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Isaiah 25:6-9, Philippians 4:1-9
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Have no anxiety about anything. Have no anxiety about anything. Peculiar words to come to us across the ages. Someone earlier this morning complimented me for choosing such an appropriate text for this week. This was prescribed months ago actually.

Paul across the ages says have no anxiety about anything. It seems impossible, doesn't it? The most frequent commandment of the Bible is fear not. Fear not, have no anxiety. I have to confess to you, I don't have a great understanding of anxiety. I have a psychiatrist friend. I've asked him, what is anxiety? He's described it to me. It's a biological phenomenon with people... There are some people, the world can be crashing around them and they're just calm and laid back and have a sunny disposition and see the silver lining. Then there are other people, there's the slightest tremor of difficulty and they become very anxious and fearful and they brood over things. I'm not sure why we have these quirks or don't have these quirks. I could say that I read this in a book somewhere preparing for this sermon, that anxiety is a lack of faith. But I don't want to say that because then if you're an anxious person that gives an unfair advantage to the guy down the pew with a low metabolism.

So have no anxiety. What would this mean? We might ask to whom was Paul speaking at first when he said have no anxiety. Paul was not speaking to isolated individuals. Paul was speaking to the Church. Paul was writing a letter to the gathered Christians, the Church, in Philippi. He had visited them years before. He had rolled into town. He had preached the Gospel. Had gotten thrown in jail for his trouble. And then at midnight, the jailer came and found Paul not being anxious at all. He was singing hymns of praise to God. They thought he was crazy. There was a church there in Philippi, and Paul wrote to them, to the Church. Have no anxiety about anything.

I've been thinking about an anxious church. The church in Philippi had good cause to be anxious. The City of Philippi at the time that Paul wrote this letter we now know was suffering economic distress. They were along the Via Egnatia. Their economic depended on trade up and down the Via Egnatia from the harbor down at Neopolis. During these days, the economy was bottoming out. Things were going very badly for the tradesman who lived in Philippi. But not only was the economy bad, it was worse than that. The emperor in Rome was named Nero. And Nero, we laugh about Nero fiddling while Rome burned. I don't think that's half as bad as the fact that Nero had a party one night and he wanted his garden to be lit up in the dark, so he went and rounded up some Christians and had them tied, bound and tarred and lit on fire. So the church in Philippi not only suffered economic distress, but also they had to fear for their very lives. They were a church that had good reason to be anxious.

Our church today may have good reason to be anxious. There's an article in *The Charlotte Observer* this morning about churches and finances during tough economic times. So the reporter that wrote the article called me and interviewed me and sort of said, "Are you cutting back? Are you nervous? Is your church falling apart? What's going on financially within your

church?” And I’ve tried to think about this, and I wish I could tell you, “Oh, I’ve spoken directly with God and I’m utterly calm about it.” I’ve been a little bit anxious. I’ve been awake some nights thinking. What are we going to do? What will the budget look like in 2009? There’s not a lot of fat to cut out of it, and I think of the responsibility that we have to so many ministry partners who are facing an even harder time than we are now who need us now more than ever, but then we know we have people suffering financial duress. An anxious church.

To an anxious church, Paul said, “Have no anxiety about anything.” I’m not sure how that works, but maybe it’s like this. I sent out a letter. I started sending letters to people in our church, and I’ll eventually send one to everybody. We got 100-something done before I left a week ago, and we’ll do more. And I was sending letters to members who give money to the church saying we know this is a hard time. Let us know if we can be of help to you in some way. Give us any counsel if you have any counsel. We know it’s going to be a tough year. If you have the ability to continue to give or even to give a little more, it would really matter now. I’ve been so moved by the responses that I’ve received. Nobody’s written back and said slash the budget, James, slash the budget. Instead, the people writing back to me, one couple said our worth has plummeted over the last couple of weeks, but my wife and I made a commitment the year we got married and that was 58 years ago, that every year of our married life we would give more to the church than we gave the year before. We know it’s really needed now. It will be hard for us next year, but we want to do that. Another person wrote me and said it’s a tough time, but my business isn’t so affected by this. I want to give more to defray those who are not going to be able to. Do you know what that’s called? That’s not called an institution, a budget and people thinking about money. What I call that is love. The church is love. This is a place of love. When Paul wrote to the Christians at Philippi, he was writing to people who loved one another. We love God. We love each other.

