

BELPRES CHURCH

Hallelujah Anyway

Philippians 4:1-13

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Hello, so good to see you here. Those of you who are here in the room, and those of you who are joining online, thank you for being here this Thanksgiving week. The scripture this morning comes from Philippians Chapter Four. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again. Rejoice. 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." Finally, 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. And whatever 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."

So let me start by reading you a few news headlines from just the last week, just the last seven days, news headlines. In addition to lots of headlines about the war in Israel and Gaza, there were things like "Wildfires on O'ahu destroy irreplaceable forests. A brewing coastal storm poised to destroy your Thanksgiving plans." Ooh. Brewing, destroy, those are sinister words. "World careening toward global recession." Okay, not just headed for mind you, careening toward global recession. "Deer hunting is dying and that should worry you even if you don't hunt." And right now you're wondering, why should I be worried about that? And some of you are worried that you don't know why you should be worried and that worries you. So meta worry. That is just a few headlines from just this week. No wonder rates of depression and anxiety are skyrocketing. Now there's lots of causes for depression and anxiety and often it is very helpful to seek treatment for that. But surely the relentless drumbeat of cataclysmic bad news is not helping.

And then there's the stuff in our own life that we worry about, that we feel anxious about in our own lives. A relationship problem or a health or a financial problem, grades or college, or applying to colleges like seniors are doing right now. Job, parent, children. A lot of people are anxious about the direction of our country and who's going to be the next president. Most of us experience some level of worry, at least sometimes about some things. Even my wife who is as close to genetically incapable of worry as is possible, it's like her genome won't let her worry, which for a worrier like me is sort of sometimes, like "How do you do that?" But even she will ever so occasionally, once in a while, feel a teeny bit of stress if she's writing a book and a deadline is looming, like once every 25 years. And if you never worry, if you are a person, you never worry, you never have anxiety, for both of you who never worry, you know someone who does. So pay attention for them and store this away for them.

We are finishing a sermon series on what our culture tells us versus what Jesus tells us. And one of the things our culture is telling us right now is, you should be worried, deer hunting is dying. You should be worried. You should feel a lot, a lot of worry. But in the text I just read Jesus through the apostle Paul who is in prison for being a Christian, is writing to Christians in the city of Philippi who are being persecuted. So from a man with plenty to worry about, to Christians with plenty to worry about, through him, Jesus says this, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I'll say it again, rejoice." He says it twice because I think he's anticipating the Philippian response. "Rejoice in the Lord always."

"Yeah. But Paul, we're being persecuted, we're being thrown in prison."

"I'm going to say it again. Rejoice. It's a command. We're not negotiating." But how can we rejoice when there's so much around in our lives and our world to make us worry and anxious? And we shouldn't minimize those things. They are real. They are painful. And when Paul who's being persecuted says rejoice, it doesn't mean that our problems aren't serious. They are. It just means that in the middle of them, we can still find hope and joy and courage. And he tells us how. He says, "Don't be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition." And the Greek words he used is there in the original Greek, it means to create a sacred space.

So it's not praying, "Lord, fix this, move that, give me this, bless me that, change this, work this out, help me here, bless me there. Amen. See you tomorrow." Which do you ever pray like that? I sometimes do. That's not what he's talking about. It's to picture Jesus next to you because He is and talk to him and then leave some time and space for those thoughts that maybe come from Him. Prayer and petition with thanksgiving. Don't just tell Him what's wrong. Thank Him for what's good. Because no matter how bad things are, there's always at least one good thing in our lives. Present your request to God and then what? And then everything will work out the way we want it to?

"The peace of God, which transcends all understanding." It's a miraculous peace. It's not tied to our circumstances. We can't always understand it, which means if you want the peace that passes understanding, you have to quit trying to understand everything all the time and just let the Holy Spirit do what He does. "The peace of God will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." And the image there is of a soldier standing guard over your heart to protect it. In other words, in prayer, God may or may not change our circumstances, but always what he wants to do and can do is change our disposition, give us supernatural peace, courage, and joy.

So the first way that we can rejoice in anxious times is to pray and listen. And I've preached on those verses before. So all of that was just review. Paul goes on to talk about some other ways to have peace in anxious worrisome times.

And the second way is to control the inputs to your brain. I hate it when I am worried and someone says to me, "Well, just don't worry about it." Well, if I could just not worry about it, I wouldn't be worried about it now, would I? Do you have any other helpful suggestions for me? I can't always control what my brain thinks or feels, but I can control what I put into it. Paul says, "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent and praiseworthy, that's what you should be thinking about." In other words, input positive things in your brain, not negative things, then you'll be less anxious. It's like cooking. If you want to make spaghetti, but you don't have noodles or tomato sauce, you can't make spaghetti because you don't have the right ingredients. And it works the same with our brains. If our brains have fewer negative ingredients in them, that limits our brain's option to cook up negative thoughts because they don't have the ingredients, brain doesn't have the ingredients.

