

Blueprint for Contentment
Philippians 4:4-13

Georgetown Presbyterian Church
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Nowadays it's quite the thing for churches to have big fancy signs with interchangeable wording so they can proclaim some encouraging message to passersby. Every once in a while you come across signs in which it is obvious that the church means well, but the wording is a bit off. There's the one that said, "Fellowship dinner Sunday night: Prayer and medication to follow." Or the one that said: "Sunday Morning Sermon: Jesus Walks on Water. Sunday Evening Sermon: Searching for Jesus." Or how about this one: "Prayer and Fasting Conference Sunday. Dinner Served at 6:00." But maybe the one that is most apropos to the current mood in our world today is the sign that said, "Don't Let Worry Kill You; Let the Church Help."

The truth is, there is a lot of worrying going on these days. What took years for the stock market to gain, has taken only days to lose. Our economy is in a crisis unlike any in recent memory. There is widespread panic among investors. The credit market is in shambles. Homeowners are being foreclosed at a frightening rate. People are wondering whether or not they'll be able to afford to stay retired, and many are discovering that they're going to have to postpone their retirement.

Anxiety levels are rising as fast as the stock market is falling.

Yet as people of faith, we have to believe that there is something better than wringing our hands with worry. As people of faith, we have to believe that there is a better response than panic and fear and anxiety. As people of faith, we have to believe that there is a greater purpose and meaning to life than to be consumed by the economic instability that has so shaken our world.

That's why the words of Paul are so timely for us this morning. You see, Paul was one who had every reason to worry. When he wrote his letter to the Philippians, he was in jail, chained to a Roman guard. Death could come to Paul at any moment, as far as he knew. He had every reason to be depressed, yet he wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice!"¹ Paul had been stripped of his freedom, and he had nothing that he could call his own, yet still he was able to say, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances."² Paul had every reason to complain about the cards he had been dealt, yet nonetheless he was able to affirm, "in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."³ Paul had every reason to worry about his situation, about the outlook for the future, yet his imperative to the Philippians--and his imperative to us today--is, "Do not be anxious about anything..."⁴

There is a part of me that wants to question the validity of what Paul is saying. There is a part of me that wants to cry out that Paul is being too simplistic, too Pollyannish in his outlook. There is a part of me that wants to say, "Are you crazy, Paul? How can we not worry when the economy is crumbling beneath our feet? How can we rejoice when everything on which we have banked the future is falling apart before our very eyes?" On a certain level, it doesn't seem very helpful for Paul to say to us, "Don't worry. Be happy."

But that's not what Paul is telling us to do. Paul is telling us to rejoice, and that's not the same as being happy. Joy and happiness are not the same thing. Not many people are happy about what is going on in our world today (unless you're one of the executives of the companies that have been bailed out by the government). Not many of us are happy about what is going on, but every one of us can still have joy. Because you see, while happiness is dependent on our circumstances or external factors such as money and position and status, joy is something altogether different. Joy is a gift from God. Joy is the assurance that our life does not depend on the economy or the stock market, but on God. Joy is the confidence that God is the One in whom we live and move and have our being. Joy is the realization that in any and every circumstance the Lord is near, and the Lord is greater than the sum of the troubles that beset us. Joy is the knowledge that God is love, and God's love surrounds you and me every moment of every day. Joy comes to us when we are able to affirm with Paul that the Lord is near.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells of the time when she was vacationing at the beach. She came across a sea turtle that had become disoriented in the night and was stranded on a sand dune, being baked by the hot sun. Taylor found a park ranger, who came back with his jeep, turned the turtle on its back, and wrapped tire chains around the turtle's front legs, and hooked the other end of the chain to the jeep. Then the ranger took off, yanking the turtle forward so that her mouth filled with sand and her neck bent severely backward. The ranger hauled the turtle over the dunes and down onto the beach. At the ocean's edge, he unhooked the turtle and turned her back onto her belly. As the waves lapped the fresh salt water onto her, she revived and began to move her legs. Finally the turtle summed up enough strength to swim away into the ocean.⁵

While the turtle was being dragged across the dunes, bouncing along behind the jeep, there must've been a moment when it felt like its life was at an end. But in reality, it was being saved.

My friends, sometimes it feels like we're being drug through the sand head first, bouncing along out of control. And we have to wonder whether we're being saved or being killed by the hands that have turned our lives upside down. But Paul reminds us that in the hands of God we are being saved. You see, ours is a faith that declares that God is with us in the midst of our struggles, that God is always at hand. And so joy can happen even in the midst of a crisis.

It is not unreasonable for the person of faith to replace anxiety with rejoicing; in fact it is the more appropriate response. It is the more appropriate response, because to rejoice is to turn to God as our source of life and contentment rather than turn to material things, or power, or status. Our rejoicing is not in our circumstances, but *in the Lord*. The antidote for our anxiety is to turn to God for meaning and comfort and hope. The right response to our troubles is to open our hearts to God, to see God as our refuge and strength, to give thanks that God is greater than the troubles that trigger our anxiety. Instead of worrying about the things of the world, says Paul, set your minds on the things of God: whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about these things.⁶ The right response to our troubles is to believe that the goodness and mercy and beauty and majesty and power of God are greater than the things which cause us to worry.

There is a part of me that is actually excited about the crisis that our nation is facing. Don't get me wrong--I don't wish trouble on anybody. I don't for a moment want to watch people's livelihoods disappear. I don't for a moment want to watch foreclosures continue unabated. But what excites me is that out of this

crisis every one of us has an opportunity to grow in our faith. This crisis gives you and me the chance to draw nearer to God. The falling apart of our financial and material foundations provides us with an opportunity to cling to God as the foundation on which to build our lives.

You see, one of the reasons our worry is so great is because our faith has been misplaced, and it dismays us to see those things on which we have planned our futures fall by the wayside. And so during this crisis you and I have a new opportunity presented to us--an opportunity to build our lives on the foundation of faith in God. You and I have the opportunity to trust that God will see us through all our days. You and I have the opportunity to believe that, even though we don't know what the future will look like, we do know the One in whose hands the future lies; therefore, we can find peace in the midst of the storm.

There is contentment in the knowledge that, whatever the circumstances, God is near, and God will provide us with what we need in order to make it through. God is near, but it's up to you and me to turn to God and reach out to him in his nearness. God is near, but God won't intrude uninvited into our lives; we have to open the door and let him in.

As most of you know, it is not uncommon for Hispanic families to name their sons after Jesus. Of course, it's pronounced Jesús. There was a church whose janitor was named Jesús. One evening after a long meeting the pastor noticed that his office door had been left open. When he got to the door, he saw that the janitor had painted the door frame and left the door open so that the fresh paint would not be disturbed. On the wall next to the door, the janitor had written a note: "Dear sir, please do not close the door." It was signed, "Jesús".

In that note, don't you think there is a message to us, as well--not from Jesús, but from Jesus: Please do not close the door. Don't let the anxieties of the current crisis blind us to the very One in whom our only true hope lies. Don't close the door on Jesus.

Contentment is possible, even in the midst of this economic crisis. But your contentment will not come with the recovery of the stock market, or the refinancing of your mortgage, or even the election of the next president. Your contentment will come when you know that it is Christ who gives you strength.

Be anxious about nothing. Rejoice in the Lord. In everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Remember that God is near. Set your minds on the things of God. And let God's peace fill you with strength.

And therein lies the way to true contentment. Amen.

¹ Philippians 4:4

² Philippians 4:11

³ Philippians 4:6

⁴ Philippians 4:6

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Other Side--Times of Terror, Times of Wonder*.

⁶ Philippians 4:8