

“Peace in an Age of Anxiety”
Sermon Series Fresh Produce #4
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(John 14:25-27)

Introduction.

When my children were growing up, one of the favorite books they liked for me to read to them at bedtime was *Peace at Last* by Jill Murphy. It’s the story of Mr. Bear who had a hard time falling asleep because of all the noise and distractions in his home. Mrs. Bear was snoring, and the clock was ticking, and no matter how hard he tried, Mr. Bear just couldn’t fall sleep. He finally fell asleep in his car. But soon a chorus of birds at dawn woke him up, and he went back to his own bed to sleep a little longer only to be awakened by his alarm clock.

Sometimes it’s hard to find peace enough in this world to sleep at night. That was true for Mr. Bear, and I suspect it’s true for you and me as well. What is keeping you up at night? Or what is keeping you on your knees these days? There is a lot to be anxious about – this crazy virus, our kids, their education and this lost year of learning, the polarization in Washington, generational poverty, racial and social unrest, climate change, the national debt. The list goes on and on.

Where can we find the kind of peace Jesus talked about when He walked this earth? And how do we tap into the peace Jesus offered His disciples when we live in an age of anxiety? That’s what I want to talk about this morning.

I. Our Lack of Peace.

People are very anxious these days, and I think all of us battle anxiety to some extent from time to time. This is especially true for young people. Take a look at this short video which captures the struggle with anxiety many teenagers are experiencing today.

Teenagers aren’t alone in their struggle with anxiety. In his book *The Second Mountain*, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks cites some alarming statistics. For example, thirty-five percent of Americans over 45 are chronically lonely. In the last 20 years the suicide rate in the U.S. has risen by 30 percent, and the rates of those between ages 10 and 17 have risen by 70 percent. Opioids kill 70,000 people every year in this country, and the life span of the average American declined for the third year in a row. The last time that happened was in 1918 when the country was in the middle of a world war and we were battling the pandemic of the Spanish flu which killed 675,000 Americans.¹

And all these statistics were before COVID-19! Last summer the FDA said that the manufacturer of the anti-depressant Zoloft couldn’t keep up with the demand. Everyone was trying to find ways to numb the pain of isolation. No wonder we lack peace today.

Whether mild, moderate, or severe, anxiety is a struggle many of us know well, and everyone has feelings of anxiety at one time or another. Perhaps you’re anxious about an upcoming exam, or having a medical test, or doing job interview. Maybe you’re anxious about

your kids going off to college, or you're worried about the person they are dating. Or perhaps you're anxious about money, and you wonder how you're going to pay the bills. At its core, anxiety is fear: a sense of worry or tension about what is or what might happen. But it's a fear that doesn't help.

The word "worry" comes from the German word *wergen* which means "to choke." Worry can choke the life out of us, and it can rob us of our confidence. Have you ever heard someone say that a basketball player "choked" when he missed a free throw to win the game? The player was worried about missing the shot, and his fear contributed to his inability to succeed. Corrie ten Boom once said, "Worry is a cycle of inefficient thoughts whirling around a center of fear.... Worry doesn't empty tomorrow of its sorrow; it empties today of its strength."²

How is anxiety impacting you this morning? What are you anxious about? And where do you need to find peace today? The good news of the passage we've read this morning is that Jesus offers us His peace, and it's a gift He wants to give us which can change our lives.

II. Jesus' Gift of Peace.

In John 14 Jesus said, "*Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid*" (Jn. 14:27). True peace begins with a person, and the key to experiencing the peace Jesus offers is by turning to the source of all peace, the Prince of Peace Himself. Now, let me be clear. In the Bible the word "peace" means far more than sitting by a cozy fire with a loved one and listening to your favorite song streaming in the background. The Hebrew word for "peace" is *shalom*, and it conveys the idea of wholeness, a world that is rightly ordered, and the healing of everything that is broken and incomplete in this world.

