

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, May 25, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

"A CALM AND QUIET SOUL"

Psalms 131:2

It's commonplace to say that these are stressful and anxious times. That's true but there has rarely been a time in which people did not feel anxious and fearful. I can well imagine Adam saying to Eve after they were sent out of the Garden, "I'm worried, dear." Certainly we know that they were afraid, for the Bible tells us so.

I remember my first experience of anxiety. I was twelve years old, in grade seven. Two weeks into September, class sizes needed adjustment, so I was chosen along with two others to go into another class. The night before the move, I lay awake in bed worrying. My parents said, "It will be fine," but questions kept racing through my mind. "What would my new teacher be like? Would I be accepted? Would I make friends?" After midnight I finally fell asleep. The next day we went to the new class, and my parents were right. It was fine and I had a good year. But that's the first time anxiety got hold of me.

As we get older and responsibilities pile up, the more anxiety we feel. Sometimes people ask me if my job as a pastor is stressful. Well, there are people I worry about and some difficult situations to deal with (never difficult people, only difficult situations!) I sometimes worry about the future, like everyone else. But this is really no more stressful than other occupations.

Now sometimes anxiety spurs us into action. But more often anxiety gets out of control in our lives. It can squeeze the joy out of life. It can drain our energy, blur our focus, stifle our ambition, isolates us from others, and even make us ill. It was said that the writer George Elliot suffered her whole long from "an excess of taking thought...the fearsome possibilities round the next corner blotted out the joys of the present stretch of road, no matter how pleasant." I know people who, if they're not exactly in that boat, are close to it.

Now the Bible identifies anxiety as a significant problem which needs to be dealt with if we are to be the kind of people God intends. Jesus counselled his disciples against anxiety in the memorable words we heard from Matthew chapter 6. Paul said to the Philippians, "Have no anxiety about anything..." But

it seems so difficult to do. That's why words of Psalm 131 catch our attention. The Psalmist writes in verse 2, "I have calmed and quieted my soul." Wouldn't it be a blessing to say, "Stresses and anxieties came to me, but I have calmed and quieted my soul." So how can we do it in a healthful way, and not in the harmful ways are so common? Well it can happen with God's help as we follow the guidance of Scripture. You see, the Bible not only raises the problem, but provides a way of coping with it, so that we can move to the point of saying, "But I have calmed and quieted my soul." The Biblical way of coping with anxiety is summed up in three words beginning with the letter "p" - prayer, priority, and promise.

First, we calm and quiet our souls through prayer.

Paul writes to the Philippians, chapter 4 verses 6 & 7. "Have no anxiety 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 passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Now Paul worried - he worried about the churches he founded, he worried about how members were getting along with one another, he worried about false teachings infiltrating the church. Without a cell phone or blackberry it often took months before he discovered through a letter or a visit how things were going. Sometimes Paul worried about his own health. But here's how he kept anxiety from overwhelming him. "In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."

Whatever you are anxious about, says Paul, speak to God about it. We have access to the Father through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. When we are anxious about something God is anxious to hear from us. Call upon God's Name and specifically name the situation that is making you anxious - your health, your job, some personal situation, a concern you have about your child, some difficult challenge you face, whatever it is, name it before God. Now God most certainly knows what is causing us to be anxious and fearful, for his Spirit searches our heart very deeply. But naming the problem before God somehow opens a path for God to pour his guidance into our lives. So often we find that even as we pray or shortly after, some godly direction or solution comes to us. Naming the situation before God also focuses our energies. It opens a path for God's strength to come into our lives so that we rise up in committed action instead of just spending our energy worrying.

Paul says that we also should pray with thanksgiving. Thank God for the forgiveness and hope you have received through Christ. Thank God for all the

help he has given you in days past and for all the ways he has meet your needs. That will remind you that the everlasting God who helped you before is helping you even now, and will help you in the future. God does not change!

