

October 15, 2023
Philippians 4:1-9
Worried? Think About These Things

As I was thinking about the passage from Philippians Janet just read earlier in the week, these were the headlines from the New York Times on Thursday:

Israel Retaliates in the Gaza Strip With No Sign of Relief for Civilians (NYT 10/13)

What More Must the Children of Gaza Suffer (NYT10/13)

These from the Washington Post:

Humanitarian Groups Issue Increasingly Dire Warnings (WaPo 10/13)

Russian Mounts Major Attack on Key City in Ukraine (WaPo 10/13)

Also, in my email inbox were links to humanitarian groups that offer relief to those suffering in Artsakh (the Republic of Nagorno Karabakh) which our Mission Committee voted to send to the Session requesting our congregation be notified about how to support the more than 100,000 Armenians out of a total population of 120,000 who have been recently forced to leave their ancient homeland and flee as refugees to Armenia in order to save their lives. These Armenians are escaping in fear of continued starvation, persecution, and ethnic cleansing.

In this congregation we have those for whom these crises in Israel, Ukraine, and Artsakh are deeply personal, with family members and relatives caught in the cycles of violence. These loved ones are being forced to leave behind possessions and an irreplaceable cultural and religious landscape of several thousand years.

On other sites I peruse this is what I read:

War Could Spread to All Middle East

Ecuador, Reeling from Violence, Seeks Change.

Salvadoran Troops Besiege Cities in Hunt for Gangsters

Just reading newspaper headlines raises one's anxiety to levels beyond healthy. Once we delve into the articles and actually read them, it get's worse.

Worried? What are we to do?

In our scripture passage from today the Apostle Paul casts a vision of discovering joy out of suffering and maintains his posture of rejoicing even in the midst of hardship. Paul writes this encouraging, even exuberant letter to the church in Philippi while he himself is in prison. The apostle Paul exhorts his hearers to think on these things that are true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, if there is any excellence if there's anything worthy of praise. These things are an essential part of a well-cultivated, fruitful and beautiful mind.

I believe I have shared with you in the past that this passage is my heart passage and one I try to use as a lens for living. So, I may have shared these ideas with you previously but I think they bear repeating today in light of our global context.

I suspect that we don't have any idea how much our mind influences our feelings and behavior. The mind is one of God's greatest gifts to us and we will be held accountable

for our stewardship of it. The mind is like a garden; it can either be cultivated or it can be left alone and so return to an untamed, natural state. When Paul says, “have this mind in you”, “consider things this way”, “think on these things,” he is acting, in a way, as a master gardener, sharing with us the ways in which we may cultivate our minds, how we may channel the water so it nourishes without swamping, help us discern what plants are weeds and what are native.

Paul calls upon believers to fill the garden of our minds with good plants: those which are true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable and excellent. All of us, at times, allow the garden of our minds to fill with choking weeds. All of us at times allow poisons to leach into the garden of our minds undoing our cultivation.

It almost seems as though we are drawn toward the salacious and least true way that is helpful for us. Perhaps you like me look at the news articles or are glued to your screens and feel overwhelmed by the atrocities being committed but are unable turn your gaze away. It may take conscious and concerted effort to search out news that is not the raw stuff of human sin and frailty that leads humanity down the path of destruction and war.

Our society or ‘the algorithm behind the platform’ is perfectly content to have us focus on and even fixate on that which is contrary to the list we find in Philippians of good gifts. Each one of us may very easily regularly indulge in imagination pollution.

Have you had that happen to you? You're thinking about something that you know doesn't feed your imagination or maybe are talking with a coworker about something, and the next thing you know you are seeing ads about it on your social media feed?

Recall the garden metaphor, we might say that Paul names the qualities of a good garden. If we do not think on these things, the implication is that our garden will be undone. A garden is undone in two ways, either it becomes wild and overgrown, undone by ravenous weeds and life-threatening thorns, or it becomes desolate and barren, undone by trash, refuse, and lack of water & nutrients. Beware the anxieties, worries and fears that demand so much of our mental energy that they become all-consuming weeds which drive out the good plants.

Paul in this 4th chapter of his letter to the Philippians encourages all who hear it to aspire higher. Think on the good news, wherever you find it. And if you don't see it initially, continue looking for those stories that bring joy and respite from the daily atrocities. Ponder the mysteries of God. Give the gift of your energies—mental, emotional, spiritual and physical--to those causes that glorify God, bring about peace, and cause well-being for others.

What might this look like?

As many of you know we are in our worship + 1 season here at the church. This involves Lord's Day Worship + 1 activity, committee, responsibility, book group, bible study, youth group, Sunday School Class, mission project, that nourishes your spirit. We are

inviting us all to intentionally make it a practice to set aside worship either in person or online and at least one other path that helps you nourish your garden. [Show Worship + 1 slide here]

If you need help thinking about what your + 1 might be speak with Pastor Chris or with me and we are happy to help you discern that path. One possibility that comes to mind in the midst of the word's suffering is to join in our Potomac Area Interfaith Communities Thanksgiving Service on November 15 which will take place this year at St. James Episcopal Church at 7:30pm. The theme we have come up with together as an interfaith community is "Harvesting Peace" and each interfaith community will offer a reading, song, prayer toward that end. Our PPC offering will be to sing 2 verses of the hymn, "When Peace Like a River" also known as "It is Well With My Soul" and share the poignant background of that hymn with the gathered community. The author of that hymn was able to find peace in the midst of his deep suffering of losing all of his children to drowning. If you would like to join the make-shift choir for this event let me know.

[Remove Worship + 1 slide]

Another way to deal with the worry and anxiety and to take Paul's admonition in Philippians seriously is to engage a prayer practice that I think I've shared with you before but I believe bears repeating.

I've borrowed this idea from preacher and author Leonard Sweet. He sums up Philippians 4 focusing on six words as a prayer practice that may serve as a way to get

through the day, and to help cultivate peace in our hearts, in the community, and in the world. Six words in three pairs, Anxious:Nothing, Prayer:Everything, Thanks:Anything.¹

The idea is taken from Philippians 4:6-7 where we read, “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.”

First, Anxious:Nothing. Turn all worry and anxiety over to God. Be ye not anxious, do not worry. Easier said than done. But sometimes, pausing to name the worry, anxiety, care, concern and then giving it to God in that moment is what is needed.

Anxious:Nothing

Second, Prayer:Everything. Being prayerful in everything means that all of life is animated by God’s presence and spirit such that actions are prayer, thoughts are prayer and movements are prayer—again, easier said than done. The 17th century monk Brother Lawrence wrote a small book about this in which he chronicles the successes and failures he encounters when giving all of himself to God in prayer in what he calls, Practicing the Presence of God. **Prayer:Everything**.

Third, Thanks: Anything. Thankful in anything and in everything, always. Perhaps you’ve seen the studies about the mental benefits of gratitude. For those who need

¹ “The 6 Words that Can Save Your Life” by Leonard Sweet, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc. Collected Sermons

scientific proof to validate these Biblical truths there are many thankfulness or gratitude studies that document the physical and emotional health benefits of cultivating attitudes of gratitude and giving thanks. **Thanks: Anything.**

In summary, the six words from Philippians to think on that lead to peace, to cultivating a beautiful mind, and to thinking on things we are called to think upon by our Lord are:

Anxious: Nothing

Prayer: Everything

Thanks: Anything

Worried? Think About These Things.

Amen