reconcile. He paid an enormous debt by his death on a cross so that we could now be at peace again. This is a peace beyond understanding. This is a peace that we now have with God because of the peace Jesus made between us and God.

It is with this very peace that Jesus guards our hearts from the anxiety that we soak up every day. Consider the fact that if you now have peace with God because of what Christ has done, there is nothing that can make you anxious anymore. As we wrestle with this health crisis taking place in our world right now, what better assurance is there for us when we face our own mortality than that Christ has given us peace with God! This is reason for us to rejoice even in uncertain times.

My friends, when the anxiety soaks up into our hearts, let's remember that **because Christ is with us we can rejoice even in uncertain times**. We can embrace together to potential, the power, and the peace of Christ and direct our hearts towards him right now no matter what comes our way. And we need to help each other with this right now. In fact, as a faith family we regularly practice passing the peace knowing that in Christ we have received peace and now we can pass it to others. Let's do that virtually this week. Think about a few people who you can reach out to and consider them God's assignment to you this week. Let's pray.