

**“Got peace?”**  
**Romans 8:26-39**  
**Rev. Mark Elsdon**  
**Covenant Presbyterian Church**  
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It is a pleasure to be here in worship with you this morning. I am one of the pastors at Pres House, the Presbyterian campus ministry at UW Madison where I serve with my wife who is the other pastor. We live just up the street from here in this neighborhood. We lead worship services each week at Pres House for our growing student community, but there aren't any kids there except ours. So on Sunday mornings during the school year we often bring our kids here to Covenant for Sunday School – and they love it.

I have a seven-year old daughter and a four-year old daughter. Some months ago my wife, Erica, had been talking with Sophie, our four-year old, about eating a balanced diet. At that time Sophie had become obsessed with eating dried apricots and would gobble up as many as we would give her. Apparently Erica had told her that eating too many apricots at one time would cause her to not feel very well, because one afternoon I suggested some apricots for a snack. Sophie responded, “Sure, but I can't eat too many. Too many apricots will make me complicated.”

Well too many dried apricots may make us constipated, but thankfully they do not make us complicated. And that is good because we don't need anything else to make our lives more complicated than they already are, do we? Our lives are pretty complicated without the help of dried apricots!

Each day is filled with complications – getting kids to school or camp, getting to work, meetings, deadlines, bills to pay, family drama, marital discord, loneliness, health problems, unemployment, the list goes on and on. Our state has been exceedingly complicated in the past 6 months politically and socially as people become increasingly polarized and angry over problems, solutions, and new problems. We are days away from defaulting on our national debt and you hear the word “complicated” come up again, and again as politicians and pundits scramble to simply describe, nevermind, fix, the problem. The ground underneath us feels like it is constantly changing – even here at Covenant Presbyterian as you experience a transition in pastoral leadership. If you have time amidst all the complications to think a little deeper you might wonder about some of the big questions in life. What is the point of it all? What happens after death? Is there more to this life than our pocketbook and our resume? Life is complicated. And all this complication produces enormous anxiety. There is a lot to be anxious about. You may be surprised to learn that even college students are filled with anxiety. A recent survey found

that 80% of college students report feeling stress on a daily basis. There is a lot to worry about and most of us do worry. There is a real need for peace in our lives.

Today I want to ask the question, “Got Peace?” I am talking about inner peace, not world peace – though that is something we most definitely need too. Do you feel like you have inner peace? If you do that’s great! But I imagine a lot of you are like me and you struggle to find and feel peace much of the time.

So what do we do about our worry? How can we “Get peace?” First, before I say any more about this, I want to be clear that in many cases anxiety is a psychological condition, an illness, that often needs professional treatment. If you feel overwhelmed by anxiety seek help. Don’t just keep it all inside and press on as if you can handle it alone.

That said, let’s think for a moment about some of the ways we deal with anxiety. I think there are generally two ways we seek to get peace in our lives. The first is to try to overcome anxiety with activity. My wife, Erica can tell you that I am a big fan of this approach. Sometimes it drives her crazy! When I get stressed or begin to worry I start making lists! Our email inbox begins to fill up – not with email from other people but with messages I write to myself reminding me of all the things I should be doing. I start problem solving. I try to figure out how to fix my anxiety and get rid of it by getting rid of the causes. Have you ever tried this approach? Sometimes it is productive – it can lead us to be more proactive, to tackle problems right away, to plan ahead and possibly avoid trouble before it begins. This can be a good thing.

But there is a fundamental problem with this approach: there is so much in life that is simply out of our control. We are fooling ourselves if we think we can control everything around us in order to eliminate our worries. This week the space shuttle Atlantis landed in Florida. It was the final space shuttle flight ever, and came off without a hitch. But do you remember January 28, 1986? That was the fateful day when space shuttle Challenger exploded on national television. Just over a minute into take-off the marvelous spaceship blew up in a huge ball of fire killing all 7 crew members.

Journalist and author Malcom Gladwell writes about how after something tragic like the Challenger disaster everyone gets really focused on figuring out what caused it and how to prevent it in the future. There is a flurry of activity as we work extra hard to fix all the problems and eliminate all the risks. Gladwell suggests, however, that something like a space shuttle is so complicated and has so many parts, people and decisions making it up, that it is foolish to think we can manage all the risks and ensure that nothing will ever go wrong again. He writes, “What accidents like the Challenger should teach us is that we have constructed a world in which the potential for high-tech catastrophe is embedded in the fabric of day-to-day life. At some point in the future - for the most mundane of reasons, and with the very best of intentions - a NASA spacecraft

will again go down in flames.” Gladwell concludes, “We should at least admit this to ourselves now.”

If the space shuttle is complicated – think about how much more complicated life is. There are so many people, parts and decisions to our lives constantly moving, constantly interacting from the smallest decision of when to cross the street to the largest decision of whom to marry. Our lives are exceedingly complex. We cannot manage our way out of worry. We cannot prevent things from going wrong. People get sick and die. Accidents happen. Just a few weeks ago a woman was literally killed by a bus crossing the street in the crosswalk that I use everyday in downtown Madison. Things will go wrong, at some point, life will fall apart. As the t-shirt says in a slightly different way, “Stuff happens!” We should at least admit this to ourselves now. The sooner we let go of the illusion that we can control it all, the better off we will be.