The peace Jesus offers His disciples is first of all a reconciled relationship with God which He accomplished through His sacrifice on the cross. The Bible says that while we were yet sinners and enemies of God, at war with Him in our hearts and bent on rebellion, Jesus died for us in order to restore all the brokenness we experience in our relationship with God.

The peace Jesus offers us also includes a reconciled relationship with ourselves. We no longer have to beat ourselves up for all the ways we mess up in life, and we can find healing for the emotional and psychological fractures we experience over course of our lives.

And the peace Jesus offers us also makes it possible for us to experience peace with one another. The enmity and strife that mark our relationships can be healed when we take the conflict to God's throne of grace and seek His help. In the power of God's Spirit, we can actually overcome years of bitterness and pain and experience reconciliation. Forgiveness is possible, and relationships can begin again when people follow the Prince of Peace together.

The gospel refuses to be reduced to sentimentality and the saccharin-sweet serenity of a false and temporary sense of peace. The peace Jesus promised is far deeper and more profound than that. He came to deal with our lack of peace by laying aside His glory in order to enter our pain and suffering and to save us. He came to restore our broken relationship with God and also to equip us to live in the un-cozy tension of the already and not-yet of His kingdom.

And that kind of peace is different from the peace the world offers. It's a peace that can rule in our hearts despite our circumstances, and it has the capacity to transform our spirits

regardless of what is happening in the world. It is deeper than emotion or a good feeling about things. Rather, it is an experience of the Prince of Peace deep in one's soul.

The late philosopher and Christian writer Dallas Willard once pointed out that it's important for us to distinguish in our minds the difference between a feeling of peace and being a peace-filled person. The famous rock band the Eagles had a hit song in which they sang about "a peaceful easy feeling." That's a temporary emotion – smooth and easy, but that isn't the kind of peace Jesus was talking about here. Instead, Dallas said the peace Jesus offers is a condition of the heart which is an orientation that anchors the soul in one's life. It's the kind of peace that can help you weather the storms of life, and Jesus' peace somehow enables you to navigate the challenges with confidence and poise.

Many people choose to chase after a feeling of peace rather than do the hard work that will help them grow into a person of peace, and they make an idol of the feeling above the condition of the heart which is anchored in Christ. They chase after the momentary feeling of peace through alcohol, drugs, eating, sex, pornography, and all kinds of destructive behaviors that ultimately wreck our ability to become a peace-filled person. Jesus suggested a different way to pursue peace, and it begins with Him. Well, how do we become a truly peace-filled person, and how do you experience the peace Jesus offers? That's the final matter I want to talk about today.

III. How Can We Experience the Peace of Jesus?

There are four things I want to suggest about how you and I can experience the peace of Jesus and become peace-filled people. **First**, we need to understand that **it starts with abiding in Christ**. You'll recall that last week I talked about what Jesus said in John 15 about joy, and I drew my remarks from Jesus' metaphor about the vine and the branches when He said, "*I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing*" (Jn. 15:5). Experiencing the peace of Jesus begins with abiding in Christ, and there is no way you're going to become a peace-filled person if you don't spend time walking with Jesus.

The **second** thing I want to say about how to experience the peace of Jesus is to share with you something Dallas Willard said about it. He said that the secret to experiencing the kind of peace which can anchor your soul and enable you to navigate the storms of life in a peace-filled state is to **abandon outcomes to God**. That doesn't mean we abandon effort, resolve, hard work, or determination. Rather, it means that when we've done all that we can, when we've acted with integrity and we've prayed boldly, then we leave the outcomes up to God.

Another word for this in the Bible is the word "surrender." As followers of Jesus, we come to a place where we realize that we don't have to make things happen, or make other people do what we want them to do or manage our image. Instead, we learn to surrender and abandon outcomes to God, and we begin to actually trust that, as the Bible says, "*God is at work both to will and to do according to His good pleasure*" (Phil 2:13). And this will free us to experience God's peace.

