

“A TRINITY: NOTHING, ALWAYS, EVERYTHING”

Philippians 4:4-7

preached December 14, 2008

Many years ago Psychologist Thomas Holmes developed a stress scale so we could see the true level of our stress. A writer, Bridget Kuhns, applied the scale to the Virgin Mary. Pregnancy - 40 points. If the pregnancy is unexpected, another 20. Then remember that Mary stayed with cousin Elizabeth for 3 months. A change in living conditions gets 25 more points. A marriage: 50 points. A change in financial status: 38 points. An increase in arguments - can you imagine newly weds going on the sort of trip they made without any arguments. No way. That's another 35. Birth adds 39, and with it are 16 for a change in sleeping habits and 15 for a change in eating habits. Not to mention all those uninvited guests: shepherds and angels coming and going. Magi from the East. Dr. Holmes determined that people get sick at 200 points. Mary ends up with 424. But wait a minute, Mary was a teenager and there is another scale for that. Then the total goes up to at least 468 points. From the first Christmas to this very day, stress and Christmas just seem to go together.

A lot of people feel stressed at this time of year. Pastors, organists, and choir directors certainly are. Teachers are trying to keep kids in line. Parents are looking for all the right gifts, no matter what lengths they have to go to. Add in baking and cooking and a few extra visits or visitors and things quickly get out of hand. Not only is there the stress of everything that we expect to get done, there is also the speed with which the day is coming. Some of us haven't even thrown away the leftover cranberry sauce from Thanksgiving yet. Some still have rotted Halloween pumpkins on their front porch. Christmas may be a wonderful time of year, but it's also a wonderful time for an annual holiday anxiety attack.

To those who feel unbelievably overwhelmed, Paul's words should restore some sense of sanity, something to shake down our fears and shape up our spirits. For he offers advice on how we are to live in these days. Paul recommends a lifestyle trinity of never, always, and everything. Normally when we talk about the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but this is a different trinity. From Philippians 4:6 *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God”* Paul says that nothing should make us anxious, that we should always be praying, and that always, for everything, in everything, we are to be thankful.

First, *“Be anxious in nothing.”* Frances Willard, the great temperance leader, once proclaimed that *“Anxiety is atheistical!”* To be constantly anxious suggests that somehow we don't quite trust. A teenager comes flying into the house 30 seconds before or after curfew and finds a parent *“Awaiting up.”* The teen's first words: *“What's the matter, don't you trust me?”* We get anxious when we see factors and situations that we don't trust. Whether it's our teenager's

social life, the health of a spouse, or our own career, when we feel we no longer have control over the situations we are facing, we get anxious. And no matter how many extra precautions we take or how well we think we have fortified our personal defenses against sneak attacks, deep down we know that the movements of the universe are out of our control. Kids grow up; illnesses attack without warning; companies Adown-size,” workers get laid off, and unions go on strike. As the Presbyterians say, “Predestination happens.”

But if we let our anxieties, those uncontrollable factors in our lives, rule us, we become incapable being agents of God’s grace in this world. How can we Arejoice” and witness the Ajoy of the Lord” to others if we are anxiety-ridden ourselves? If we can’t trust God, then who can we trust? Paul tells us to be anxious in nothing because God is still with us. God is among us. That same God who came to us in the person of Jesus, that same God who lived and died to take away our sins, that same God continues to walk with us, to talk with us, to call us to new hope, to new life, to new peace.

So, be anxious in nothing. And always maintain an attitude of prayer. I always liked that phrase: “Be of an attitude of prayer.” Prayer is communication with God, and we should always be in communication with God. Often we pray differently than we talk or live because we are anxious about how God would react if He knew how we really are. Well, God already knows how we really are, and still He loves us. I don’t understand it, but God does. It’s called grace, being loved even when we are unlovable and disobedient. And since God accepts us, since God wants the best for us, it is wise for us to always be ready to walk and talk with God just as much as God wants to walk and talk with us.

A classic Dennis the Menace cartoon depicts an irate Margaret haughtily proclaiming to Dennis as he walks by, “I’m not speaking to you, Dennis Mitchell!” The next frame shows Dennis, his eyes rolled heavenward, breathing a heartfelt, “Thank you, Lord.” That is the attitude we need to develop. When confronted with an unexpected grace or an unforeseen groan, is our first response to turn to God in prayer? The very reason we can be anxious in nothing is because God is always powerfully present with us in prayer. Always. Paul recognizes that a good percentage of our “prayers” are more correctly seen as “supplications and requests.” Sometimes, when we are feeling spiritually strong and centered, our souls do turn toward God in true prayer, seeking nothing more than a feeling of the holy presence, God being with us, touching our heart and soul, bringing us into a whole new level of existence.

Other times, we approach God on our bellies. When our spirits are parched and dragging, we come to God as supplicants, admitting our own inadequacies and recognizing God as the source of all wholeness. And sometimes we seek God in prayer with specific requests. Some of those requests may seem childish and simple to God, like the two little boys, in early

September, who hopefully got dressed with all their mittens, coats and hats, and plopped their sled on the top of a hill. They then looked to heaven in faith, and declared, “We’re ready for the snow now, Lord. Let ‘er rip!” But other times our requests are deeply serious: “Heal her,” “Help him,” “Hear me.” God wants to hear our prayers. God wants to share our supplications and requests. God wants to be vitally present in our lives. God wants us to always be prayer-filled and prayerful.

