

**May the God of Peace be with You
&
the Peace of God Guard your Hearts and Mind**

What an anxious time we are in. Despite the news of the largest bailout ever – \$700 Billion dollars by our government to cover bad debt – stock values have continued to decline, plummeting 18% this week, the worst week on Wall Street since the Great Depression 75 years ago. The markets are in a tizzy. Investors are panicking and selling. A world wide market collapse is feared. The country is in a recession. Millions of homes are in foreclosure. Credit is tight. Interest rates, when companies and government can borrow money, are high.

On the political scene two presidential candidates and their running mates who pledged to take the higher road and not sink to negative politics as usual were busy slinging mud at one another. If we believed even half the negative publicity each campaign is generating about the other side how could we in good conscience vote for either?

On the personal side there are people in our parish whose jobs are on the chopping block, whose mortgage rates have ballooned to impossible monthly rates while the value of their houses have slipped below the amount they owe on their mortgage, who face imminent foreclosure, whose savings and retirement funds have dwindled, and many more who are deeply worried about their future.

These are anxious times indeed. And so I find it very timely that in our three-year cycle of readings this week's Epistle lesson is from Philippians 4:4-13, whose theme is helping Christians deal with anxiety.

Philippians is a letter written by Paul when he was in prison to a congregation he clearly loves, but who were facing severe challenges. One challenge was division among their leaders, so Paul emphasizes the need for unity. Immediately before today's reading Paul urged two prominent women in the community – Euodia and Syntyche – to come to one mind. There were other challenges as well; the Philippian community were facing persecution for their faith. So Paul strongly encourages his beloved friends in Philippi to press on, to move forward in the faith despite their difficulties. And so Paul's words of encouragement to the Philippians, which we read this morning, were to a congregation facing difficult and anxious times. His words have been a wonderful resource of comfort and encouragement to Christians in anxious times ever since. Let me read again vs. 4-9:

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, 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. ⁹Keep 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.

I've also included an insert of a paraphrase version of the passage in your bulletins from Eugene Peterson's, *The Message*, which helps us see some of the meaning behind the familiar words. You might want to look at the familiar words of the NRSV in the bulletin insert as I read from Peterson's translation.

4-5 Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute!

6-7 Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.

8-9 Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.

Paul urges his friends to rejoice. Nine times in this short letter Paul either rejoices over the good things God is doing or admonishes the Philippians to rejoice. *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!*

Rejoicing. Perhaps few people realize how characteristic joy – being happy, radiant, exultant – is to the Christian life. The first thing every new convert in the Bible does is to rejoice. Jesus was a joyous, radiant person, something the musical Godspell brings out so well. And yet the prevailing image of Christianity is so often one of somber mourning, constant repentance and guilt. The Christian life is joy filled. And so Paul reminds us to **rejoice**. And in case we didn't hear him the first time he repeats himself, *again I will say, rejoice*.

Don't worry, Paul tells them, *do not worry about anything*. That's not so easy is it? Especially in fearful and anxious times. But Paul tells us how to do it. Pray to God about everything. Bring your life to God and God to your life. Especially give God thanks for everything. That's not just *counting our blessings*, or adding up all our health, wealth and prosperity and saying *thank you*. That's giving God thanks for every circumstance in my life. This isn't the only time Paul wrote such a thing. He wrote to the Thessalonians in the 1st letter, 5:16-18: *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*. That doesn't mean we

pretend to put on a happy face when bad things happen to us. But we thank God for the trials and hardships and how they teach us to depend on God's strength and not our own, just as much as we thank God for our blessings. In all circumstances we give God thanks for his presence and love and strength and hope. God can use all things – awful terrible things as well as good things – to His glory and good purpose.

Be anxious in nothing, prayerful in everything, thankful in anything ...then... the Peace. Aah, the Peace, the *peace of God that surpasses all understanding*. How wonderful that sounds! A peace beyond my comprehension. A peace that I cannot achieve by my own efforts, a peace that is not man-made, but comes from God. A peace which is not an end in itself but a result of thanksgiving and prayer.

This peace of God shall *guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus*. The word for *guards* is a military word for standing on guard duty. It is this peace that comes through prayer and thanksgiving that stands guard, keeping our hearts and minds in Christ.

Next Paul gives us a list of virtues – whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, of excellence, or worthy of praise – and he tells us to think on these things. Some older members, like me may remember the lyrics of an old Bing Crosby and Andrew's Sisters song: *You've got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative, don't mess with Mr. In-between. You've got to spread joy up to the maximum, bring gloom down to the minimum, have faith or pandemonium is liable to walk upon the scene*. Paul is telling us to accentuate the positive.

In this highly charged political climate I like what *The Purpose Driven Life* author Pastor Rick Warren says: *"I'm not for the left wing and I'm not for the right wing; I'm for the whole bird!"* So much of partisan politics focuses exclusively on the negative. Paul invites us to focus instead on the positive.

Paul encourages the Philippians to follow his example and promises that the God of Peace will be with them. We can trust our God to be with us and help us through our most difficult times. In all these positive ways – through rejoicing, in prayer, in thanksgiving, in experiencing God's Peace, and in focusing on the positive, Paul encourages the Philippians and us to trust God. Trust in God and even in tough and anxious times we will discover that the God of Peace is with us indeed.