

The Peace That Passes All Understanding
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I remember my grandmother telling me one time she had lost sleep the night before because she was worrying about the centerpiece for Christmas dinner. It was before Thanksgiving when that happened. I did not inherit my grandmother's hostess gene, but I did inherit the worrying part. My worries are about the future of our planet; the health of my family; the future of the church; if I am saving enough for retirement. But I also worry if I left the stove on; if I will get up to preach with my skirt stuck inside my underwear; if there are termites eating up my home while I film myself preaching this sermon....sorry....the list is endless....it just doesn't include centerpieces for holiday meals.

You see, I have a theory that what I worry about doesn't happen. Most people would come to the conclusion that means they shouldn't waste their time on all that worrying. That is not the conclusion I have made in the past, unfortunately. I think that if what I worry about doesn't happen than it is my responsibility to make sure I worry about everything....so that it doesn't happen.

For example, I wasn't worrying about a possible pandemic and see where we are. With my logic you could blame this nightmare on me. It is hard to keep up all this worrying in order to keep the world safe. In case you are wondering, I do know how narcissistic that sounds. But I know I'm not the only worrier out there. And the world is giving us so much to worry about these days. I don't need to give you the list. You know what there is to worry about. We worriers worry because it is the way we think we can control the uncertainty. We think if we agonize over it, we might just be able to solve it.

But what this pandemic has taught me is that my worrying hasn't achieved anything but to make it harder for me to sleep. We are looking for peace in the midst of one of the most challenging times of our lives. It is like the scripture that Deb read that basically says, "It's bad out there, folks. A band-aid isn't going to help this one." Is finding peace even possible right now?

Our second scripture reading today was from the Letter to the Philippians from the Apostle Paul. Philippians is a love letter filled with joy. The recipients are the church in Philippi. *My dear, dear friends*, Paul writes. *I love you so much. I do want the very best for you. You make me feel such joy, fill me with such pride. Don't waver. Stay on track, steady in God.* That is sweet and tender stuff. I know I'm causing you a bit of a whiplash to go from a scripture about how bad things are out there to the saccharine words of Paul. If Paul wrote me those words during this pandemic, especially in a week when we have lost someone to Covid-19, I would think he was pollyannaish and out of touch. But did you know that Paul wrote those words to the church at Philippi while he was in prison in Rome? Tradition says that he was beheaded by Rome not too long after he wrote this letter of love and gratitude and joy.

In this letter Paul says, “Don’t worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Turn all those petitions, worries, anxieties into the shape of prayer.” I usually react pretty negatively to people who act like it is easy to just pray about my worries. “Just take it to the Lord in prayer.” It makes me feel like my trauma is discounted. I want to say, “Have you had a spouse drop dead in front of you or a child go through addiction?” But I can’t say that to Paul. He suffered so many hardships. Five times he was whipped with 39 lashes. Three times he was beaten with rods. He even survived a stoning. Three times he was shipwrecked. And of course, he spent several years in prison. I can’t discount Paul’s words because I know now all that Paul had already been through by the time he wrote this letter. When he invites us to shape our worries into prayers, I know that he knows of what he speaks. He offers love and prayer and gratitude and joy and peace....from a prison cell.

Paul talks about the peace that surpasses all understanding. In fact, he says that God is already guarding our hearts and minds, whether we’re noticing it or not. And since we know that Paul knows of what he speaks we can’t just roll our eyes. Paul managed to make himself a receptive vessel for the peace of God. I know that I have not always been a huge fan of Paul, but a pandemic has given me a new perspective...on many things. I’m beginning to see how Paul embodied his faith in ways that made him able to open himself up to the peace of God in the midst of the storms of life. Here are some of the ways I think Paul did that:

1. Paul was a man who tenaciously connected with people. He made friends with Jews and Gentiles, prison guards and prisoners. He was a man in constant pursuit of relationship. He was always traveling somewhere to be with people, staying in their homes and sharing meals around their tables. And when he couldn’t be with them in person, he wrote them letters. I’m sure that he wouldn’t have let the challenges of a pandemic keep him from people through Face Time or Zoom or phone calls or letters or emails or texts. I participated in a memorial service on Zoom in May. I knew it is the way to connect and memorialize during these trying times but I went in thinking it couldn’t possibly match a service in which we were all together in the sanctuary....and I was undone with emotion by how tender, healing and powerful it was. I had to turn off my video and have a big old cry. That service gave me peace. This past week Pastor Dawna and I were part of an anointing service by Zoom. Yes, it turns out that is possible. Yes, it was very sacred. There was space for people to connect and speak their love and I found relief and release by being allowed to stand as witness to that deep connection.
2. Paul wasn’t shy about speaking up...words of love or words of truth. He didn’t mince words in either direction. It is hard to experience the peace that surpasses all reason when you don’t speak those things that are choking your throat. Otherwise they sit between you and whoever, unspoken. Paul confronted people when he needed to, and he made sure he told people he loved them. To the Church in Philippi he wrote: “Dear, dear friends. I love you so much. I want what is best for you.” I’ve started speaking up since the

pandemic began. I have been working on my courage muscles around issues like racism. And I end many of my phone conversations and Zoom calls now with “I love you.” I know I’ve freaked out a few people lately by doing that, but my heart is too full to hold those words in my throat. We need to speak what matters most.

3. Paul savored sweet memories to get him through the tough times. His memories filled his heart with gratitude. “I thank God every time I remember you,” he wrote. I know you don’t think about Paul this way, but it turns out he was a bit sappy. And just a heads-up, right now, so am I. Every day now I take some time to think about times I have belly laughed with you or times we have spent together in the sacred highs and lows of life; or times we sat around a table and ate together; or Pentecost Sundays we have shared in the sanctuary with everyone wearing flame colors and singing “Now Let the Fire of Heaven Come Down”; or deep conversations we have had about the nature of God and the call of Christ. When I take time to remember and allow myself to be overwhelmed with my sappy nature, I am aware that I have more sacred memories to comfort me than I have worries that disarm me. This truth floods me with gratitude.
4. Paul was a person who was all about grace. Grace was his constant message and he tried to spread God’s grace everywhere he could. We are in need of some grace right now and the best way to make sure that happens is for us to own it and extend it. When I find myself getting frustrated with people or the situation we find ourselves in, I say out loud, “Grace. Grace. Grace.” Everything is harder right now so it is especially important to experience God’s grace directed towards ourselves. For when we do, we will find the wholeness we need in order to offer it to others.

When we look at Paul’s life we see that he connected, spoke up, savored memories and shared grace....all from a prison cell....while isolated from others. Paul embodied his faith and in that space he found the peace of God that passes all understanding. It allowed him to live in gratitude during the most challenging time of his life. Paul serves as a model for us but we each have to discover the practices that help us embody our own faith, here and now, in the material world. What is it you need to practice in order to open yourself up to the peace of God that is available to you, right here in the middle of pandemic time?

Maybe you can’t answer that question in this moment, but I invite you to pay attention to your body. Don’t go into this with your head....go into it with your body. What helps you breathe right now? What makes you sing or whistle or laugh or tear up? What makes you call out to the heavens, “Thank you”? You will know it when it happens. Notice it. Pay attention. Then do more of whatever it is. And then encourage those around you to embody their faith. Encourage it in them that we might all take our anxieties and shape them into prayer and discover the peace that is present all around us, guarding our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

