

A Worry-Free Life; Where to Find Peace. John 14:27 & 16:33, Matthew 11:28-30  
First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City  
Rev. Jamie White; Sept 10, 2023

We continue our series on “A Worry-Free Life” this morning by talking about where to find peace. How many of you hear the word peace and think, “Um, yes please. I’d like more peace. Give me more of that.” Yeah, all of us! Now a big part of that is because we live in a culture that simply expects us to worry, expects us to stress out and to live in frenzy... that is what the vast majority of folks consider perfectly normal. Last week we unpacked a few of these “normal” ways of living, and I really challenged us to investigate those in our own lives. We talked about the danger of living, not in the present, but in the future; always focused on what might happen tomorrow. We reflected on the dizzying pace of life that’s simply killing us. And we thought about how dangerous it is when we get our meaning and purpose, not from who God says we are, but from what we own and what we do.

All these things... again, just what most folks consider “normal” ... keep us trapped in the worry game. But when we really get honest, none of us want to live a life preoccupied by worrying. None of us want to lay in bed at night with nagging thoughts about all the things that could possibly go wrong. We all know that our anxious thoughts, they’re crippling us. We want more peace, in fact we’re desperate for it. But what gives us peace, really? Is peace just an absence of conflict, a life free of worries and troubles? Is peace just an atmosphere of tranquility, like Webster’s dictionary suggests? The world defines it this way. It’s often assumed that peace is dependent upon circumstances and surroundings.

Here’s what I mean. Most of us would be thrilled to have a season in our life with zero conflicts in our homes and families, a state of serenity at our workplace and in our neighborhood, feelings of calm among our friends or here at church. We would all say that sounds like peace. Or, think about it this way; if you’ve been lucky enough to stroll along a quiet beach, or walk through botanical gardens, or hike alone at sunset, or Zen out in your favorite yoga class, you’d probably say that feels like peace. Or if you’re like me, you might say that peace is being in your own house, a clean house, with no kids around, the perfect temperature, where you’re snuggled in a blanket, (after a 90 min massage of course) and in one hand is a very good book and in the other is a great cup of coffee... you might say that is what peace feels like.

And sure, all of those things are peaceful. They match that Webster’s Dictionary definition of peace; freedom from conflict or a state of tranquility. But did you notice that all those lovely descriptions of peace have everything to do with the circumstances and surroundings you may or may not find yourself in? If peace boils down the absence of trouble, or if peace is by-product of our current surroundings or present circumstances... well then, frankly, that stinks. Because it’s way too rare to be of any use to me on a regular basis. What about all the bad days, what about when the family is indeed in conflict, and work is stressful, and the house isn’t clean, and the lab results came back with a terrifying diagnosis? Is peace simply not possible in the real mess of our everyday lives?

Well, thankfully, the peace that God offers us has a much broader and more substantial definition. You've probably heard that the Hebrew term for peace is **shalom**, which means "**wholeness, completeness, harmony, integrity, well-being, contentment.**" This definition of peace is clearly about far more than an absence of conflict or a state of tranquility. The shalom of God, the peace of Christ, it is about being whole, complete, and content. Peace from God offers integrity, not as in having high moral character, but as in "not-split." Integrity is about being a person that is not fractured, one who is whole and complete. This kind of peace carries a sense of quiet trust and unwavering calm, a contentedness regardless of what's going on.

This is why Jesus, who is so often called the son or the prince of peace, can say to his followers in John 14:27, "**My 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.**"

The peace of God is different. Jesus says, "I'm not giving you what the world gives." Our culture, the world around us, cannot offer you real peace. You can try to chant, do yoga, practice your biorhythms, pop a pill or take a drink, listen to meditation music, consume herbs, numb out on Netflix, burn incense, shop till you drop, soak in a tub, run another marathon... but that's not where you're going to find real peace. That stuff will not lead you to the kind of peace that God gives, to the shalom and wholeness you're really longing for.

