

"What, Me Worry?"
November 8, 2020

Philippians 4:1,4-9

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Call to Worship

God comes to us. That is a central affirmation of the Christian faith. We ought therefore to be prepared for the arrival of God into our lives, to be expectant and hopeful. **Although the arrival of God into our lives is a gift that is unpredictable, it is not unexpected. God comes to us.**

Prayer of Invocation

Creator God, we would be true worshipers, and so we turn to Jesus who reveals in fullness the truth of who you are. Together we open ourselves to the presence of Christ in our midst, banishing all images of your being which are of our own creation. We seek to be formed and reformed according to your loving intention for our lives, as your people and for your church. Amen.

The Word

Philippians 4:1, 4-9 (NRSV)

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Do not worry 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.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Living the Word

Mad Magazine, created in the 1950s, sported Alfred E. Neuman, a fictional gapped-tooth mascot, whose famous motto was, and still is after more than 60 years: "What, Me Worry?" The magazine continues to be comic satire of life. It may seem a little mad to think any of us real people could live without worry in our lives, yet the Apostle Paul invites us in today's scripture to 'not worry about anything.'

Of course, we soon realize that Paul didn't have some of the same reasons we have to worry: teenagers, a marriage, aging parents that he was responsible for, a loss of income, bills piling up, COVID. No, none of these things to be worried about, but Paul had prison...How could he not worry, when his life hung in the grip of a ruthless government? Paul must have had something to help him worry less than his situation warranted. Because none of us can live like Alfred E. Neuman, with no cares in our lives, we want the answer to how Paul could be without worries and then invite us not to worry along with him.

Did you know that we are still in 'Ordinary Time?' – In the church year, the excitement of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost are long past. We have been wandering in ordinary time, that has been very unordinary this year with the Hebrew people for the last six months. It is still a few weeks until the lighting of the first Advent candle, which begins our journey to Christmas again...

Yet Paul invites us on this Sunday, somewhere between the feasts of our Christian year, to rejoice. Not just a full celebration - 'rejoice' but an 'everyday is special,' rejoicing. This part of the year which we call ordinary time is represented by the color green, and like most of life, which is lived out between the celebrations, it is a time of everyday living.

But not so ordinary, as God is still ever present, and filled with surprises for our lives. Instead, Paul is inviting the Philippians and us into a celebration of every Sunday, as we come together to be filled with joy about the days we have experienced all week. Sunday should be a sharing of our joys and hopes – the ones we have experienced through God's creation around us and through our resurrection faith.

Paul writes to the Philippians and to us to encourage us and remind us of our need to rejoice in the midst of everyday life. Remember, Paul is in prison and has lots of time to think about his woeful situation, which he suspects will end in his death, possibly very soon. And yet he is focusing on the encouragement of others. He is still teaching and guiding and encouraging, which takes the focus off of himself and gives him joy as he reflects on this community of people, which he loves and which he has seen growing as a Christian community of faith.

At Christmas and holiday times we are reminded to think of others as we drop some money in the Salvation Army bucket, or buy some extra groceries or gifts for those who don't have. But during ordinary time it is easier to forget. It is November and the local Salvation Army is pretty much out of funds until after the kettle drives begin again. You can enjoy the blessings of giving, even in the ordinary times, in fact it may become an extraordinary blessing as you realize the need and share God's love with others...Enough to make you want to 'rejoice' during the off season.

The source of our joy is that we can believe in God through our connection with Jesus Christ. It is God's ever-present nearness with us that can encourage us when we get caught in the mundane of the ordinary. It is the knowledge we have through Jesus that God is in control and has already won the victory for us through Christ. It is the opportunity that we have been given to take our concerns, as well as our joys to God in prayer, knowing they will be heard.

Paul invites us, as God's beloved to let go of the things that eat at our very being: physically, emotionally and spiritually. Worry can do that, making us physically sick, tie us into emotional knots and move us out of the range of each other and God.

None of these are in our best interests or filled with the blessings that God would want for us. God awaits our requests through prayer, for healing of whatever the situation that is troubling us.

Paul has a close relationship with the church in Philippi. The first verse speaks of them as brothers and sisters, whom he loves and longs for, his beloved. Paul knew that the work that was being done by them and by the other new Christian churches was valid and worthy. Though he was in prison, he knew that the whole Christian movement was of God and had a future, way beyond just his work.

Christ had come to build relationship with the people, connecting them closer to God. This has been going on for 2000 years. Throughout history, we have had high times in the church, but many more ordinary times, when the church needed encouragement. That is why the scriptures are so important for us. They tell us a story, a history, of how the church has weathered the good and the bad, and continued, with God always near.

We are in this together. To 'live in Jesus' means that we do so as the body of Christ; but because we are all different, we don't all see things the same way and we have a tendency to grate on each other. Paul adds to this letter that we should let our gentleness be known. Perhaps the word gentleness could be re-stated as forbearance. When we can listen and share gently, forbearing with the ways that we might grate on each other, we can be the encouragers and reminders to each other as to how to find peace and worry less.

