

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, October 12, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

"THE PROTECTING PEACE OF GOD"

Philippians 4:6

In a Peanuts cartoon Lucy has set up her psychiatric booth on a street corner, and tells Charlie Brown that he worries too much. "No wonder your stomach hurts. You've got to stop all this silly worrying!" And Charlie replies, "How do I stop?" Lucy answers, "That's *your* worry! Five cents please."

"Do not worry about anything," says the apostle Paul in Philippians 4 verse 6. To which we may respond "Sure, easy for you to say." But Paul wasn't giving easy or cheap advice. In fact, Paul gives us a practical step we can take in order to keep anxiety from damaging our hearts and minds. He writes in chapter 4, verses 6 & 7, "Do not worry about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." And the other thing that keeps Paul's advice from being cheap is that it came from his own life experience. Paul himself was a worrier, who once wrote about "the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches." And in this passage Paul is worried about Euodia and Synthche who were having a dispute and causing unrest in the Philippian church. But Paul knew that anxiety did not and worry need to overwhelm him. He'd discovered that his anxiety could be replaced by a peace which passes all understanding.

Now we can't help but feel anxiety in these days. The future looks uncertain and we may feel the ground shaking under our feet. We may be anxious about our health or our jobs or our retirement funds or our family's well-being. The truth is that responsible and thinking people very often feel some anxiety. I certainly do. In this political season, we remember that our leaders carry very heavy burdens and worries which go far beyond partisan politics.

Now we are not in their shoes, but there is some good kinds of anxiety, anxiety which can spur us into positive action. I hope that we do feel some anxiety about our congregation and the mission of Jesus Christ in the community and around the world. I hope we are anxious in a positive way about fulfilling our responsibilities as church members, and being good citizens in our community and country. Anxiety is not all bad if it spurs us into action. But sometimes anxiety can overwhelm us, prevent us from acting rather than

spur us to action. It can ruin our sleep and cause us to turn in sub-par performances. I often felt anxious before school exams and didn't do my best because it took me a few minutes to settle down and gather my thoughts.

The truth is that we need "the peace of God which passes all understanding (which) will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." The picture Paul gives us is of God's peace coming and standing like sentries around our hearts and minds, protecting us against the damaging arrows of anxiety. Now Paul knew that the peace of God is a gift we can't control. God gives it when and how he chooses. Sometimes it comes in the midst of stress and crisis, when we don't expect it. That's why it passes all understanding. But Paul knew there were steps he could take to make himself open to receiving God's protecting peace. So it is for us. There are some things we can do to make ourselves more open to receiving the gift. Do these, "and the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

First, take the long view.

I might sound like a financial advisor when I tell you that. But it's true, not just when it comes to the stock market, but life in general. It's a spiritual principal. Take the long view.

Now this letter to the Phillipians was not the final letter Paul wrote, but it wasn't his first, either. Lots had happened to Paul ever since the risen Christ encountered him on the Damascus road. In 2nd Corinthians Paul described some of the anxiety producing events in his life - imprisonments, near-death beatings, shipwrecks, dangers, toil and hardship and sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, cold and exposure. But Paul knew that he had come through them all with the help of God. Even now as he wrote to his favourite church he was in prison. And yet from that prison dungeon came his most joyful letter of all. "Rejoice in the Lord always, again, I will say Rejoice." (4: 4) Clearly the peace of God was standing guard over Paul's heart and mind at that very moment. Indeed, Paul was at such peace in his prison cell that he was able to share the Gospel with some of the guards and win them to Christ. Paul took the long view. He had enough experience to be sure, as he writes in Romans, that nothing in life or in death or in all creation could separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

An awareness of history, both our personal history and the history of God's people helps us to take the long view. There is no crisis we go through that hasn't been faced before by someone, somewhere. When you're young, a crisis seems like the end. But it's not, and if you're younger now, you'll discover that

with time. By the grace of God, we came through our problems, sometimes emerging stronger than ever. And by the same grace, we'll get through whatever the present crisis is. It's been true in the church and in our own lives. And that experience strengthens our faith in God who is the same yesterday, today and forever, the God who helped us in the past, who sustains us in the present, and goes before us into the future, the God who has saved us in Jesus Christ. Here we are today rejoicing and giving thanks to God. For God's mercies still endure, ever faithful, ever sure. By taking the longer view we become open to receiving and experiencing God's protecting peace.

