

Prayer of Confession

Lord, you see how stubborn we are, how quickly we turn from you toward idols of our own making. We forget your providential care, the countless ways you provide, your gracious response to our cries for help.

We give attention to our own needs and sometimes neglect the needs of others.

We cannot justify our behavior, we can only confess it, repent, and ask again for your mercy. Forgive us, Lord, that we may bear faithful witness, in word and deed, to your love and grace.

Hymn 698 **Take, O Take Me As I Am**

Take, O take me as I am; summon out what I shall be.

Set your seal upon my heart and live in me. *Repeat.*

Assurance of Pardon

God pours out mercy and grace. God never gives up on us, but frees us to live lives worthy of our calling.

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel. Know you are forgiven and be at peace.

Old Testament Reading **Isaiah 25:1-9**

O LORD, you are my God;

I will exalt you, I will praise your name;
for you have done wonderful things,
plans formed of old, faithful and sure.

For you have made the city a heap,
the fortified city a ruin;

the palace of aliens is a city no more,
it will never be rebuilt.

Therefore strong peoples will glorify you;
cities of ruthless nations will fear you.

For you have been a refuge to the poor,
a refuge to the needy in their distress,
a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.

When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm,
the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place,
you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds;
the song of the ruthless was stilled.

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.
And he will destroy on this mountain

the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death for ever.
Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.
It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the LORD for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

New Testament Lesson

Philippians 4:1-9

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.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

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 honourable, 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.

Sermon

A Reflection of God's Glory...a Human Being Fully Alive

Of all the skills needed to be effective in ministry there is one that does not come easily or naturally to me. A pastor should be a "non-anxious presence." We can certainly understand why this is important: church folks and even entire congregations can be consumed by anxiety. For good reason. Our lives have been altered in so many ways during this pandemic. But they have been altered before and the world has continued to turn. Still, we worry.

A fellow pastor says it was during one of those times of extreme worry, he took his family on a hike. He described it as a brisk, early spring morning, the scent of sweet blooms in the air. Beautiful. Perfect. This was during a time that he was convinced he had a terrible disease lurking in his body and the thought was paralyzing for him and exasperating for his wife and family.

As they climbed the trail, he had a “eureka” moment and he blurted out to his wife, “You know, right now, at this very moment, I feel as though I am healthy. I do not think I am dying of anything. I feel certain of it!”

His wife didn’t think he could see, but he did see her roll her eyes, as I am also inclined to do. Then she said that was exactly what she had been telling him for weeks, and since it was settled, could they just enjoy the day?

Believe it or not, that was a novel thought- Having enough room in his head to enjoy the moment he was in.

Later his wife sent him an NPR story that explored the relationship between spending time outside and mental health. The story described something the Japanese call “sinrin-yoku,” or “forest bathing.”

The theory goes that when we are obsessing about something, we have a tendency to draw into ourselves and retreat to our familiar spaces- a room or an office. Being confined to a physical space can trap our thoughts and we dwell on them. However, going outside-to the mountains or the beach or even our yards, allows our thoughts to escape into that atmosphere like billowing smoke from a fire.

Sounds good, but, will this really work? Well, it’s helpful, but good intentions and wide-open spaces are not the cure-all for pervasive anxiety. Sometimes professional help is necessary and we should be aware of that.

Scripture can help. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes, “Do not worry about anything, rejoice in the Lord always.”

According to the Anxiety and Depression Society of America, anxiety affects 40 million adults a year. And that was before Covid 19.

My friend, the hiker, says, this Philippians passage spoke to him that day hiking with his family. Especially verse 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.”

Think about this: Paul wrote these words while in prison-a closed space where he could ruminate for long days about his fate. But, as dreadful as it might be, Paul saw himself as a prisoner for Christ, a high calling, writing to the members of a persecuted church, re-directing their thoughts.

What did Paul know about psychology? We don’t know, but we do know that he was on the right track when he encouraged those early Christians to train their minds on the things that give life meaning and purpose.

Thoughts have power. Sometimes when I am about to step up to the pulpit, I feel my pulse race and it's hard to catch my breath. It's an awesome thing to proclaim God's Word to people, even people I know like family. I've been doing this a long time now, about thirty years. I still get stage fright.

So, I do a breathing exercise my doctor taught me: take a deep breath, hold it for ten seconds, exhale for ten seconds. I do this three times and I can feel much more at ease. My pulse slows down. My anxiety is reduced. I can breathe.

My friend, Susan, practices centering prayer. Other friends practice meditation or yoga to reduce their anxiety and raise their awareness and appreciation for life.

If you are not inclined to try any of those practices, then, take a walk. Read the newspaper outside. Drive to work or to Grandma's by a different route. You will notice something new. This creates new pathways in our brains. We feel hopeful, inspired, optimistic.

Irenaeus was a theologian of the fourth century. His words hold wisdom for today: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive."

A friend of mine was undergoing treatment for breast cancer. She was young, with a young family to raise. She had a lot to live for. Even on the hard days, she had a lot to live for. I visited her one day and she took me around her house. She would pull out a drawer and there would be a slip of paper with these words of Paul: "The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but, in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." And, "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, right, pure, lovely...think on these things."

She had these verses, like little treasures, all over her house. She had a potentially deadly disease, and it took a lot of strength to cope with it and follow all the medical protocols. Cancer is a six-letter word that strikes terror in all our hearts. But, she was training her mind to think about joy, delight, beauty, and grace, because those things are life-giving, not life-taking.

I offer these thoughts to you in hopes that, in this time of great upheaval, that your senses will perk up, that you may notice what is admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy.

So that you may be a reflection of God's glory...you...fully alive.

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Blessing

May the God of endurance and encouragement, grant you to live in such harmony with one another that with one voice we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Postlude