Now Paul doesn't say that by praying this way the circumstances that are making us anxious will go away. But he says that as we name them before God, the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. The picture is that of a guarded fort. The evil one is trying to distract or even destroy us by throwing flaming darts of anxiety at us. But God's peace comes to protect us against the worst these flaming arrows can do to us. We experience peace despite our outer circumstances, a peace that can't be fully explained. I've had this experience and perhaps you have too, where in difficult circumstances I should be full of anxiety, but instead I feel peace, and I know it must be from God. "In everything with prayer and supplication, let your requests be made known to God." That's the first step to saying "I have calmed and quieted my soul."

The second step is reordering our priorities.

In Matthew chapter 6, Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not be anxious about your life, about what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing...your Heavenly Father knows that you need them all..." Jesus is telling us not to make these needs our top priority. Now like the birds of the air we certainly have to work to get food and other necessities, but if we work and care for one another there will be plenty for all. We do live in a world of plenty, and many shortages are artificial, caused by human manipulation and greed. I am strongly suspicious that's what's happening now in the world markets for oil and food. Our providential God has arranged creation so there is plenty for all and that shortages in one place are offset by an abundance elsewhere. Remember in the Bible how Egypt had an overflow when the rest of the world had a famine. And God worked through Joseph in order to share Egypt's abundance with surrounding nations.

Jesus says that our top priority is to "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness." What does that mean? In the Lord's prayer Jesus says, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The second phrase explains the first. Seeking God's Kingdom first means seeking to do God's will. So we ask ourselves, "Am I running my business, my life, my home, as God wants? Am I using my gifts in a way that pleases God?" When you put God's will first, you can put away your anxieties. You don't stop working, but you can stop worrying about these things. For God promises that all you need will be added unto you.

I find this true as a pastor. If I begin to worry excessively about the financial state of the church and other matters I lose focus on looking after the spiritual needs of the congregation, which for me has to be the number one priority. But when I get back to that, I find that these other things are indeed added unto us, through the faithfulness of God working through faithful people like yourselves.

And making God's will our priority also helps overcome the anxiety of others. For if someone is anxious about their basic needs how are those things added unto them? Well, perhaps through their own efforts but also through people who generously share what they have in accordance with God's will. When someone comes to our food cupboard and we are able to overcome their anxiety about daily bread, it's because someone here has given thought to the needs of others. Make God's will your number one priority and you will be able to say, "I have calmed and quieted my soul," plus you will have a part in overcoming someone else's anxieties and worries.

Finally, we calm and quiet our souls by trusting in God's promises.

Jesus said, "But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much clothe you - O you of little faith." I know it's harsh to say, but so often much of our worry and anxiety comes from little faith. I was anxious the night before going into my new class because I didn't trust the wisdom and word of my parents.

God makes tremendous promises to us. And if we really trust them we calm and quiet our souls. You see, we cannot really secure our lives; there are many things we cannot control. It is only God who secures our lives; it is in God that we are secure. Can we trust the promises of the God who loves us so much that he gave us his only Son to die and rise again to redeem us from the power of sin and death? Can we really trust this God? Yes, we can. To everyone who comes to him through faith in Christ, God says, "See, I have inscribed you on the palm of my hands." What a promise, what a sign of God's faithfulness. God has inscribed us on his hand, so that even if he wanted to forsake us or drop us he couldn't. God will keep us through life and death into eternity. God is faithful to his promises.

No, we don't know what tomorrow holds. Today has enough joys and troubles of its own. But God is not surprised by the future. Indeed, in these moments God is already preparing us for what tomorrow will bring.

A construction crew was building a road through a rural area, cutting down trees as it went. A worker noticed that one tree had a nest of birds that couldn't yet fly. He marked the tree so that it wouldn't be cut down. Two weeks later the worker came back to the tree. He was lifted up in a bucket so he could peer into the nest. The birds were gone, obviously having learned to fly. The tree was cut down. As it fell, the nest fell clear and materials the mother had gathered to build the nest were scattered around. Part of the material was a scrap of a Sunday school pamphlet. On the paper were these words from Scripture, "He careth for you."

The same God whose eye is on the sparrow watches over you and me. He has inscribed us on the palm of his hands. We can really trust this God, our Heavenly Father. Trust his promises and you will be able say indeed, "I have calmed and quieted my soul."