When Jesus says, "my peace I leave you, my peace I give you," he is effectively saying, "I am the only source and giver of real peace. Real peace comes from God... from trusting in God, and only this kind of shalom, this kind of peace is strong and sufficient enough to quell all that worries us. In other words, peace has NOTHING to do with your surroundings or with what is happening in your life today. God's peace is different from the worlds, and something you can't find apart from God. CS Lewis said, "**God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.**"

I know that's quite an exclusive claim to make. Which is why it's no wonder that Paul says in Philippians 4:7 that "the peace of God transcends all our understanding." Divine peace is bigger than what we can make sense of and bigger than what we can manufacture on our own. Maybe that's why so many folks aren't *really* interested in it. Because it's true, embracing Christ's peace requires setting aside what we can conceptualize and control, and instead calls us to simply trust in and rely on God for all that burdens us. But for some, that sounds absolutely bonkers... just let go and let God?!? Some folks just can't imagine trusting God like that, so instead, they keep all the crazy going, running faster and faster, consumed by stress and worry... and then when they finally hit a breaking point... they grasp for a false, second-rate peace and do whatever they've got to do to manipulate their circumstances to get a little breathing room, a little tranquility... maybe that's a vacation, or binging a show, or heading up to the mountains... it's all to try and get a little slice of peace. I get it, I do. But the truth is, that second-rate peace... it just won't cut it. It won't last. It's not strong enough for what worries us.

And let's talk for just a second about our worries. All the stuff you lay in bed at night fretting over, whatever it is your worried about today... when you think about it, there's really only three possible outcomes for your worries.

1. What you're worried about may never even happen. In fact, in 2019, researchers at Penn State asked people to document what they were worried about and then record how many of their fears actually came to pass. Here's what they found: 91% of people's worries did not come true; 9 out of 10 things never even happened! Isn't that wild? Mark Twain has this great line to illustrates this perfectly: **"I've suffered a great many things in this life, and a few of them even happened."** So true. Less than 10% of what you're worried about will ever happen... but like Mr. Twain would remind you, worrying will rob you of your peace 100% of the time and just lead to greater suffering. That's one possible outcome... what you're so worried about may never even happen.
  
2. What you're worried about may happen, but it hardly ever happens how we thought it would. We spend all this time worrying, sort of thinking of all the worst-case scenarios, and it turns out that whatever it actually was, it wasn't so bad after all. We asked someone out and they said no, and we lived. We had a scary presentation at work, and it went okay. We didn't get into the college we wanted, and we survived the rejection. We were waiting for the lab results, and discovered we're actually fine. We're worried about an exam, but we passed. We're in the middle of a conflict with a friend, but it isn't as awkward as we expected. So, that's a second possible outcome. It happened and it wasn't actually that bad.
  
3. What you're worried about may happen, but God will be with you in it. And here' the truth, it might even be worse than you imagined... but God will carry you through it. Sometimes the bottom really does fall out, but you can survive it and even be transformed by it. You might even experience God in a way you never knew was possible. This is precisely why Jesus can sit down with his disciples, when he's trying to explain to them that he's about to be betrayed, rejected, and crucified... and he knows this whole "the kingdom of God has come into the world" thing... it's going to look like a big, fat failure to them at first. It's how he can still say in John 16:33 **"I have told you all these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."** When the trouble arrives, when what we're worried about does indeed come to pass, we too can take heart, because we serve a God that offers us his peace and has already shown us, that what might indeed look like and feel like the sting of death, will always and forever eventually turn to resurrection. It's true, sometimes, what you're worried about might happen, but God will walk you through it and give you his peace.

Friends, we are invited to trust in God as our source of peace, to give all our worries to the Lord, to cast all our cares upon God. Not only is this actually possible, but it is what we are called to as Jesus followers. Hear these words of Christ from Matthew 11:28-30. This is sort of the banner text for this sermon series, it's one of those passages that I'd encourage you to memorize, to get into your mind and heart. Jesus calls to us, saying: **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you**

**rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”**

Who among us isn't weary and heavy burdened? "Come to me" Jesus says. Jesus is promising us rest and peace for our souls. But notice the yoke imagery that Jesus uses here. This was a common farming image that the audience would have been familiar with. **(SHOW YOKE PICTURE)** Here Jesus is referring to the device used to attach two oxen together for plowing fields. This device helped the animals move in unison, harnessing the muscle of both animals to help plow much more effectively. It also allowed a younger animal, often weaker and more inexperienced, to be yoked to a more mature animal, helping the weaker learn from and rely on the strong.

