

Pray and Stop Worrying

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“Do not worry about anything. . . .” -- Philippians 4:6

If you were watching nerd TV last Friday evening, as I was, you may have seen one of the scariest episodes of Washington Week that's been aired in a while. It was all about anxiety. People are scared. They're scared of ISIS and they're scared of refugees. They're scared of guns and they're scared of immigrants. They're scared of climate change and they're scared of Muslims. They're scared of Putin and they're scared of Trump.

As we make our way through Advent toward Christmas, the whole world, it seems, is waiting – not for the birth of the Prince of Peace, but for the next attack: a bombing, a shooting spree, or worse.

Ours is an anxious age. Probably no more and no less anxious than any other age, if we studied them carefully, but that doesn't make our anxiety any less real. We Americans in particular seem to be feeling anxious in a new way, with a new-found sense of vulnerability and helplessness.

We used to think that the vast oceans bracketing our continent would keep us safe, but that confidence became obsolete with the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles. And so we built our Star Wars defense, only to discover, on 9/11, that thousands could be killed by a small handful in a matter of minutes, using our own airplanes that departed from our own soil.

The fear of Communists is now the fear of jihadists, and the nightmare of radicalized Americans directing their murderous zeal against their neighbors is undermining our stability as politicians fan the flames of racism and religious bigotry.

Everywhere we turn, it seems, the picture is grim. Airliners downed in Egypt and the Ukraine. The ongoing agony in Syria. The intractable violence in Israel and Palestine. And the endless shootings in America, which seem to have driven many of us into hopeless despair against the tidal wave of guns.

So we strive, in our increasingly secular society, to be merry and bright as the days shorten, and we put on our smiling seasonal game-face, even as we hold more candlelight vigils for the wounded and the slain. And beneath the store-bought holiday cheer, the anxiety has stubbornly dug in its heels and refuses to budge, even for a day. The Advent mood, here and abroad, is ominous rather than joyous waiting, and we who wait for Immanuel are pulled between the hope of expectancy and the fear of malignancy.

“Watchman, tell us of the night, what its signs of promise are.” Few of us sing that Advent carol anymore, perhaps because, even in our churches, we don't want to be reminded that we are in the night, awaiting the promise. We American Christians want to live with the assurance that the promise has been realized in us, that we, in our Christian nation, live as a shining beacon on a hill, with the eyes of all the frightened, pluralistic world looking toward our confidence and our strength for solutions to problems that don't have solutions. So we will not ask the watchman to tell us of the night.

And yet the Christian faith, on this third Sunday of Advent, has dug in its heels

even more deeply and more stubbornly than our anxiety, and the word that unites our readings and lends itself to this day is rejoice. Be glad. Do not be afraid.

We light a rose-colored candle on this third Sunday of Advent to symbolize the theme of rejoicing, found in both our readings from Isaiah and from Paul, from whose letter to the Philippians comes this morning's text: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. . . . The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."

That is not pious claptrap. That is serious advice for serious Christians in serious times. To rejoice, as the prophet Isaiah urged his Jerusalem contemporaries to do in the face of a menacing enemy eight centuries before Jesus, and as Paul urged the Philippians to do who had grown anxious at the delay in Jesus's return – to rejoice in the face of such anxiety-provoking circumstances as theirs is not a retreat into mystical denial, but rather is a defiant act of courage.

To rejoice while others cower or arm themselves in the futile of hope of putting a bullet through everything they fear – to reject both of those alternatives for divinely-inspired rejoicing is to proclaim to the world that the faith of our fathers and mothers is far from dead. We are, in fact, the people who can ask the watchman to tell us of the night, because we do not fear the darkness. And we do not fear it because we know that God made the darkness just as we know that God made the light.

We rejoice not because we don't think that there are plenty of things in the world that can bring harm to us and to those we love, but rather because we believe in God's power to overcome evil more than we believe in evil itself. Indeed, we shouldn't even speak of believing in evil at all, because to believe in something is to place one's trust in it, and it is the terrorists and the bullies and their allies who trust in the power of evil.

We, on the other hand, acknowledge evil, but we believe in God. Let me say that again because it's important. We Christian people acknowledge evil, but we believe in God. We believe – trust – sometimes in the face of massive evidence to the contrary, that God's word will be the last word, and that word is love.