If you work for a company and you’re suffering economic distress or maybe you lose your job, there are people in this church, some you know, some you don’t know, but they love you because we are a family. It’s a funny thing about love. Love has this great ability to be the perfect antidote to anxiety. Love. Paul wrote to the church.

From where did Paul write this letter? Paul was in Rome. A week ago today, I was in Rome. I had a meeting in Rome. This is just so out of the box for me. I usually have meetings in, you know, Statesville or somewhere like that. I had a meeting in Rome. And I had a couple of afternoons to tool around a little. I had spoken to an archeologist. He said I want you to nose out this church that you’ve probably seen before. It’s been abandoned for years. But a couple of years ago, an amazing thing happened to this church and I want you to go see it. So I found it. It took forever. And when I found it, it’s a church called St. Paul’s, and it is named for the street that it’s on. And it’s a church that for years people thought marked the place where Paul lived and worked when he was under house arrest in Rome. But then nobody really believed that anymore, so the church was abandoned and neglected for centuries. Well they reopened it now because two years ago they guy that lives in the house next year decided to add a basement to his house. So he starts digging and he finds something that he thinks he shouldn’t mess with. He calls the archeological authorities. They come in and they find that in this guy’s basement next to this house is an old Roman house from the First Century. Next to the house is a granary. And I went and saw this. I went down where these excavations were. And cut down into the stone

were these circular caverns where in ancient Rome they stored grain. It turns tanners always worked next to this granary they know now, because they would put the grain into the leather that they were stretching out and curing and then sometimes they would carry the leather, and other times they just would use the leather. And the conclusion that they've drawn is that this probably is exactly the place where Paul lived and worked under house arrest when he was in Rome. He always did that chained to a Roman soldier. And I looked at this stone area and I thought; Paul was here. Paul was here when he wrote that letter to the Philippians and said, "Have no anxiety about anything in Rome."

Last Sunday morning, some of you have been so kind as to say you missed me. I missed myself, but I had a great Sunday morning. I got to be in a worship service that was led by the Pope. People have different views of the Pope. Some people think, oh the Pope is an arbitrary authority figure and we want to be shed of the Pope, and other people think, I personally think that having a Pope would be a great thing for Methodism, especially if I could be the Pope. We'd get a few things straightened out. The Pope. It was lovely to be in this service because we're there and all this pomp and circumstance, and at first all these Cardinals come in with this hats. Could you see George and Bill with these hats coming in? It's cool. I wish I had a hat like that. And then the Pope came into the room. This was amazing. The Pope entered the room in the back and there was a collective gasp from a couple of thousand people. And then as he came up the aisle he passed a group of Africans and he turn to them and when he did they let out this cry of excitement. Then he came forward and there was spontaneous applause, and we all had our cameras.

The Pope. Partly he's got kind of a rock star image. He's probably the most famous living person on the planet. But I think it's more than that. The word Pope comes from a word that means "Papa." The Pope is the Papa. He's the Godfather of a really big family. What the Pope is, you see, is he is the symbolic embodiment of the unity of the church. You can go all over the world and Roman Catholics have a little picture of the Pope in their den or their bedroom. The Pope's the unity of the church. I thought about this when I was in Rome. The church is one. We're accustomed of thinking of the division of the church. We've got Methodists and we have the Orthodox or the Presbyterians, and then there are Baptists. The Baptists have made a work of art out of dividing. I shouldn't have said that. So we think about the division of the church, and churches divide within themselves. We love the division of the church. It just seems to suit our combative mentality for some reason. But be very clear, however divided the church may be down here on Earth, in God's heart the church is one. When God looks down, God does not think, Oh I'm pleased that there are 742 various church bodies that can't get along with one another. No, in God's heart, the church is one. God is the Papa of the one church family. Unity is important. Isn't division the source of so much of our anxiety? If your company splits, doesn't that create a lot of anxiety? If your family is divided, doesn't that create a lot of anxiety? If within your own soul there is division...Do you ever notice that going on? You look in the mirror and it's like there are two or three people ratting around in there that don't get along with each other. Some of you don't know what I'm talking about. I can tell. If your soul is divided it's a source of anxiety, is it not? What we need is a oneness. What we need is a unity. What we need is to be at peace. And be very clear, on God's side, the church is one. It is one family.

When we have our baptism, we say the church is of God; the one church is of God and will be preserved to the end of time. The church is, as we sing in a hymn, our shelter from the stormy blast. As I thought about the economy this week and the woman calling to interview me about the church during troubled times, I didn't tell her what I should have told her. I should have said, on Sunday morning I'm going to preach in a beautiful room, and that room was constructed in...Do you know what year? 1929. The stock market had plummeted. Fortunes were lost. But our ancestors in the faith said, now we need this shelter from the stormy blast, now we need the church.

