



Lynnae Douglas' Sermon

19TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9

(ISAIAH 25:6-9; PSALM 23; MATTHEW 22:1-14)

Grace and peace to you, from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. A favorite book in the Douglas household is C.S. Lewis' delightful story, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Lewis captivates his readers by taking them on an adventure to a land called Narnia. The four main characters are children who journey to Narnia through an enchanted wardrobe. The youngest of the children, Lucy, is the first to discover the wonders of Narnia. She is mesmerized by what she sees, and yet she quickly learns that Narnia is not as it is ought to be. She meets a faun named Mr. Tumnus who tells her that it's been winter for a very long time in Narnia. The frost is relentless and the spring blossoms haven't emerged for quite awhile. He says a line that gets repeated throughout the story, and it's a line which has often come to my mind in the last 7 months. He tells Lucy that "it is always winter in Narnia. Always winter and never Christmas." Always winter, and never Christmas. Can you imagine? I'm sure Wisconsinites who have endured many long winters *can* imagine it. It'd be terrible!

Well that phrase, "always winter and never Christmas" probably sums up how many of us would describe the year 2020. We've all been affected in various ways by the barrage of changes that began at the outset of 2020, changes that still alter our lives even now in October. I want you to think just for a moment about the ways in which your own life has been affected. [Pause] Some of you have lost dear friends or other relatives this year. Some of you can't freely go to see your dear friends or loved ones as you once did. Some of you have lost jobs. Some of you have been thrust into being full-time principals and teachers of your newfound homeschool, while still somehow managing your other full-time responsibilities. And this is, admittedly, only a short list. All of you have had changes imposed on your normal routines. Maybe at first it didn't seem like it, but by now it's felt like a bitter-cold, prolonged winter.

And in these particular circumstances, we gather together and hear this word from Isaiah. He speaks of a time of restoration, not only for Israel, but also for peoples of other nations as well. He speaks of a mountain on which God will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a feast that includes the best of meats and the finest of wines. We hear that God will swallow up death forever and wipe every tear from all faces. It sounds like an enchanted mountain, and perhaps especially from where we sit today, we wonder if this is truth or fiction. Then we see an image painted for us from Psalm 23, an image of God the Shepherd leading his people to lie down and rest in green pastures beside still waters, where there is no want or lack, no fear in the face of evil or death. In this image we hear of abiding goodness and mercy. And we wonder, can we hope for any of this in the midst of our blistery winter, in our world that is still filled with tears and unrest, with worry and sickness and death?

When we turn our ears to Paul's letter to the Philippians, we do receive a little piece of delicious meat, a little taste of that well-aged wine which we can expect more of at the coming feast on the mountaintop. Paul's words here are meant to encourage and bless the church at Philippi, and though they are some 2000 years old, they are the living words of God still meant to bless and encourage us today.

Rejoice in the Lord always, Paul says, and again I say, rejoice. It's helpful to remember that Paul is not writing these words on top of a beautiful mountain, away from the cares and changes of this life. If anyone had a good excuse to *not* rejoice in the Lord *always*, it was St. Paul. Though Paul was not enduring a global pandemic, he was writing these words in chains from a Roman prison cell. He was on trial for his grave offense of preaching the gospel. This isn't exactly an environment that provides cause for rejoicing. I'm positive his prison cell did not include a window through which he could peer out at lush, green pastures or hear the quiet waters of a nearby stream. But that's just the point isn't it? Paul isn't saying rejoice in the environment you find yourselves in just as I'm rejoicing in the rat-infested prison I get to lay my head to rest in. He's not telling us to rejoice in the many losses and sorrows of this year. He does elsewhere commend the habit of giving thanks and being content in all circumstances, but that's not the same thing as rejoicing in the circumstances themselves. The call is to rejoice *in the Lord*. Rejoice that Jesus is risen, rejoice that Jesus is for you and rejoice that he is coming again.

It is this kind of rejoicing that embodies feasting at a rich meal. Rejoicing in the Lord is deeply nourishing and satisfying to our bodies and souls. This is no momentary joy, but joy in the living Lord Jesus, who bore our sins in his own body, so that we could live and die and rise as those who belong to him. It's a rejoicing that can be done *always*, even through the real pain and sorrows of this year, because we trust that suffering and death did not get the last word on Jesus, and they will not get the last word on us either.

The next few admonitions from Paul are all interrelated. Rejoicing in Jesus includes letting our gentleness—our forbearance and meekness, even through trials—be known to everyone. The Lord is near, Paul comforts. He is going to return, and Paul wants this good news to spread even should persecution follow.

