

Sunday, October 30, 2022

The Peace of God

(Fare well Message)
(Philippians 4:1, 4-9)

Scripture:

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!
⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, brothers and sisters, 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 such things. ⁹Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.
(Philippians 4:1, 4-9)

Message:

I first became aware of “time” in church.

My grandfather would promise me a nickel if I could sit still for five minutes. I could have made some serious money - if I could have just sat still. Growing up, preachers seemed to preach forever - and then moved on to their second point.

I learned “time” is relative: time drags in school and flies by during summer vacation.

My first day at my first (real) job - scrubbing floors and walls, cleaning lockers and removing gum from underneath desks at my high school - was forever! I started at seven in the morning - five hours later, it was still only eight o'clock; it felt like I was reliving that Old Testament miracle where the sun stood still every day!

A full day seems short, though long in retrospect; an empty day seems long, though short in retrospect. A minute waiting for bad news is an eternity, a day on vacation flashes quickly by.

I've learned about time in the church's Council room:

First, there was Parkinson's Law of Triviality - "*The time spent on any item on the agenda is normally in inverse proportion to its benefits*" - so we talk at length about spending \$100 and approve a \$10,000 expenditure in minutes...

And then there was Parkinson's Law of Fullness - "*Work expands to fill the time available for its completion*" - whether we had two items or twenty to consider it would always last until at least 9 p.m.

Some have told me shorter messages are better than longer ones - I've usually ignored that advice ☺. Some changes are hard; and while some changes are necessary, some aren't.

Marcel Proust, in Remembrance of Things Past, writes, "*In theory, one is aware that the earth revolves, but in practice, one does not perceive it; the ground upon which one treads seems not to move, and one can live undisturbed. So it is with time in one's life.*"

The sand in the hourglass passes quickly. People talk about killing time; but the reality is, time is slowly killing us. We are all thirty-seven months older than when we first met.

The time has passed quickly: I've added two grandsons to my family and later today we'll celebrate my dad's 97th birthday. We survived a pandemic together, saw the political party in power change, and watched Michigan beat Ohio State.

Scripture says: "*A day or a thousand years is alike to God; but we must number the minutes and gain a heart of wisdom.*" (**Psalm 90:4,12**) Scripture never attempts to define "time" and an appropriate definition eludes me as well, but I keep learning about it, and much of that learning has occurred in church.

I've learned time doesn't heal all wounds; only Jesus' grace and forgiveness can. We tend to take our pain deeper and hold on tight to our hurt.

I've learned time is precious; it is not something we should ever take for granted; it is designed to be experienced and cherished in the present and always in his presence.

While the past three years we have ministered together have gone way too fast (for me at least), it has been a privilege to be a part of this faith community.

Our journey together reminds me of something Franklin D. Roosevelt said to the nation in 1940. It applies not only to this transition time but to how we continue to engage God's mission, build his kingdom, and prepare for our Lord's return. He said, "*Never have we had so little time to do so much.*"

As we journeyed together, I'm grateful for new and gracious friends; these months together have been a gift and a blessing. Thank you. (It has never been lost on me that most of you had little say about my coming and staying, and yet, you still welcomed me into this pulpit, into your homes, and into your lives.)

As you know, this is my last message as your STM, and the time has come to say fare well. As a Specialize Transition Minister, we all knew this day is coming, but it is still one of the hardest parts of this work (for me). But God has an amazing adventure ahead for Covenant Church as he leads you together into his preferred future. He has been preparing a new pastor for you and preparing you for your new pastor.

So, this morning I want to simply echo a few of Paul's words to the Church in Philippi.

PEACE: ITS CHARACTER

In Philippians 4:7, Paul promises the Peace of God to those who rejoice and pray.

- This is not a **military** peace, i.e., he is not referring to the absence of war. It's actually possible to be engaged in a military conflict and still experience his peace.
- This is not a **relational** peace where we all get along with everyone else - breaking down the walls of hostility between Jew and Gentile, male and female, or slave and free (cf. **Ephesians 2**).
- This is not a **doctrinal**, theological "peace" that assures us of eternal life (i.e., of going to heaven). Every believer has that peace - that is peace with God where the chasm between us created by our sin has been bridged by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Fact is, Christians who have been saved by God's grace - who have peace with God - often still seem anxious, troubled, and lacking the peace of God.

This may all sound like we're getting pretty technical – peace with God vs. peace of God. When Paul writes about peace with God in **Romans 5:12**, he is referring to being saved. Here in **Philippians 4**, when Paul is writing about the peace of God, he is referring to living joyfully. That is an important distinction.

This peace of God is an inner gift (experience) of God's grace.