Paul. When Paul was in prison in Philippi, those Christians to whom he wrote, what was noteworthy is that he was in that prison, but at midnight he and Silas were singing hymns of praise to God. I believe that he did no less in Rome, chained to a Roman soldier in that spot where I stood one week ago, Rome burning around him, the economy in disaster, he's at the very end of his life, but he sings praises to God and this what the church does in the hardest of times, we lift our voices and praise to a God who is our father, who is our father.

Who is Paul talking about in this letter anyway? He's saying, Have no anxiety. That's a lot of pressure, isn't it? Have no anxiety. That makes me more anxious if I'm anxious already to have this demand laid upon me to not be anxious. I was anxious before, now I'm anxious about being anxious. Oh, never mind. Have no anxiety.

Paul's letter isn't about us. Paul's letter is about God. God is the ultimate non-anxious presence. I read an autobiography of General Colin Powell a few years ago. In it, he said the primary responsibility of the leader, above all else, is that when everybody else is fearful, when everybody else is anxious, when everybody else is just worried about what's going on, what the leader does is the leader stays calm. The leader is the still point with the storm going around him. God is not anxious. And we need not be anxious because at the end of the day it's not about us, it is about God.

When I was in Rome, I sat next to a Bishop of the Methodist Church from Germany named Walter Klaiber, and in conversation he said something that was so good, I said hold on Walter, I've got to write that down, that's going to be in my sermon Sunday. Walter said, "Those who are not able to help themselves are shareholders of the Kingdom of God." Shareholders. Some of us in the room, myself included, are shareholders in Wachovia. But Walter was talking about shareholders in the Kingdom of God. And who are the shareholders in the Kingdom of God? Not those who are spiritually astute, not those who have mastered the Bible, not those who never worry about anything, not those who are morally squeaky clean. No, Paul says, and Walter Klaiber was right, that the shareholders of the Kingdom of God are those who are not able to help themselves. We live our lives like this. During anxious times, we're going to hang on to what we've got. We're going to wring our hands in fear and anxiety. And as long as we do so, we're trying to handle it on our own, and what God wants us to do is not to hang on and not to wring our hands, but instead to open our hands. Oh precious Lord, take my hand, I'm not able to help myself, but you, Lord, the non-anxious presence, you are able. You are able. It is all about God.

Paul says have no anxiety about anything. The reason that he gives is very simple. The Lord is at hand. Not the Lord is way off and is going to roll into town some day, but no, the Lord is at hand, therefore, have no anxiety about anything. The Lord is at Hand. Paul says... This is so interesting. After he says the Lord is at hand, he says with gratitude, make your request known to God. What we tend to think is I'll make my request known to God, then if God does what I want, then I'll have some gratitude. But Paul says, with gratitude, make your request known to God.

Start with the gratitude, brothers and sisters, during the worst times. On your darkest day, there is something for which to be grateful. We begin with gratitude. With gratitude, make your request known to God. Have no anxiety. Gratitude is a marvelous, is it not, antidote to anxiety? If you're grateful, you can't be too anxious.

And Paul also says have no anxiety for this other thing. He says so elegantly in the passage that Sandra read, Paul says if there is any excellence, if there is anything that is true, if there is anything that is pure, if there is anything that is worthy of praise... I don't think here he just means positive thinking; if you think positively this will be good for you in some way. I suspect that Paul is chained to a Roman soldier, Rome is burning around him, he is in ill health, he is in the latter days of his life. I think when Paul says if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, he's not thinking about the great things that he's got in his life that he's going to continue to enjoy. I think he already has his eyes trained on his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, with whom he is about to spend eternity. He looks into the very heart of God and he says if there is any excellence, are you kidding? Of course there's excellence. There's the excellence of our Lord. Is there anything that is true in a world of lies?

Yes, our Lord is always true. If there's anything worthy of praise, oh yes, everything can crumble around us, but God is worthy of praise. That's why in the dark, in the prison during the worst of times, Paul sang hymns of praise to God, so we can have no anxiety about anything because there is something excellent. Because the Lord is at hand. Because there is something excellent. Because the Lord is at hand. Because there is much to be grateful for. Because there is love. And when we realize these things, we begin to look around for that anxiety that dogged us just five minutes before, and we think, where did it go? Where did it go?