Christians not only take the long view of life; we take an eternal view. Jesus said, "Let not your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms." Our view extends beyond this world to eternity. In Romans Paul tells us that in everything God works for good, and all that seems so confused and unfinished **here** will be brought to completion and fulfilment **there** according to God's gracious plan in Jesus Christ. And this hope is promised by the cross and resurrection of Christ.

A very popular new Christian book is a novel called "*The Shack*" by William Young. I've read it put in the church library. It's about a man who suffered a terrible earthly loss and knew a great sadness. But after some years God graciously gives him a glimpse into eternity. And this glimpse into how things turn out changes his whole attitude towards God and towards life. It brings peace to his troubled soul.

Our life here on earth, though we are so wrapped up in it now as we should be, is but one room in the Father's house. Take the long view, "and the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

Secondly, pray with thanksgiving.

"Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to God." Paul is telling us that whatever situation is making us anxious, we should name it before God in prayer. "O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear; all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer." It's simple, just say, "Dear Lord, please help me. Such and such a situation is causing me anxiety."

Now I think naming the situation is a good thing to do, for two reasons. For one, it quantifies the problem and helps us to keep it in proper perspective. You realize that it's just one part of your life, not all of it. Naming it puts it in a box

and keeps it from dominating your life. It reminds you that while there is this thing that is causing you anxiety, there is lots more in your life that is positive. And your mind can move away from focussing strictly on the anxiety producing thing to things of excellence. Verse 8, "Beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Don't just think about the negative things; focus also on things in your life and in the world that are good and worthy of praise. And if you can't think of anything else, focus on Christ. For he indeed is the one who true and honourable and just and commendable the one who is truly excellent and worthy of praise.

The other positive thing about naming the situation before God is that it puts you in touch with one who really can help you. Have you ever noticed what often happens when you're ill and make an appointment with your doctor? Just after making the appointment you feel a sense of relief and you often feel better even as you're sitting in the doctor's waiting room because you are very near to the one who can really help you.

Naming an anxiety producing situation before God brings you close to the One who is strong enough and loves you enough to help. Perhaps God will fix the problem immediately, perhaps He will sustain you through it; perhaps God will show you a way forward. God never leaves us without resources we can call upon. And the greatest resource is God himself.

And when we ask for God's help, we ought to pray with thanksgiving, says Paul. Thanksgiving Sunday reminds us to always and everywhere to give God thanks. Even in anxious times, there are so many things to be thankful for - the answers to prayer we have received; our forgiveness through Christ's death and resurrection; the ways God has graciously met our needs in the past and is doing so now. We can thank God that we live in this free and bountiful and beautiful land. We can thank Him for all the times he has protected us from temptation and saved from the worst that might have happened. We can thank him for the love that never lets us go.

I finish with a story which I heard some years ago and always moves me deeply at Thanksgiving. A guest minister went to preach at a church one Sunday and discovered that the front row was always occupied by people from a local home for the blind. He was touched by this and thought he would ask these blind people to choose a hymn for the service. He sent someone to ask them expecting that these suffering people would select a sad or comforting hymn. Instead, they requested a great hymn of thanksgiving. ***"When all thy mercies, O my God, my rising soul surveys, transported with the view***

I'm lost in wonder, love and praise.” They were blind and because of that they had missed out on much of life, but they still wanted to sing their praise to Almighty God. And how much more we hugely blessed people can sing with thanksgiving this day. “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 passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