This "peace" is an infusion of divine **strength**. Paul writes "*this keeps our hearts and our minds focused on him.*"

This “peace” has an **inclusive** quality; it embraces our whole being and keeps our **heart** (feelings), **mind** (thinking), will and strength (our soul) focused on Jesus.

This “peace” is the blessing of being in an **intimate, inseparable** relationship with Jesus nurtured through worship, Scripture, and prayer.

Finally, this peace defies **description**; Paul says this peace “*passes all understanding.*” That is, this peace is not easily defined, analyzed, explained, or put in a neat box. This peace can only be embraced and enjoyed by keeping the “**Lord near.**” (4:5)

PEACE: ITS CONTENT (Let’s look at this peace through three windows.)

Looking through the first window, we see this peace as calm in the midst of turmoil.

Paul writes this while confined in a Roman **prison**; no doubt challenged with discouragement and wondering about the future of the Church, what will happen. There is little light in a Roman prison cell, yet Paul writes confidently of being kept in the peace of God.

General Robbie Risner, a POW held by the North Vietnamese in solitary confinement for seven and a half years, writes, “*It was the essence of despair. If you could have squeezed feeling out of the word despair, it would have come out gray, dull, and lead colored.*” Through a pencil-sized hole in the brick and mortar, he was able to see one blade of grass - it was the only color in his world. He said, “*It was blood transfusion for my soul.*” (That is this peace!)

A group of artists were invited to enter a contest to paint the best picture of peace. **(PIC)** One artist went to the mountains - probably where I’d go - and painted a picture of a mountain lake without a ripple perfectly reflecting the clouds, mountains, and trees. A great illustration of majestic tranquility!

(PIC) Another went to the New England coast and painted huge waves pounding relentlessly against the rocks surrounding a lighthouse with the keeper of the light standing calmly in the midst of the waves. It is peace in the midst of turmoil.

The second painting won.

Whatever trouble you have been through or **storms** you are currently encountering, you can be embraced and protected by the **Peace of God**. In fact, it is precisely for these difficult circumstances that the Lord asked Paul - while he was in prison - to write these things down.

It is one of the reasons this peace surpasses all understanding. Who can understand how a Christian can be at peace in the midst of life’s storms and tragedies? But they can and often are.

The view through this window is my prayer for you - that you may know God's peace in the midst of all the **storms** and **challenges** you may face in your lives.

Looking through a second window - we see this peace as the assurance of God's presence in our world.

This peace of Jesus, Immanuel, **God with us**, wraps its arms around us minute by minute, day by day - not from a distance - but from within and around us.

This is the peace of God holding us in the **palm** of his **hand**. Sometimes the developments, direction, and disasters of this world seem so overwhelming we wonder if God is still around, if he still cares, if he is still on the throne, if he still remembers us. God wants to reassure us he is always with us.

Maxwell Anderson said, *"Sometimes it seems God's gone away, forgot the promises he made, and we're lost and alone out there in the stars!"* (We've all been there!)

Moses' words are still true: - *"The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms."* (**Deuteronomy 33:27**)

You've heard the story of the footprints in the sand: a person walking through life periodically assuring himself by the sight of the two sets of footprints behind him - his and Christ's. After a particularly devastating experience, he turns around and is shocked to see only one set of footprints. He cries out to God, *"Lord, where are you when I need you the most?!"* From closer than he could imagine, a voice responds: *"My child, there is one set of footprints - they're mine. I am carrying you."*

The view through this window is my prayer for you - that the peace of God's presence will always be with you as you step into God's preferred future - even and especially when life doesn't seem to make **sense**.

And then we come to the third window. Looking through this window we catch a glimpse of the future.

Paul writes, *"The peace of God will guard your hearts and minds."* Paul places this in a future tense as a promise, a source of hope, a guarantee.

To think of this as a future promise does not deny that you may have experienced it in the past; truth is, it is impossible to move on without it. Hopefully, it is also a peace you are experiencing today; truth is, it is hard to face each day without it.

But Paul wants us to know this is a **forever** promise, that it will be there to help us face each and every new day! Scripture says the God who is with us is the God who controls the events of his-story - even the events that shatter our

dreams, challenge our common sense, and leave us wondering where God might be and what he might be up to.

The **future** belongs to God. **We** belong to God. And Covenant, this promise is for you. This promise is solid! It is 100% **guaranteed!**

The view through this window is my prayer for you - that even if the present, let alone the future, seems uncertain, that you will step boldly and **confidently** into the **future** in the days, weeks, months, and years ahead - knowing God is already there ahead of you.

Even gazing intently in all three of these windows doesn't begin to fully explain this "Peace of God" or provide fully understandable reasons for why what is happening happens...

But in Christ, that's okay because he provides *a peace that **passes all understanding.*** It is okay because nothing that happens in our future can challenge our eternal **security**, his divine **companionship**, or the confident **hope** we have in Jesus. Nothing!

