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[All Scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise noted.]

Philippians 4:4-9

God's Got This

Extreme anxiety and a sense of doom seem to be pervading our society. Even in areas as yet untouched by the corona virus chaos reigns. People are clearing store shelves of toilet paper and disinfectant lotion and bottled water. The hoarding doesn't really make sense. It doesn't matter. It doesn't have to make sense. Fear has a way of banishing rationality. Fear also has a way of eroding kindness and compassion and generosity.

Yesterday I was on the phone with a friend who lives in Wisconsin. She told me of a friend of hers who was accosted in a store aisle when she reached for a package of toilet paper (not because she was hoarding but because she was out). Though she quickly offered to release the package to the other customer, she was nevertheless verbally harassed. Thankfully a store employee intervened before things escalated further. Really? Over toilet paper?

I read a news article about people who very early on recognized this as a profit-making opportunity. They traveled far and wide to accumulate thousands of bottles of disinfectant lotion and to hoard masks and other things likely to be in demand. Then they began selling them for insane markups, taking advantage of people's panic buying impulses. Really? Have they no integrity?

It is clear that COVID-19, the novel corona virus, needs to be taken seriously. It is new and not well-understood. It spreads rapidly. There are as yet no known treatments or vaccines. Parts of our population are particularly vulnerable. There is a very real risk that hospitals can be overwhelmed if it spreads too far too fast. Those things are true. COVID-19 needs to be taken seriously.

In this crisis and in any crisis, it is critical that those of us who belong to Christ remember who we are and whose we are. It is critical that those of us who belong to Christ be intentional about letting our identity in Christ inform how we act and react, how we make decisions regarding ourselves and our loved ones, and how we choose to behave toward others.

God's got this. No matter what happens, God's got this.

God's got us. No matter what happens, God's got us.

We who belong to Christ know that God loves perfectly, and perfect love casts out fear. Perfect love does not mean nothing bad will happen. Perfect love casts out fear. We who belong to Christ are embraced in God's perfect love. We who belong to Christ have no need to fear.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God who is fully revealed in Jesus Christ—the God to whom we belong—is a loving God who takes no delight in anyone's suffering.

Yet, in this broken and rebellious creation, suffering happens. Disasters happen. Tragedies happen. Whether from natural causes or human causes or some combination of the two, bad things happen. It's often impossible to know whether the origin is natural causes or human actions or some combination. In this broken and rebellious creation, dangerous things happen...on a personal level, on a family level, on a community level, on a national level, on global level.

God—the God who is fully revealed in Jesus Christ—remains faithful. You know this. I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. God remains faithful. We who belong to Christ have the privilege and the responsibility to remain faithful as well. It's who we are. You know this. I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. It's who we are.

How do we do this? When extreme anxiety and a sense of doom are pervasive all around us, how do we remain faithful?

We do this, first, by digging deep into the resources of our faith to release our anxiety and reject our fear so that we can remain calm. Not unconcerned. Not uninformed. Not cavalier. But calm. We dig into the resources of Scripture and tradition and the witness and legacy of the people of God who have gone before us. We lean on and learn from our faithful brothers and sisters who are in this with us.

We're anxious too. We're not immune. We know what it is to read the headlines and hear the news reports and feel our heart rates rise and our thoughts scramble. We dig into the resources of our faith so that we can release our anxiety. Again and again and again. Daily. Hourly. As often as it takes.

Paul's Letter to the Philippians is one of the resources of our faith. Listen again to Paul's words: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near."

Let your gentleness be evident to all. Extreme anxiety does not breed gentleness. Fear does not breed gentleness. Calm makes a way for gentleness. The same Lord who was near last month and last year and throughout our lives is near now. Be not afraid.

"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 minds in Christ Jesus."

This is not a peace that we find buried deep within ourselves. This is not a peace that we conjure up out of our own resources. This is not a peace that we achieve by force of will or accumulation of knowledge. This is not a peace we achieve by burying our heads in the sand. This is not a peace that depends upon the circumstances around us being peaceful. This peace comes to us as a gift from God as we lift up in prayer our concerns and our thanksgiving, lean into God's embrace, and release our anxiety.