So for instance, if you struggle with lustful thoughts, well then don't put lustful ingredients in your brain. Be careful of the movies and the TV shows you watch and all of that stuff. If your brain has fewer lustful ingredients, it can't cook up lust as well. And it's the same with worry. Don't put worrisome ingredients into your brain and the fewer worrisome ingredients your brain has, it makes it harder for it to cook up worry. And if what we have is positive ingredients in our brain, positive thoughts, it'll be that much easier for our brain to cook up positive thoughts and feelings.

And Paul lists eight words, eight positive things to put into our brains. And the first is, "Whatever is true," and I'll spend most of my time on this, "Whatever is true." Ultimate truth is a person, Jesus. So what Paul is saying here is whatever lines up with who Jesus is and what He's about, think about that. But it also means just think about things that are factually true, not false. Don't dwell on what's not true. Gossip, rumor, speculation. This happens in this church sometimes. A rumor will go through the church and people get all upset and worried and angry, but it's not true. They're upset about something that doesn't exist. They're upset about something that's not true. I mean, there's enough true things in

the world to worry about. Let's not worry about things that aren't true. Happens in offices, schools, neighborhoods. A rumor or speculation gets everyone all up in arms, but they're worried about something that doesn't exist.

Don't dwell on rumors and speculation, and also be careful of half-truths. So those headlines that I read you at the beginning, they're only partially true. For instance, the world is careening toward a global recession. When you actually read the article, actually what it is, is speculation. Speculation from some, but not all economists of what might but isn't necessarily going to happen. That hardly constitutes careening toward destruction. But that headline sure does grab you, doesn't it? And it gets in your brain and it sticks there. Half-truths create anxiety, whereas a fuller picture brings greater balance and peace. It is true, there are serious problems in our world and in our lives, but some other things are also true. We just don't hear about them.

So for instance, extreme poverty is radically down across the globe. Millions of acres of land are being restored and having trees planted on them by an all female organization in Africa, millions of acres being restored. There are fewer life-threatening diseases than there has ever been in all of human history. Fewer people are dying of hunger than ever. Literacy rates are soaring across the planet. In most categories, there has never been a better time to be alive than right now. Never before in history have so many, had so much, for so long and been so worried about it.

Now again, I am not saying let's just ignore the problems in our life and in our world. No, they're real. We need to pay attention to them. We shouldn't minimize them. The problem is we're out of balance. We're not thinking about the good things, both the good and the bad. We're just focused on the bad. What is going well in your life? There has to be at least one thing that you can dwell on that for this week of Thanksgiving. There's got to be at least one thing going well. Dwell on that this week.

Oh, and the other thing we tend to do is we tend to catastrophize and exaggerate the bad stuff. Don't be doing that. That's also not true. That's not true. When we exaggerate or catastrophize the bad stuff, I do this all the time. I have one sermon I don't like and I'm like, that's it. They're going to fire me and I'm going to end up living in a van in Pasco. I mean, as it was foretold by the prophet Isaiah. This week my youngest daughter was applying for a part-time internship with my wife's publisher, and she was starting to plan the job and what she was going to do, and how she was going to spend the money and all this. So my wife just texted her to remind her, "You first have to have the interview before you get the job." And my daughter texted back, "I miss who I was this morning when I was young and full of hope."

Now, my wife didn't say, "You're not going to get the job." She just said, "You have to do the interview first." But my daughter sort of catastrophized it. "Oh no." And she did

get the job. So yay. There have always been bad things in the world. The difference is it wasn't in our face continuously like it is today. Multiple times an hour, we see bad news on social media and radio and talk shows and newspapers and TV and you name it. So instead of "Whatever is true, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, dwell on these." It's become whatever is frightening, whatever is depressing, whatever is enraging, think about that stuff. Our brains were not designed to take in this much negative information this quickly, this continuously. Our brains weren't designed for it and it's killing us.

I read a study a while back where people deleted all their social media accounts and news accounts for just four weeks. That's it. And at the end of those four weeks, they felt way better about the people on the other side of them politically, way less angry at them. And they felt way less worried with just four weeks not looking at the news and social media. "Whatever is true, dwell on that."