When you know that in your heart and soul, you have the *Peace of God.*

PEACE: ITS CONTEXT

Let me try once more time to describe the indescribable by highlighting the **context.** The context says a lot about dealing with the presence of God. These items are not pre-requisites or conditions; that is, Paul isn't saying, "*If you do these things then you might qualify for the peace of God.*" No, Paul is saying when you embrace the gift of God's peace, this is what your life will look and be like.

Listen to this list of encouragements and blessings that come with his peace:

4:1 - People who have the peace of God "***stand firm in the Lord!***" I.e., they trust him; obey his Word; they go where he leads.

4:2 - People who have the peace of God are people who "***agree in the Lord.***" Apparently in Philippi, people such as Euodia and Syntyche, didn't always see eye to eye (I know that is hard to believe ☺). Paul reminds them they can't enjoy the peace of God if they're holding onto resentment and are unwilling to forgive those who've offended them and move on.

4:4 - People who have peace with God know how to **rejoice:** "*Again I say rejoice!*" In life, there are always complainers: Adam and Eve focused on what they thought they didn't have; the Israelites ignored God's miracles, whined about the lack of water, and moaned that Egypt was better. Complainers rarely have inner peace - they don't trust God, forgive others, or find joy.

4:5 - People who have the peace of God are **forbearing, patient**, gracious, and **gentle**.

4:6 - People who have the peace of God have **minimal anxiety** because they've surrendered their lives and their worries and their future to the Lord, and they are convinced they are in good hands.

Paul says people who have the peace of God live with the expectation that Christ will **return**; they are convinced the best is yet to come. They are people who **pray** - so they can stay near to God (cf. 4:6). They are people who practice **gratitude** - so they worship with thanksgiving (cf. 4:6). They are people who focus on things that are **true**, right, just, **pure**, lovely, and **praiseworthy** (cf. 4:8); they are people who long for God's preferred future, for his eternal shalom.

The key to this indescribable peace is Jesus: it's not available apart him; it is inescapable with him. We know the Father by knowing the Son.

Whether you understand or you don't, whether you're struggling or cruising along, whether the water is smooth or the waves are high, remember this: Jesus knows you; Jesus loves you. He longs to be your Savior and Lord. That issue needs to be settled in your life. If it's not, settle it now - before you leave here this morning! Then you'll not only have *peace with God*, you will have the *peace of God*. It will make all the difference.

I'm **not** saying, "**Goodbye**" this morning. I'm saying, "**Fare well!**" I will miss you; and I'll continue to treasure our time together. I commend you on your willingness to engage the Scriptures, to pray, and to come together to discern God's will and follow God's leading.

I'd like to thank those I've had the privilege of working the most closely with: the great **staff** you have here (Henry, Sarah, Amy, Tanya, Bob, Lisa and Jeff, Heidi and Melanie, and Dale as well as the privilege of working with and Laura, Marcia, Rick, Carol, and Evan); the **transition team** (Beth, Jamie, Jeff, Mike, Henry, and Mark); the **Council**; the **Admin Elders**, and the **Exec Team** (Aaron, Blake, and Jenni), the **worship planning** team (Sarah, Clay, Dori, Gwen, and Sara); the **personnel** team (Matt, Justin, Michelle, Laurie, Tanya); Matt, Mary Ellen and the **Search Team**; and the **Re-imagining Worship** teams. A special thank you to Mike and Blake who served as Council chairs over the last three years - and in the midst of a pandemic.

Thank you for your cards and words of encouragement - but mostly for your prayers. Thank you for welcoming me into your homes, your bedsides, and into your lives.

I'm excited - as you should also be - about what God has in store for Covenant's future. It is his Church, and you are his people. Thank you for

blessing Marilyn and me – I will long cherish your celebration a few weeks ago of my years in ministry. May you be a blessing to your next pastor as he blesses you.

We will cherish our memories, remember you in our prayers, and, as followers of Jesus, we will see you again. In the meantime, may you fare well...

And...may the God of Peace and the Peace of God be with you always!

Prayer:

Father, thank you for Jesus Christ. Thank you for his willingness to leave your side, take on the form of a human being like us, suffer and die for our sins, and then to be raised up. Thank you for the peace with God this brings to our life when we trust in him for our salvation.

Father, we also ask that we may know your peace in the midst of the storms and challenges throughout our life. We ask for a growing sense of your presence that we may see you clearly even when life doesn't make much sense. We ask that you give us the strength to step boldly and confidently into the future you have prepared for us.

Father, give us the strength to stand firm in you, to agree with one another in the Lord, to be patient and kind to others, and to know joy in our living as we long for and prepare for your return.

In Jesus' name – our life, light, and love – we pray. Amen.