

“Joy Amid Anxiety” based on Philippians 4:4-9 and Luke 3:15-20

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on December 15, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Last week we saw the wild man we call John the Baptist naming injustice as a means to bring peace through reconciliation. Now, today in the passage that Tabatha read for us, he says that he’s not so bad after all. He baptizes with water, but the next guy, he will baptize in the Holy Spirit and fire.

In fact, the next guy will carry a ‘winnowing,’ or a ‘pitch’ fork to clear his threshing floor, gathering wheat for storage and burning the chaff, not just with fire, but with an unquenchable fire. A fire that cannot be put out. From this we celebrate Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of Joy in our Advent Season. It’s hard to feel joy with all that judgement.

Medieval artists took the winnowing fork out of Jesus’s hand and they gave it to the devil. They also gave the unquenchable fire to him, not as the place of his suffering, but as something he controls. Both concepts are part of any devil costume today. In modern times, we make a distinction between a ‘winnowing’ and a ‘pitch’ fork, probably because of those artistic depictions. Still, both are tools with prongs used to separate loose materials. Either way, I doubt we will ever see a Halloween Jesus costume complete with a pitchfork and a source of unquenchable fire.

We struggle to imagine Jesus in this way as judge. I think that’s because we want to hate the final judge because we fear the judgement. And so, popular art gives the task then, to someone we think its ok to hate the devil, which means divider, or the Satan, which means accuser.

But what we miss is that the pitchfork is not being used here to divide people from each other, with some people who are grains being put in the barns of heaven while other people called chaff being blown downfield into the terrible fires. This is not what’s happening here. Like last week, this is again about refinement. Wheat and chaff grow together on the same stalk. One part is the seed, the nutritious part which we eat, and the source from which new plants grow. The other part is the chaff – this is waste. It is not needed, and it can be burned.

Last week, Malachi spoke of the refiner’s fire making gold and silver pure, and this image today is similar because useful grain is preserved, but the stalk and chaff are burned. The best of us is what is preserved by the judge. This is the biblical image of salvation and the new creation. It’s not often the popular image of it.

Paul combines these images in a building metaphor in 1 Corinthians. In that letter he says we build on the foundation of Christ, and we use gold, silver, stones, wood, hay or straw. He says, “Fire will test the quality of each person’s work. If what is built survives, the builder then, will receive a reward. If it is burned, the builder will suffer loss, but will be saved” through the fire.

Paul’s message in the Letter to the Philippians is very similar too, but again it’s told in still another way. What I love about Paul and Scripture is that nothing can be described definitively so they describe it in many different ways to help us build a picture. Paul warns against thinking that markers in this world build a kind of credit with God. After all, Paul says he would have the best credit as an Israelite from the tribe of Benjamin, a circumcised Pharisee, so zealous for this faith that he even persecuted the church.

But now all of these things are counted as loss – they mean nothing, because all that matters is Messiah Jesus as his Lord. This means enduring suffering while looking forward to resurrection that is yet to come. He says our lowly bodies will be transformed and share in the Messiah’s Glory.

It is against this backdrop that Paul says to “Rejoice in the Lord at all times. Rejoice!”

He says, "Let your gentleness be known to all people, for the Lord is near." What's more, he adds, "Be anxious about nothing," adding then, "let your requests be made before God with prayer and petition with thanksgiving." Then, the peace of God which surpasses understanding, will guard our hearts and our minds in the Messiah, the Christ – Jesus.

Beloved, this is a short letter, so unless Paul has serious memory issues, I want to be clear that Paul is not saying that grief and anxiety are sins. No. Not at all.

Yesterday, we laid Pat Wilkison to rest in the columbarium and we grieve losing her. Today, we rejoice and celebrate the 100th birthday of our beloved Dot Roark. Just a few verses earlier in Chapter 3, Paul says he weeps, he grieves for those distorting the faith. Yet now he is saying to "Rejoice always."

With both of these, we want to focus on the second line. He says, "let your gentleness be known." This is a difficult word to translate, as the compound Greek word is to be "fittingly equitable." How many times do we say things like that? Fittingly equitable. This is the opposite of Paul's previous zealotry. It's more like mutual forbearance. This is a gentleness that lowers the stakes of strict observance of specifics, focusing on the foundation of our faith in Christ Jesus.

You see, this is what he wants from Euodia and Syntyche, who were mentioned just before these verses. These were two women leaders in the church who were at odds. Likely this is over an issue where each thinks they are right – perhaps as important as baptism rites, or as trivial as the color of a carpet – either way it is secondary to who Jesus is and what he did for us.