I had a mother of teens share with me this week that she felt like a mean mom for some of the restrictions she had placed on her teen, but when she gathered with some other mothers of teens she heard in their conversation that they also had given the same restrictions. When we open ourselves and share our joys and concerns, we can at least wade through them together.

You are always invited to have conversations with the pastor. I will always try to make myself available to you for this, though you may have to catch up with me at times. Some take advantage of this opportunity and shared joys and concerns about themselves and about their church. I learn more of how important this church is to those who share. We can't see the presence of God near to us, when we dwell on the worries within us. But as we share them, we all grow in a peace that passes our human understanding.

Paul did understand that to live beyond constant worry, into joy and peace, wasn't something you could obtain on your own. It wasn't something that just came to you, as in "I just won't worry anymore." But rather it was finding God at work in the midst of those concerns and worries and knowing that God can see a much bigger picture than any one of us can, even if it isn't an immediate answer or the answer we were thinking of. God is in control!

It begins with finding your way to God, through prayer and letting God be in control. Joy isn't the goal, but part of the outcome and a sign of the presence of Christ in the situation. It is how we see the things in the ever-unfolding journey of our lives. It is how we can continually perceive God moving in our lives, not just how we respond to each situation with our own emotions. It isn't just 'I'm happy...and now I'm sad.' But being able to see a much larger picture of how God is in each event, working for good, despite the circumstances we might face.

Having gone through the teen years with two boys, we had our times. As our youngest, Jeff traveled through a long-term high school relationship with one girl, I found myself worrying about how serious they might become as they seemed to draw closer and closer to each other. I loved them both and was thankful that they spent most of their time together at our house in front of the TV. But to give them some space, we allowed them to watch the TV in Jeff's room.

I teased them about the need to keep the door open, but then I would go to bed stewing about the fact that they were unsupervised, because I seemed to need more sleep than they did. Finally one night, my husband Bob, said to me "Quit worrying! What is the worst that could happen?" I thought about it for a while and then said "She could get pregnant." So he asked "And what would you do then?" I processed a bit and then replied "I would love the baby." And Bob in his wisdom told me "Exactly, now go to sleep."

My prayer became "Ok, God you are with them, I am not. I am putting them in your care." And I slept easier. Two years later when Jeff, as a Marine was sent to Iraq, way beyond his mothers reach, I once again asked God to watch over him. I prayed myself to sleep each night and made him my first prayer in the morning. That was what got me through the days of unknown dangers, and often gave me a peace within the situation.

Prayer is not a technique to obtain joy, but a relationship with God, by which joy can come to us. It is giving up our desire to save ourselves, and acknowledging that we are saved by the faith we have in God and Jesus' redeeming abilities in our lives. We can take everything in our lives and make them reasons to worry or opportunities for pray. Through prayer, we may find new ways to view the situation, because God can see each situation from so many more angles than we can.

I have decided that the teen years, and many of our worry points are ours to grow by. They can become great memories of how we walked through the fires with God or how we suffered through alone. Paul sitting in prison had many hours to dwell on his situation. He used it to turn himself over to God and spent his time writing letters to the churches to encourage them.

When we can take the plans of the selfish who would want to harm us and show them that with God there isn't a way to hurt us, we can turn the situations around and frustrate those who would do us harm. Nathan Eddy, a chaplain in Manchester, England puts it this way: "Joy is not an escape from the pain of life; it is a reconsideration and reinvestment in life from a different, liberating perspective." (repeat)

Think about these things: whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, any excellence, anything worthy of praise. These are the things to set our minds on. Instead of whatever is false, whatever is detestable, whatever is evil, whatever is wrong, whatever is hurtful, whatever is offensive, anything negative , anything that makes us less than we were created to be.

When computers were new and took up a whole room per machine, way back in the 1970s, we typed piles of cards, which all had to be in perfect order or error printouts would spew from the machine. We would use the phrase: "Garbage in – garbage out." It is true for us as well. If we only take the garbage into our minds, it will be all that we have to share with others.

Follow what you have been taught: Paul had spent time training teachers to be ready to share the good news with others. Christ's life, death and resurrection were the beginning of a Christian chain reaction to the world. Paul now invites the leaders at Philippi to remember all that he had taught them. Through the trickle-down theory, from Christ, through the disciples to the first churches and 2000 years of time, we have those same teachings. Paul says to us "follow what you have been taught."

Listen and hear Paul's words for us today, as the church and as individuals living together as the Children of God:

- Stand firm in the Lord
- Rejoice in the Lord
- Let your gentleness be known
- Do not worry
- Make your requests known
- Peace will guard your hearts & minds
- Think about these things
- Follow what you have been taught
- God is near

Alfred E Neuman's famous motto still is "What, me worry?" Maybe it isn't so 'mad' after all.