"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."

Good things are still happening in the world. There is still beauty and compassion and generosity. There is still worship and praise and gratitude. There is

still grace and mercy and love. We need not let our heads be filled with screaming headlines and dire predictions and stories of anger and blame and selfishness and fear. Even as we stay informed, we need also to think on good things so that our minds are not consumed by words and images that fuel fear and feed anxiety. And the peace of God, which doesn't always make sense, will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Sometimes the peace of God makes the least sense when we need it most. It doesn't have to make sense. The peace of God isn't about having it all figured out. The peace of God is about trusting the One who still can be trusted even when we can't figure out much of anything.

Sickness is a powerful foe. It is. God is more powerful.

Death is a powerful foe. It is. God is more powerful.

In a crisis it is healthy and right to be concerned and even a bit anxious. That concern—that shot of anxiety--cues us to be attentive and alert so that we can work through the confusion and face the challenges that come with crisis.

Fear, however, is a tool of the enemy. Fear cycles our anxiety back on itself until it becomes all-consuming. All-consuming anxiety is not so helpful. Rather than cueing us to be alert and attentive, it makes us more and more confused and causes us to crumble before the challenges. Fear turns crisis into chaos. Fear banishes rationality, erodes kindness, and fuels selfishness.

Love casts out fear. God's love abounds. We are embraced firmly in that love. And we are called to love. That's who we are. Fear—begone! You have no place here!

Second, we are called to be responsibly prudent. We need to be attentive to our leaders and heed the advice of experts who know more about this whole mess than we do. We need to take appropriate precautions, not only for our own sakes but for the sake of others around us. To be responsibly prudent, we need to stay calm. Fear banishes rationality.

Third, we are called to be compassionately caring. Our mission to give of ourselves even at risk to ourselves for the sake of others is not put on hold when crisis arrives. Our calling to think more highly of others than of ourselves is not canceled by the presence of danger. In the weeks and months to come, we need to be attentive to our neighbors and open to the ways that God may call us to care for others. To be compassionately caring, we need to be unafraid. Fear erodes kindness and fuels selfishness.

There is no single answer to what it means for us, as disciples of Jesus Christ, to be both responsibly prudent and compassionately caring. It's not always an easy path to discern, and it will look different for each of us. We need to honor one another's discernment, accepting and encouraging one another through it all. Some will hear God's call to serve at the front lines of health care and in other ways that involve heightened risk. Others will hear God's call to serve in ways that are not quite so risky.

Self-protection is a valid and legitimate way to honor God's amazing gift of life. In times like this self-protection has its place in loving our neighbors and honoring their lives too. Still, self-protection is not the highest goal.

Glorifying God is the highest goal. That's who we are. Our Lord was condemned though he had done no crime. He went to the cross without self-defense. He suffered without calling for rescue. He laid down his life for our sake and for the sake of this world. We love because he first loved us. We love even at risk to ourselves, not cavalierly, but courageously. It's who we are.

I will close by sharing two quotes.

The first quote is from Martin Luther. A decade after Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the cathedral door, Germany was ravaged by the plague. Martin Luther's guidance to Christians in that time and circumstance was similar to what I have said today: Be responsibly prudent and compassionately caring. Luther also affirmed that there is no one-size-fits-all answer for how best to act. The quote I want to share is Luther's words for himself.

"If Christ shed his blood and died for me, why should I not expose myself to some small dangers for his sake and disregard this feeble plague? If you can terrorize, Christ can strengthen me. If you can kill, Christ can give life. If you have poison in your fangs, Christ has far greater medicine. ... Get away, devil. Here is Christ, and here am I, his servant in this work. Let Christ prevail."

The second quote is from something my husband Phil said this morning.

"If I go from loving on my brothers and sisters, what better way to go?"