Then Paul gives another word of encouragement. He says, “do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God, [make your requests known to God].” Do not be anxious about anything. Perhaps those early Christians in Philippi first heard those words and thought, but how could we not be anxious? “You’re in jail Paul! And the whole political structure around us wants to subvert any allegiance we have to Jesus Christ! And here we are two millennia later and we think, do not be anxious about anything? But the news tells us that over 200,000 people in our country have died because of COVID-19, and our nation hasn’t seen division like this since the Civil War.

Paul knew quite well the various anxieties that threaten to undo faith in Christ. And here he spreads a table before this great enemy named anxiety. He says, in effect, it may be winter now, but come, sit down and rest. By prayer and with thanksgiving, bring your requests to God. Ask of him! He promises to hear you and he will quiet you with his love. Bring your requests to God your good Shepherd. He promises to sustain you and lead you into his green pastures where only his goodness and mercy will follow you.

Now I’ll be the first to confess this is a refreshing word from God, but it is far easier said than done. When our hearts and minds are full of trouble and we are weighed down by that which overwhelms us, by far the easiest thing to do is simply stay there. It’s easy to go on carrying the burden and allow our thoughts of worry to go uninterrupted. We often stew in them and bottle them up. In my case, I usually carry them in my shoulders.

The word used in the Greek that gets translated as anxiety literally means to be divided into parts. This is actually what anxiety does, it divides us internally and pulls us apart in different directions so that we are not whole. Anxiety distorts our perception of reality. Physicians and mental health experts can tell us how harmful this is to our bodies, which means it’s also profoundly damaging to our souls. “Can any of you add a single hour to your life by being anxious,” Jesus once asked in his Sermon on the Mount. The obvious answer was and still is, of course not.

We were not made to conquer anxiety by ourselves, in our own heads and hearts. We are made to be in relationship, chiefly with God, and also with one another. As the church Father Augustine once put it, “our hearts are restless until they rest in him.” This is why the call to not be anxious is coupled with an invitation to pray, to relate to God our Maker. He knows that we cannot overcome anxiety through self-determination. But when we bring our requests to God with thanksgiving, we direct our attention away from ourselves and our circumstances. We are instead drawn into the relationship we were created for, as we speak to the One who actually knows our every need before we even ask. He is our perfect Father who will not feed us with a stone when we ask him for bread.

As we relate to him in this way, God promises to guard us with his divine peace. *And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* The Philippians had a sense of what peace meant, but it was an earthly “peace” imposed by imperial force in Rome. The peace of God, on the other hand, is altogether different than the peace of Rome. It’s powerful, but it’s not coercive. It doesn’t rise and fall with national rulers; it’s everlasting. Perhaps that’s why Paul tells us that it’s a peace that transcends understanding. The same peace that has always been enjoyed by the Father, the Son, and the Spirit before the world was made is what he graciously promises to give to us. It’s with this peace that God promises to *guard* our hearts and minds, guard being used here as a military term. This is God’s own peace which defends us and subdues this enemy called anxiety.

Paul goes on to encourage his listeners to think on things that are true and noble, right and good and beautiful. Again, this is far easier said than done. We are face great pressure in our culture today to perceive lies as truth, to perceive that which is harmful as good, and that which is shameful as beautiful. But as Christians, we don’t need to look to what the wider culture defines as true or virtuous or lovely. Paul writes earlier in Philippians 2 that we *have* the mind of Christ. We who are baptized have been clothed with the wedding garments that our Host gave to us, as our gospel lesson expresses. We are no longer slaves or victims of this world, only able to think on those things which are not good for us. The Lord is our Shepherd; he leads and guides us with his rod and staff, driving away all our enemies, including the sinful thoughts that still threaten and accuse us.

Much has changed in the last 7 months, but God has not. He continues to draw near to us in his Son Jesus. He sympathizes with our every weakness and he sympathizes with our wintry year. It is Jesus who comes to us today through these words of life and encouragement, and it is also Jesus who perfectly accomplishes each one of them. Jesus was not immune to the threat of anxiety. He knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane in total agony sweating drops of blood as he made his requests known to his Father. He was certainly tempted by invasive, impure thoughts—yet without sin. Jesus was not a stranger to cares and worries and tears, to sickness and death and the torments of hell. And he conquered and overcame all of this for our sake. We have been baptized into *his* risen and holy life. He promises to go on sharing with us his joy, his trust in the face of anxiety, his true and noble and lovely thoughts. And he promises to return and establish his kingdom, where in a very real sense, it will always be Christmas, and never winter. It’s not fiction. He promises to one day sit us down at a great feast upon a mountaintop with rich meats and the finest of wines, beside still waters where anxiety cannot exist, where death is swallowed up, and where pure rejoicing will never end. And so we pray, Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.