And then Paul goes on. "Whatever is noble." That means living in a way that does not lead to disgrace. "Whatever is right," which means whatever lines up with what God says is right and wrong, just and unjust. "Whatever is pure," that is whatever leads to a clean conscience. "Whatever is lovely," which means beautiful, inspiring. "Whatever is admirable," things you see that you want to emulate. "Whatever is excellent and praiseworthy," things you can recommend to others. "Wherever you find these eight things, think about them." It's about what we savor. It's about what we turn over and over in our minds and go over and over again. It's about what we savor, the good or the bad. When younger dads ask, what I would do differently now that my kids are mostly grown, what I would do differently going back, my answer is always, "I would savor it more." I did a reasonably good job of being an involved dad. At least my kids say so. But so often I was just getting through it. There were so many things. I was so busy, I was just getting through it to the next thing. I wish I'd savored it more. When my son, when he was little, when he wanted to play catch, one of the things I would try to do is not stop playing catch until he said we were done playing catch. But oh my God, the kid could go on and on and on. There was one time we played catch for almost three hours. That is a lot of catch.

And we got home from the park and my wife said, "Were you playing catch this whole time?" And I said, "Uh-huh." And I said, "Okay, if he comes home from college and plays the, you never played catch with me card." My wife said, "I've got your back." Fortunately, he remembers me playing catch with him. But here's the thing, I wish I'd savored those three hours more. I wish I'd just not be thinking about the next thing, but just stop and say, this is good and it's not going to last forever. And so just take the mental picture and be in the moment. Savor the good, pray, control the inputs. And then finally, don't just think about these eight things. Act on them.

Paul says, "Whatever 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." So for instance, if you see someone doing something honorable, don't just see it and move on. Tell them, "Hey man, that was honorable," because that's a way of acting on one of those eight words. We are often really quick to criticize, which just ingrains the negative in us, but praise ingrains positive stuff in us. And it's a way of acting on one of those eight characteristics. And it makes it more real to us because we've acted on it. Pray and listen, control the inputs, act on the positive.

So let me give some practical steps, just practical stuff that we can do to reduce anxiety this week. Just action steps practically. First, and I've given this one before, but it's a good one to do. Spend twice as much time with Jesus as you do consuming news. I mean, spend time with Jesus through prayer, scripture, worship. We are often more angry and more worried than we need to be because we're consuming way too much news. So spend twice as much time in prayer, scripture and worship than you do on the news, which will either dramatically increase the time you spend with Jesus or decrease the time you spend on the news. But either way, you're going to feel better.

Second, use social media wisely. All the data shows that the more we scroll, the more anxious we get. And it can be a helpful tool, but use it wisely, which means limit your time on it. And don't be clicking on the inflammatory stuff with the things that are designed to make you mad or afraid. Careening. Storm brewing. Destroy your Thanksgiving plans. That's just clickbait. They're just trying to get ad dollars. We are being played. Don't fall for it. Use responsible sources and use it wisely.

Third, talk to your heart. Worry comes from listening to our heart. Oh, there's this to be worried about. Oh, there's that to be worried about. Worry comes when we listen to our heart. Peace comes when we talk to our heart. And I'll do this sometimes when I'm worried. I will literally in my mind, I will talk to my heart and I'll say, "Heart, remember now, God has never let you down and he's not going to start now. Heart, remember now, remember all those things in the past that you thought were going to be terrible and they weren't. Remember, oh my worried, anxious heart, you're catastrophizing again." Talk to your heart.

Fourth, community, like I talked about last week, we need other people sometimes to help us calm down.

And then fifth and finally, praise Him anyway. Let me go back to that first verse. "Rejoice in the Lord when you're happy. Rejoice in the Lord when everything is going your way. Rejoice in the Lord when everything is up and to the right." [inaudible 00:18:05] it says, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I'm going to say it again. Rejoice." And this can be hard to do, and sometimes I have to force myself to praise God, but it always reduces anxiety

when I do. This doesn't mean we can't lament our problems and what's wrong in the world. We should lament. It's biblical. We should pour out our anger and our hurt and our fear to God. But in the Bible, after people lament, it always ends with them praising God. And I have seen people praise God around the world in some of the most difficult circumstances you can imagine and find genuine joy because here's the thing, it is hard for praise and anxiety to coexist in the same moment.

When I am in the act of praising God, it drives anxiety away because when we are praising God, we are by definition focused on what is true, noble, pure, lovely, because God is all of those things and more. Last week I talked about one of my closest friends who died in his sleep a few weeks ago at the age of 44. Perfect health. No one saw it coming. And I talked about how I have a lot of grief over that. Well, the Sunday after his memorial a couple of weeks ago was All Saints' Day. And in our traditional services, we sang one of my favorite hymns, For All The Saints. And the last verse says, "From earth's wide bounds to ocean's farthest coast, through gates of pearl stream in the countless host, singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost, hallelujah."