That is what we believe because we are Christians, and that is what Christians have believed always and everywhere. And that is the definition of orthodoxy. We are orthodox Christians, you and I in the United Church of Christ, even though we're often portrayed as balancing precariously on the crumbling edge of the Christian cookie. Look at all the creeds of Christendom – the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Creed of Jerusalem, even our own UCC Statement of Faith – and you'll see that we're orthodox because we believe what they all say in their very first words: we believe in God. Not a single Christian creed says we believe in evil. They all say we believe in God, because we trust in God; we do not trust in evil. We acknowledge the reality of sin, but we believe in the power of God.

And that's why Paul could urge those anxious Christians at Philippi, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."

The antidote to worry, friends, according to Paul, is not medication. It is not psychotherapy. It is not alcoholism and it is not workaholism. The antidote to worry is prayer, because prayer is that turning of ourselves toward that in which we believe, who is God. And prayer is the opening of our hearts, minds, and souls to the loving power that made everything then and makes all things new now.

That is prayer, true prayer, and most of us rank-and-file Christians are notoriously bad at it. For the vast majority of us, our prayers fall into two modes, succinctly described by Anne Lamott as "Help me, help me!" or "Thank you, thank you!"

These certainly are recognizable as prayers, and they're undoubtedly sincere, but

they're neither broad nor deep. They are not the prayers of someone who regularly prays, as we do, Sunday after Sunday, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." They're not the prayers of someone who prays regularly, "And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

It's fine to thank God for mommy and daddy when you're three; but if your prayer at thirty-three has simply swapped in your spouse and kids for mommy and daddy, then your prayer life has withered on the vine, and is still back at "Now I lay me down to sleep."

You can stop worrying about the world – and your paycheck and your health-care and Faith's budge and who's going to win the next election – when your prayer life shifts from being primarily about you and yours to focusing on God and God's will for the world and your place in it.

How can we hear the voice of our still-speaking God, even in our prayers, when we spend so much of our prayer life asking God for favors or telling God what to do? Is God not going to bless your spouse, child, or America unless you remind God to do so? Is God going to change the path of a hurricane or the outcome of an election because we pray to be spared the devastation that both can wreak?

Probably not, but the prayer of the Christian whose life is anchored in Jesus Christ is not for God to do for us as we will, but rather for us to be given the grace and courage to live out God's will.

What would Jesus do? is an interesting theological exercise, but the question that constitutes real prayer is, What would you have me do? With this tax refund? With this addicted child? With our country's widening wealth gap? With global warming? What would you have me do, God, with my one tiny life in the face of all of overwhelming that?

And, friends, I have a surprise for you. God always answers those kinds of prayers. God always answers the prayers of those sincerely seeking God's will for their life. Not what the Russians should do. Not what my irascible neighbor should do. Not what the school board should do. But what I should do. The one time in the Christian life when it's perfectly acceptable to be massively egotistical is when you pray the most sincere and humble prayer any of us can pray, "What, Lord, would you have me do?"

As a nation, we wail and gnash our teeth and wring our hands and implore God to stop all the senseless gun violence. But how many of us, who know how to write a declarative sentence and can afford the cost of a postage stamp, have written our representatives in Congress telling them we want sensible gun legislation? Jill Dugovics did it last week; what's stopping you?

Edmund Burke, the great English statesman, said that the only way for evil to win in the world is for enough good men – we would say people – to do nothing. Prayer is the first and most important step in not doing nothing. Prayer is the most important step you can take in any undertaking. Prayer takes us to that place where our burdens and anxieties are seen for what they really are: temporary and penultimate. Prayer takes us to that place of calm, of peace, and of power. Prayer allows us to focus our attention and expend our energies on the things that really matter. Prayer is the daily practice of allowing God's will to become our will and thereby to make of us those new creations God has promised us we can be.

For the Christian, prayer is not a substitute for action; prayer is the wellspring of action. Examine the lives of our greatest spiritual leaders – Thomas Merton, Mother Teresa, Desmond Tutu, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King – and you'll find prayer at the center of them all.

"More things are wrought by prayer," Tennyson said, "than this world dreams of." Prayer takes us to the heart of God, where there is limitless power, limitless possibility,

and limitless opportunity. If you want to stop worrying about the state of the world and start doing something about it, start with prayer. Pray sincerely and honestly and then listen carefully to God's answer, because you'll always get one. Let God's will become your will, and see what happens. You'll be amazed, and you'll rejoice in the Lord, always. Do this, and you won't have time to worry.