So, when Jesus says, "take my yoke upon you and learn from me" we are being invited to get in sync with Jesus, whose presence balances the weight of our worries and our weaknesses, helping us let go of the anxiety that threatens to cripple us. The command to **"learn from me" (mathete ap' emou)** is directly taken from the Greek word for **"disciple" (mathetes)**. We are invited to be Christ's disciple, to learn from Jesus what a life of peace, in the midst of our difficult circumstances, might actually look like. This is so much more than cognitive learning or mental ascent; more than checking the right belief boxes about God. This is about adopting Christ's way of life. It is about surrendering our life to the yoke of Christ. We attach ourselves to the way of Jesus. We let him lead, we let our weakness be absorbed by God's strength.

Not only does this image of yoking ourselves to Christ offer us a compelling picture of how to live and how to hold onto peace... but even more, Jesus assures us, *"my yoke is easy. My burden is light."* I love how Eugene Peterson translates this text in *The Message*: **"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."** What does it feel like to take on Jesus' yoke? To surrender your whole life to God's way, to life in God's kingdom? It feels light and free and like rest. When we are in alignment with Christ, the result is rest. Not just metaphorical rest, actual rest. Jesus says, *"You will find rest for your souls."* It is a life of shalom, of wholeness and contentedness, no matter what worries us. *"Learn the unforced rhythms of grace and you'll live freely and lightly."*

I don't know about you, but that is the kind of life I'm interested in living. This is the kind of savior I want to be yoked to, to surrender all my lesser identities to. That is the kind of peace I'm interested in, the real kind that is big enough to hold all my worries. Being yoked to Jesus Christ, it is not a burden, there's nothing ill-fitting about it. It is freedom. It is peace. It is the invitation from the God who created you and loves you, who knows what you most need, and desperately wants to lead you to a full, meaningful life. Not a life marked by stress and worry, but marked by faith in the God that can be trusted. So yes, let go and let God... yoke yourself to Christ... follow your savior wherever it is he leads

next. Give up what you think is best and trust that God has made you for something far better, for peace.

I want to close this morning in a time of contemplative prayer. If you're comfortable, I'd invite you to close your eyes and place your hands over your heart. Take slow deep breaths, feeling your chest expand as you breath in and out. I'm simply going to guide us through some thinking and praying prompts. As you continue breathing, I'd invite you to breathe in God's peace and then imagine exhaling your thoughts and your worries. As you exhale, just allow them to be held by God in this time of prayer.

Jesus says, "come to me, all who feel weary and burdened" ... what most burdens you in this moment. As you exhale, share it with your God.

Jesus says, "I have come to give you my peace, a real peace... not like this world, but a peace that leads to wholeness and integrity." What in your soul feels split or fractured. As you taken a new breath, allow God's peace to fill any cracked places within you.

Jesus says, "At time in this life, you will have trouble, but take heart, I've already overcome the world" ... where do you most need to take heart this morning, letting go of your need to control and simply trusting that God is with you in whatever trouble you face. As you exhale, breath out your need to fret and control... breath in the truth of God's promise of resurrection.

God, we breathe out as much of our worry as we can right now. We think of all the worries of those in our bulletin today. Worry over health and healing, worry over family and friends, worry over situations that bring pain, worry over how long the grief will last. We breath them out and give them to you. And we breath in your peace O Lord, trusting that you extend it to every one of us today. We all need it, Lord. Spirit, give us a steady resolve and faith in a peace that exceeds all we can hope and imagine. We pray along with the apostle Paul, from 2 Thessalonians 3:16, "that the Lord of peace himself would give us peace at all times and in every way." We pray all of this in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray, saying "Our Father..."