Let nothing make you anxious, always be prayerful, and in everything be thankful. On the 39th straight day of rain, do you really think that Noah went up on the deck of the ark and thanked God for the water falling on his face? Being thankful in everything doesn’t mean that we just put on a “happy face” and act all sweet and cheery, regardless of what is happening. Being thankful in everything means that we believe that the guiding, guarding hand of God is constantly present. Once we have been born-again in Christ, none of us can ever be abandoned children. The love of God through Christ remains steadfastly by our side no matter what we face.

That is the reason we can be thankful in everything. Our thankfulness is not a matter of plastic grins, smiles on the outside regardless of what is happening inside. No! It is based in the confidence that whatever comes our way, our life is erected on a foundation of power, the power that is the resurrected Christ. And when we understand this power that comes to save us from our transgressions and sin, the power that can lift us into new hope, new strength, new life, then we can be thankful for even the problems that we have to deal with, for deep within our heart and soul we know that nothing can shake up or tear down the foundation on which our life is grounded; deep down we know that through prayer the Lord is present with power and grace to enable us, to encourage us, to strengthen us; deep down we know that we are sharing our life with the living Lord, and there will be nothing that can keep us down, or hold us back, or make us anxious. And there is also one other beneficial side effect.

When we are anxious about nothing, always prayerful, and thankful in everything, then we can live in the peace of God. Paul writes that it is when we are “*in Christ*” that we will finally experience this miraculous gift of the “*peace of God*.” As long as we are in Christ, the peace of God will guard our hearts and guide our minds. It will pull all the pieces of our life together and unite them all under the banner of God’s peace.

The Rev. J. Walter Cross talked about flying a kite with his son Jay in southern Florida on a windy day. “*The wind was strong, and the kite grew smaller and smaller as it tugged against the string. The harder it blew, the higher it rose. Then there was a sickening snap! The string had broken. The kite was free, but it was no longer soaring higher. It was tumbling, falling crazily to dash itself against the ground or become tangled in the trees. What kept the kite*

airborne was the restraint of the string. When that was lost, the kite was unable to fly. We are never freed until we are restrained by something that pulls us higher and higher. It is not the absence of restraints that makes us free. That is one of the great fallacies of our society. Some want to remove all restraint so they can be free. But the truth is, there is no freedom in life until one belongs to God. Every other form of freedom is an illusion. We find the freedom to achieve the greatest desires of our lives only when we live in that relationship. When Christ binds us to himself, then we are free.” Then we can rid ourselves of fear and doubt, anxiety and distress. We find ourselves strengthened by the prayer we lift up and the hopefulness in the thanksgivings we offer. It is then that we can find peace.

Many might be saying, AI’ve heard that message before, and I want to believe it. I want to experience this peace that you are talking about, but there are so many problems that are attacking me. I feel like the children of Israel who cried out, “‘How long, O Lord, must we wait for you.’ Or like David who pleaded, “‘Don’t stay so far from me, Lord.’ Or like Jeremiah who lamented, “‘There is terror on every side. I am surrounded and overwhelmed. When will you act to save me?’”

Know that you are not forgotten or abandoned by God. Remember that the Lord has helped you through all sorts of difficult situations before. Just as the sun rises every morning, so the Lord looks to you and comes to you. Clouds may hide the sun from our eyes, but that does not mean that the sun is not there. Nor does our lack of sight mean that the Son of God is not with us, looking over us, coming to us with power and grace. The Lord has helped us come to this point, this time in life, and the Lord will continue to be with us. The problems may be new, they may come with a new intensity. But it is the same God who created us, who redeemed us, who sustains us, who loves us today, tomorrow, and forever. You are not alone. We are not alone. And the hand of the Lord will be upon us to strengthen us through prayer, to calm our fears, to deliver us with thanksgiving, that we might find peace.

As the days quickly pass, as we approach the day on which we celebrate the birth of our Lord, it is easy to become as stressed as Mary must have been, a young woman away from home, a new husband and a baby that the father knew was not his. Strangers stopping by just to see her child. No place to stay. No time for rest and comfort. No sense of belonging or attachment. So much that has to be done but no time, strength, or energy to do anything. Yes, it is easy to feel like the stressed out Mary. But Mary’s child offers us a better hope, a better way in life. He offers us peace.

In this season, take the time to look upon the Christ child, but do not stop there. Receive in faith the new life he offers even now, through his resurrection. Receive the trinity he brings so that you can be anxious in nothing; so that you may be connected to him and strengthened

through a constant attitude of prayer; so that in everything, through everything you will be able to look to the heavens with a spirit of thanksgiving; so that you may live in a peace that is beyond human comprehension. It is a gift of God, the gift of grace when we live in Christ. In your life may you find it, may you live it now and always. In your life, may it be so. Amen.