And not only are we foolish to think that we can control everything when the reality is we can't. We are also outrageously arrogant. It is very tempting and alluring to say that we are in control – especially for people who are highly competent and used to success. But we make mini Lords of ourselves when we believe that. We supplant God with ourselves and place ourselves above God or equal to God. We end up building our whole sense of peace on ourselves and when we do, we will surely be disappointed – we should at least admit that to ourselves now.

The second way we manage our worry is by trying to escape it or pretend it isn't there. Maybe we do admit that we can't control everything and we can't work our way out of worry. So instead we try to simply try run away from it. Sometimes that means actually running away. Recently Erica and I watched the movie “Into the Wild”. It is a true story about a young man named Christopher who graduated from college and then gave away his whole life savings of \$25,000, cut up his ID, burned his social security card, and started hitchhiking around the country. He traveled around with nothing for two years before finally backpacking out into the Alaska wilderness by himself. He lived in the wild for almost 4 months before dying of starvation. In two years of travels he never once contacted his family. He simply ran away from life.

We run away in other ways too. By spending inordinate amounts of time in front of the television. The internet has provided whole new ways of running away from life. On campus, a common way is by getting drunk. Sometimes we just put on a fake smile and pretend everything is okay. Does anyone remember the very irritating but impossible to forget Bobby McFerrin song, “Don't worry, be happy.” He sings, “here's a little song I wrote, you might want to sign it note for note, don't worry, be happy.” Then he goes on to sign about all kinds of trouble in life to which his response is always the same, “don't worry, be happy!” We might call this the “living in denial” method to getting peace.

The problem with this approach is that it doesn't work either. We all know that life is full of too many difficulties for us to just smile and tell ourselves to "be happy." Studies have actually shown that alcohol or drug use increases anxiety and depression rather than soothing it. While working harder doesn't give us peace, ignoring our anxieties isn't any better and often we create much bigger problems for ourselves than the ones we were trying to escape in the first place. When we stop running we find that the worries from the day before are still there, just as real as ever. Trying to escape doesn't bring us peace.

Now both of the approaches I've talked about have some value – planning ahead and tackling worries head on can be very helpful. Having a good time and taking a break from worrying with rest and relaxation is important. Even simply putting a smile on our face and singing a ridiculous song probably will make us feel a little better. But none of these approaches will give us true, lasting peace. They simply won't. And they certainly don't address the deeper anxieties that we might have about the meaning of life. Sometimes our worries are not about the events of our lives but questions of meaning. What is the point of this life? What happens in death? What can we hope for when we lose a loved one or in the face of tragedy?

The apostle Paul writing in the letter to the Romans knew this worry well. He experienced a complicated life first hand. The early Christian church in Rome faced everyday worries as well as deep questions about meaning, life, and death. Paul names just some of the complications they faced: hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and death. In other words, life was very hard for them and filled with uncertainty. They had a lot to worry about.

So what kind of encouragement does Paul give the Roman church in this passage? Does he give them a to-do list or a self-help book from Barnes and Noble? Does he take them out for a few beers or sing, "Don't Worry, be Happy?" No, he grounds them in something much larger than themselves, something beyond the life that they see in front of them day to day, something of great strength, longevity and power. He encourages them with the promise of lasting peace that is found in the love of Christ. Paul asks the rhetorical question: <sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

And he answers it by saying this: <sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Peace has nothing to do with what we do or don't do, or with what happens in life. Peace has everything to do with God's promise, God's power and ultimately God's love. Peace is not found in the external or even internal experience of life. Peace is found in the grace and love of Jesus Christ. We can try all kinds of approaches to create peace for ourselves but in the end they will not last and they will not sustain us. In the end the only way to experience real peace is by cultivating our relationship with the source of peace – God.

While young children like my daughter may get confused between the words constipated and complicated, they do understand where to go for peace. When the crash of thunder wakes my daughters up they run into our room to find refuge in their parents' arms. They don't try to figure out how to fix their worries, they don't distract themselves with toys, they don't just put on a smiley face and tell themselves it is okay. These are all coping mechanisms that they learn later in life. Their first reaction is to run into the arms of the source of love that they know best – their parents.

But as we have grown up we have forgotten how to do this. We have learned other coping mechanisms, mechanisms that have their useful place. But we have forgotten the first and best response to worry – we have forgotten how to run into the arms of the greatest source of love in all the world – Jesus Christ.

There is a beautiful little song that includes these words: "I've been blowing in the wind. I've been scattered like the leaves. I've been running, just to find some peace. I've been running, just to find some peace. Make me like a tree, rooted by the water."

We need peace like a tree needs water. When the worries of life rise up around us we want to be like a beautiful big tree rooted deeply in the waters of God's peace. When the wind blows around us we don't want to be scattered to and fro like dead leaves on a blustery autumn day. We need to be rooted in the water that is the love of God. But a tree cannot make water for itself. It can only receive it from the sky above and the earth below. What a tree can do is send its roots deep into the ground and seek to drink deeply of the water it needs for life. And what we can do is sink ourselves deeply into a relationship with God. Grow our roots deep and wide into God's love. Cultivate our faith through worship, prayer, and service to others. When you are anxious, remember to turn first to the one who loves you. And like a big, beautiful, strong tree, may you find you are filled with the waters of God's peace that will truly sustain you through all the winds of worry.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor unemployment, nor politics, nor loneliness, nor divorce, nor pastors going, nor pastors coming, nor sickness, nor worry, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.