And as I sang that, I got a picture of my friend in the middle of that countless host shouting hallelujah at the top of his lungs as he walked into Heaven. And it gave me joy because it reminded me that no matter what, death is not the end. And we were going to live forever with Jesus. And that's something to be grateful for. My depression and anxiety could not stand in the presence of me praising God anyway. I have a friend who for much of his life lived what can only be described as a charmed life. He was tall, good-looking, came from a wealthy family, quarterback of his high school football team in a town where football heroes were worshiped, went to an elite college, had a postcard, perfect marriage, really cool job, all of that. One day years ago, he was talking about people who he knew who were really struggling. One man had lost his job, another had lost a loved one. And he said, "Man, some people's lives are just harder than others." And I said, "Everybody's life is harder than yours." A little bit of jealousy there.

Well, a few years after that, I was visiting him again. He lives in a different city, and I hadn't seen him for a while, and I will never forget our conversation because now he was in a hard spot because everyone goes through hard times sometimes. His mother, who he was close to, died unexpectedly in her 50s. He and his wife had gone through several very painful miscarriages and were having a hard time getting pregnant, and his business was failing. So that's a lot. And he told me all of this. And then he leaned forward and he said, "And Scott, I have never had more joy in my life. These struggles often wreck a marriage, but all they've done is draw my wife and me closer together. And I've always wanted to feel God's presence and I never have.

For me, it's always been kind of an intellectual thing. But right now, God feels so real to me that I could touch him. And I have this amazing friend who lives here, a true brother

in Christ. Just last night he came to my office and he said, "We got to pray for you." And we both got down on our knees and we prayed for over an hour. And I'm so grateful to have a friend like him. And I don't know if my business is going to fail or succeed, but if it fails, I trust God, He'll use that to lead me to a new opportunity. And I don't know if my wife and I will ever have a successful pregnancy, but either way, I want to continue being this close to God."

Now, he faced some very difficult, worrisome things and he grieved those things. He didn't just ignore them, he grieved those things. But he was focused on what was true, noble, praiseworthy, beautiful. And he was acting on those things, praying, drawing close to his wife and to his friend and to God. Fear says what if? Faith says even if. Fear says what if? Faith says even if. And he was saying even if everything falls apart. And for him it was, I will praise Him anyway. The Devil is always trying to make us anxious and worried. He works overtime to make us anxious and worried. So how about this week, we turn it around and let's make him anxious and worried this week? You want to make the Devil anxious and worried? You want to give the Devil a nervous breakdown? Here's what you do. When he takes his best shot at you, you thank God in advance for how he is going to use hard times for good, you forgive your enemies and you praise Him anyway. That gives the Devil a nervous breakdown.

And when we do that, it reminds us that no matter how bad things get, there's always at least one thing to be thankful for and praising God focuses on what is true and noble and beautiful. When we praise Him anyway, it is a defiant, rebellious act that says to our worries and our problems, you don't own me, you're not the boss of me, you do not control my life. Jesus does. And I will not give in. I will not give up. I will not bend my knee to my worries and my problems. I belong to Jesus. I obey only him. In the words of a contemporary Christian song, "I will find a way to praise you from the bottom of my broken heart because I'd rather strike a match than curse the dark. I'd rather take a chance on hope than fall apart. So even if my daylight never dawns, even if my breakthrough never comes, even if I'll fight to bring you praise, even if my dreams fall to the ground, even if I'm lost, I know I'm found, even if my heart will somehow say, hallelujah anyway."

Jesus, thank you that because of you, we can say hallelujah anyway. So we bring you our fears, our worries, our anxieties, and we lay them at the feet of your cross and ask that you meet us there. Thank you that you're the God that can handle our anger, our hurt, our fear. And Lord, as we bring those to you, help us stay focused on you because you have promised that you'll keep us in perfect peace if our minds are stayed on you. So help us do that, and we will give you all the praise and honor for being the author of our joy in your name, Jesus, amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following (note: we use the same scripture reflection questions each week so that we can practice using the same tools over time as we examine different scriptures):

- What do you feel when you read this scripture (excited, angry, worried, etc....)? Why do you think that is? (Explain in your group and then take that response to Jesus in prayer this week.)
- As you read this scripture, where does it challenge your current cultural context?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- How does Paul's view of contentment differ from our secular culture's view?
- Looking at the 8 words Paul lists in verse 8, what are some things you can think about that fit these characteristics?
- How does what you think about affect how you feel? How can you dwell more on the things this passage talks about?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.