Whenever you're at the airport and there is a flight delay, you can usually tell pretty quickly the people who have abandoned outcomes to God and those who haven't. There are varying degrees to how people respond. Some lash out in anger, and they shout, "This isn't fair!" "I demand...!" and "I *have* to be on that flight!"

In moments like these, we are reminded that we're not in control. However, there is a life of peace you can experience when things happen that aren't what you had planned. It has the ability to help you rise above your circumstances. It is a life that abides in Christ, which remains in Him, where you don't have to be responsible any longer for the outcome of what happens. And if we miss that flight and have to reschedule, then we're just going to have to trust that God has another plan and He didn't need us to be on that plane.

One of the most frequent promises that is made in the Bible is, *"I will be with you."* No matter what happens in your life, God is going to be with you. Do you believe that? He will be with you during whatever difficult trial you have to face in the coming week and in whatever adverse circumstance you find yourself in now. Jesus says, *"I will be with you."* You can count on it.

What situation are you facing today that is out of your control, and how God asking you to trust Him with it? Can you look to Jesus and surrender the outcome to Christ? It's a key to experiencing the peace He has to offer.

A **third** thing I would say is that **contentment is another key to peace**. The apostle Paul wrote about how to deal with anxiety, and he said that he had learned to be content in whatever circumstance he found himself in. And Paul went on to add, *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"* (Phil. 4:6,7). How is God calling you to find contentment in Christ and to give up your striving and your dissatisfaction and discontent? And how does Jesus want you to make prayer more of a part of your life so you can experience the peace Paul writes about? Learn the art of contentment. It will lead to greater peace in your life.

The **final** thing I want to say about how to experience the peace of Jesus is to **become a peacemaker** yourself. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus didn't say, "Blessed are the peace lovers." He said, "Blessed are the peace-makers." Making peace is hard work, but it is a key to becoming the kind of peace-filled person Jesus talked about in Scripture.

Being a peace-maker means being a person who seeks the *shalom* of God for all people in the world. It means being willing to lean into conflict, pain, and problems, and to work to bring healing and wholeness to all the broken things that exist in the world – broken people, broken relationships, broken promises, and even broken systems. Every time we work with the Holy Spirit to help reconcile people to God, and they in turn experience God's transforming work in them which affects the world around them in a missional way, *shalom* is established in that little corner of the world and the kingdom of heaven continues to be ushered in.

Conclusion.

Saint Francis, the bishop of Sales, once noticed a custom in the country districts in which he lived. He had often noticed a farm girl go to draw water at a well, and when she did so, he noticed that before she lifted the pail, the girl always put a piece of wood into the pail. One day he went out and asked her why she did that. She looked a bit surprised and answered matter-of-factly, "Why, to keep the water from spilling, to keep it steady."

Later on, Francis wrote to a friend about the incident, and he added, "So, when your heart is distressed and agitated, put the cross into its center to keep it steady." In every time of storm and stress, the presence of Jesus and His cross brings peace, serenity, and calm.³

As we close this morning, I would like to give you two suggestions for a practice which includes a prayer for you to consider doing in the coming week as you seek to cultivate peace in your life and experience more of the Fruit of God's Holy Spirit. The first practice I would recommend is to begin everyday by praying these words: "Lord Jesus, I surrender this day to Your care, and I abandon all outcomes to You. Help me experience Your peace today no matter what happens and help me trust You with my life and with everyone I know and love. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen."

A second practice I would recommend is to end each day by praying a prayer that is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. It is a powerful guide for people who want to become peacemakers. As we close this morning, I want us to pray this prayer together, and I encourage you to make it your aim to pray this prayer every day in the coming week. Become a peacemaker for God and experience His peace.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

¹ David Brooks, *The Second Mountain*, 32.

² Corrie ten Boom, *Quotable Quotations*, Albert M. Wells Jr. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 447-447.

³ Adapted from William Barclay, *Matthew*, Vol. 2, 107.