**Emily Toews** 

I can't deny that we live in a time of high anxiety. It seems as though we give and give and have very little left except for negativity towards ourselves and for others.

Maybe anxiety as an epidemic was born when radio and the movies and then television and now the internet began relaying global news.

Our scripture from Proverbs that Bryce read for us reminds us to trust in the LORD. Putting our trust in the LORD calms fears, sweetens sleep, gives confidence and purpose and energy for going forward. Philippians 4:4-9 seems to continue this thread. Here Paul, from prison, writes these words to the Philippian church.

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

<sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

There is so much packed into this very beloved passage. In a world filled with anxiety and uncertainty, how does Paul's message remain relevant through the ages to reach us here and now? Paul offers us a pathway to God's peace that is far more simple yet utterly more profound than we can understand; a peace grounded in the nearness of Christ.

Paul begins with a call to rejoice—an imperative that seems almost counterintuitive in times of distress. Paul knows all about things that seem counterintuitive. After all, he is writing the letter to

the Philippians while he is imprisoned and awaiting a verdict that would likely be a death sentence. Yet, Paul begins with a call to rejoice.

Joy, for Paul, is not a feeling that is dependent upon circumstances. It is choosing to reflect on God's actions of redemption and resurrection even when everything else around you indicates that death and destruction have won.

This rejoicing is not about ignoring our troubles. It is not an actual feeling. This joy is a theological act; a decision; a deliberate act – a defiance – as it were – to the present darkness. Rejoicing in the LORD is shouting into the void, "you can't have me! I belong with Christ" even if you don't fully believe it.

Rejoicing in the LORD is saying, "God loves everyone – no exceptions" while working at learning about others and transforming your own prejudices.

Rejoicing in the LORD is actively looking for something good – even if it's tiny – while in the midst of despair. Rejoicing in the LORD is recognizing now and in the future the presence of Christ in all things and all times – even tragedy and loss.

The reason for rejoicing is not difficult to find – it's in the next verse – Why do we rejoice? Because the LORD is near. We have waited 2000 years for Christ's return – is Christ's return imminent or is "the LORD is near" speaking to the SPIRIT of Christ who comforts all who are oppressed, who empowers us to stand up when we feel defeated?

What if we viewed Christ's nearness as an invitation? An invitation to love, to integrity, to a deep and abiding relationship with God.

Now, I do want to add that there is something slipped in here in verse 5 that I think gets overlooked often. In my Bible – the NRSV – before Paul says, "the LORD is near" he says, "Let your *gentleness* be known to all."

From the Greek and Latin, the word translated as "gentleness" can also be translated to mean moderation, tolerance, being ready to forgive, kindness, goodness and fairness."

You may have a stressful life or living situation. You may be overwhelmed by so many things, but you can <u>always</u> choose how you will respond to others. One of the things that we say to our children – frequently – is "you may be tired/hungry /angry/annoyed etc., but that doesn't mean that you can treat other people poorly."

It is the same for us when we are experiencing anxious thoughts or whatever big feelings we have. Paul says, "Rejoice. The LORD is near. Be gentle/kind/moderate/ tolerant/ready to forgive yourself and others. No one is at their best all the time. Show them and yourself the kind of grace and forgiveness and mercy that we know Christ gave to his disciples and those who followed him.

Paul continues: <sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

There will be times of worry and high anxiety – When Paul wrote these words he was in a prison cell waiting for a verdict. Of course, your faith will be tested, of course terrible things will happen to you or your family or the people whom you love. Of course you will worry. This was true of the Roman Empire, and it is true today. When we step out of the door, turn on the television or even look online we see a world that focuses on what is fake, dishonorable, unjust, impure, and shameful. Is there even a space to find hope in a world such as ours?

But Paul also reminds us of another reality, and it is the reality of God's goodness and mercy - already here and still drawing near. It is from this goodness that God beckons us to come. Come as we are without holding back. God says, "bring it all. Let it all hang out. Give it all to me including even your shame in being anxious and worrying in the first place." No matter how trivial or how insurmountable our anxiety - bring them to the God who loves us.

We cannot generate freedom from anxiety by our own efforts; the attempt only pushes the anxiety underground, where it festers. But Christ will meet us at the place of worry, because Christ has descended to the depths of human despair.

I can tell you, as a person who suffers from anxiety, that giving our worries to God is no small feat. But what it is IS surrender. It is acknowledging that we are not in control of all that will happen. It is letting go of the control and deliberately giving it over to God. Some might call this surrender "freedom" but I call it "embracing the chaos". Whatever we call it, when we give it over to Christ – when we surrender it all - there is a kind of peace.

Now this peace isn't simply the absence of anxiety or a state of calmness – but it is a powerful creative generative peace. It is not a peace that WE control, but a deep inexplainable wholeness, goodness and restorative shalom. This peace of Christ is beyond reasoning and will guard our hearts and minds from shame and fear.

Philippians 4:8 and 9 read a bit like a self-help list of things to do in times of worry. Paul urges us to focus on what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. In doing so, we shift our attention from overwhelmingly worrisome people and things around us to the goodness around us.

Training our minds to think of this reality, and thereby to act with hope, is a daily mental discipline. One that we cannot do on our own. We need each other. Let us be people who are open and honest and able to hear the needs and anxiety of others with compassion and empathy – not with mocking and rolling our eyes. Let us be people who hold each other to the light – no matter how distant the light may seem. Let us be people who rejoice in witnessing God's colorful love expressed so differently in each one of us.<sup>1</sup>

You may ask, then, Is this just an exercise in positive thinking? Isn't this, then, a sermon on "how to" live in an anxious world? Yes. It seems as though it is, but I might argue that we, like Paul in prison, have a need to remember the goodness of God.

 $<sup>^{1}\</sup> https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28/commentary-on-philippians-41-9-2$ 

I want to leave you now with a list written by Jane Lancaster-Patterson summing up Paul's words to find and receive peace within:

- Rejoice: Don't just expect joy to arrive on its own, but commit yourself to practices of godly joy every day (4:4).
- No one is at their best right now, including you, so be gentle to absolutely everyone (4:5).
- Christ is near (4:5). Take moments to experience the reality that you are surrounded by transcendent compassion that is larger and deeper than you.
- Don't obsess over your worries, but don't brush them under the carpet, either. Share them with God, all the worry and all the gratitude together (4:6).
- This conversation with God is a source of peace beyond our capacity to understand (4:7).
- Commit yourself not to simply obsess over all that is going wrong, all the evil and destruction you see in the world. Turn your attention to things that really matter, to where you see action that is worthy of respect, to places where justice is being done, to goodness in all its forms. Make a list of them if you have to...
- Pay attention to the truly remarkable people around you who will show you how to walk this path (4:9).<sup>2</sup>

 $<sup>^{2} \</sup>underline{\text{https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28/commentary-on-philippians-41-9-6}$