Then Paul says to these women and to all of us, "Be anxious for nothing." Now, this is often ripped from its context and used to criticize people suffering anxiety. It's as if we think we can just say, "Be anxious for nothing" and it will all be fixed. It's that simple. Just do it. They make it a universal command, as if anxiety is a sin.

Yet, again this assumes some kind of amnesia for Paul in this letter to make that case. This is because at the end of chapter 2, Paul uses the same word in Greek, the one we translate here as anxiety, to say that Paul himself, sent Epaphroditus to the Philippians to ease his own anxiety. He doesn't say it's a sin. Nor does he say in any way at all that your anxiety or mine is a sin. The truth is that anxiety itself is not a sin – it is not something we choose. Anxiety happens – a lot – and in our modern culture perhaps more than ever.

Often anxiety happens and arises within us without warning. Every Saturday night, I go to bed early. I take a melatonin gummy. They're not just for kids. My plan is to get up six or seven hours later and get here super early to work on the service.

Last night, I woke up after just four hours – wide awake – with a surge of anxiety, fear of loss, racing my mind. Are my kids prepared for if I were to die tomorrow? What about Claire? Is it ok if I don't have Christmas cards this year? What if? What if? All kinds of "what if's" in my head. It took more than an hour, for me to fall back asleep only for the alarm to go off 90 minutes later.

I did what I was supposed to do. I prayed, with thanksgiving. I reasoned or thought about excellent things. It helped. But prayer and understanding what we have in our faith to hold onto will never, in and of themselves, completely eliminate anxiety. This is not Paul's promise, as he offers these guidelines to help us. Paul's promise is that we can find joy, even amid this anxiety, when we pray and focus on what is good.

Paul tells us to reason upon, or rest our thinking upon things that are true. We think about things that are venerable, or worthy of worship, things that are just, things that are holy, or set apart, and

pure, and things that are friendly, or lovely. He says to think on things which are spoken well of, or deserve a good report. What you have also learned and have received, what you have heard and have seen in Paul's ministry, Paul says to practice these things and the God of all peace will be with you. He does not say the anxiety will disappear, nor the grief, but God will be with you in it, bringing wholeness.

Beloved, this is the power of recognizing Jesus, not some Satan or devil, is our judge. Would you rather our judge be the accuser or the one who chose to empathize with us by sharing in our humanity. Jesus wielding the winnowing fork reminds us of the point of being transformed. This is because God calls for us to repent, to be changed, to turn away from sin, for our sake, not God's. Everything we do that points to Jesus, and every time we do something in this world to reflect self-giving love, we share in the work of new creation.

Our work will be like the gold that remains through the fire, and it will be preserved when all things are new. The one who builds right will be rewarded, but the one who builds poorly, will still be saved, Paul said. And so we build and do what is right, not because we earn anything but because everything good we do will be preserved in the Kingdom of the New Creation for which we work.

The foundation of our faith – by which Euodia and Syntyche are written in the book of life – is what Paul says in Chapter 2, that Christ Jesus, although he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. But instead he humbled himself, taking on the form of one who is enslaved, and he became obedient, both to God and to our human condition. He did this even to the point of death, death on a Roman cross, so that at his name, every knee shall bend in worship, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory to the Father.

In Jesus, the eternal Son shared in our humanity to live within our limits. He endured our challenges, our joys, our griefs and our anxieties. We even see in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus experiences anxiety. Within all those limits he lived without sin and died for us, rose for us, and ascended for us. God doesn't need humanity. God did this for humanity – each and every one of you.

The beauty of the new creation is that God's promise is restore all good things. The promise is not a disembodied soul playing the harp forever. I do not play the harp. Nor does that sound lovely to me at all. But you know what does sound lovely? Seeing you again. Hugging you and embracing you and enjoying this creation renewed in all of its best. That sounds awesome. It's hard for us to conceive sometimes because of all the images we are given.

Anxiety is the fear of loss, and we can address our anxiety by holding on to the promise that everything we lose will be restored. All that is good, the Lord will restore. That's a much better promise than Plato's idea of souls floating around in clouds.

Creation will not be destroyed by fire, but it will be purified. That is the promise. That is where even in our anxiety, we can pray and give thanks. Likewise, we can hold on to those things that are good, knowing that God will restore our loss, and we need not fear. Amen.

Resource to consider: "The Anxiety Opportunity" by Curtis Chang.