

Series: "Corona, Corona"

Sermon: "Cease! The Lord is Near!"

Text: Philippians 4: 4-7; Psalm 46

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- In normal times, I do much of my work at home in my office-cave in our basement
- Much of the rest of the time I meet with folks around town in coffee shops, restaurants, and other public places.
- Of course this *public* life changed because of the Covid-19 virus, social-distancing and eventually the call to avoid anything but essential trips. When that happened, I thought my life would become more relaxed because ½ of what I normally did, meeting with people around the city, was no longer possible.
- It would be like a "*stay-cation*." I could finally catch up on preparing Tyrannus lessons.
- Maybe I would even be able to put the fertilizer on my lawn on time this year.
- I probably don't have to tell any of you who are new to working from home, or any of you who have mastered that skill, it is no automatic "*staycation!*"
- Tonight, I now have 331 emails in my inbox. When I started typing this I had just 295. Your inbox and screen of unanswered texts may be behaving like mine is. The dings and the beeps are rarely silent.
- Many of the emails are from the strange sources. For example, insurance companies, dedicated to insuring just churches that have sold us insurance or even just quoted us a price have been emailing me again every day. Now, their emails are not about insurance or mitigating risk. Now they are telling me they have online sermons available I can share with you so you will be able to make it through this virus crisis.
- I didn't even know they knew you guys! I certainly wasn't aware knew exactly what we all would need right now to fix our situations.

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- However, they assure me they have *experts* who are standing behind the solutions they offer.
- People who sell us church sound equipment and presentation software tell me they also can provide everything we need so our church will survive.
- With a bit of shame I must admit to you that one self-appointed church expert sent me an email saying: "*You have asked me to provide you with a plan for your church in these times of the Corona virus.*" I was tired when I read it, so I wrote back, "**No I didn't!**" I was surprised when I got a reply back that suggested I *should* have if I hadn't.
- Like many people who don't have much to do with the church world, some of these church-business folks seem to feel anxious from their own changed circumstances. The first impulse seems to be that they need to **do** something.
- I have been reminded by this that Mary used to "preach" a sermon on Christians living with the sense of "Do—Fix—& Control!"
- As I try to observe the efforts of people offering to help fix or save things, I believe this do-fix-control is what many of these folks are feeling.
- I have felt it rise up in me. Have you?
- I have *also* felt the **anxiety** that invariably goes along with this human clamoring from within to "Do-Fix-& Control!"
- I may be a more anxious person now than in the past. A few weeks ago, I described to a doctor friend some dreams I was remembering (I didn't used to remember dreams but these were detailed memories). He laughingly *diagnosed* me as a man with "free floating anxiety" issues. Maybe he is right.

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- Maybe this comes more with age. Solomon suggests it can. Maybe it is simply a lack of my faith these days. I'm certainly not sure of what causes it like I am what is causing me more anxiety these last weeks.
- When I am aware of an unexpected burst of anxiety in me, my thoughts always seem to go to Paul's letter to the Philippians in the 4th chapter where he says to them...

Philippians 4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

- I don't remember to go here every time I'm anxious. Sometimes I fret and worry. However, this call to "*prayer and petition*" has served as my aspirin, my Tylenol, my Advil for anxiety that might come on like an infrequent headache.
- Wednesday night, my internet went out at home. I mean *really* went out. No plugging and unplugging would fix it. I knew I was in trouble when I called Comcast and even their digital *bot* only laughed at me. It sent me text instructions to wait for a call that never came.
- I was anxious. So many had just worked so hard to put up an updated FBCCS.org website to help connect and communicate with you better and now I was cut off from your communications and the site itself.
- *What about our parents?* Without our 500 GB down and 20 GB up internet, how could Mary keep grocery shopping for them all from afar? Her mom still is amazed Mary can send her all those groceries all the way from Colorado so quickly.

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- How about my FBC brothers and sisters who might need my help or my prayers? How about my friends in faraway countries who need my stories about what is going on in my life these days to make their lives so much more interesting? How could I stay in touch? Maybe they would conclude I was mad at them and ignoring them.
- Then the worst anxiety hit me! What if this "house confinement" goes on for a longer time than I hope? I mean, what if I can't get **Netflix** anymore? How will I survive?
- So I stayed up until 3:30 AM. I took apart my Comcast rental modem to do what I call "a **very hard** reset." I found an old slower router in a box in the basement storage and installed it. I got my internet back without Xfinity knowing I had voided their warranty!
- Some of you smarty younger folk are hearing this and saying, "*Duh! You have a smart phone, Raleigh. I've seen you use it*" Yes I do but I don't like working on it because it is an old iPhone 6s and that means its virtual keyboard is small and it's slow. "*But you could still get information! You weren't really cut off, Raleigh!*"
- I know that but that's how, anxiety, unchecked by "prayer and supplication, works. It focuses you in on something to **do**, something to **fix**, something to **control**, even if it is realistic or logical.
- It certainly takes one's eyes off of Jesus and focuses on one's own abilities and self-sufficiency. The one who truly can do/fix/control, in our lives fades into the background noise and the cacophony of our own good ideas and contentions is about all we hear at that time.
- Why? Because our human flesh relishes proving our ability to work things out on our own for the sake our own significance.
- That is all a part of that "*ambitious autonomy*" we have been talking about in our study of *Genesis* for weeks now as God was preparing us, for this Corona virus we didn't even know was coming.

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- It's all part of a natural human tendency to say "***I can do this God!***"
- We may not be aware of it but this is the prime source of anxiety in believers. We all struggle with it to some degree. That is what James wrote what he wrote in his New Testament letter about us experiencing trials as believers being a good thing from a good God because they can teach us the reality that we need to grow in faith.
- When I take my anxiety "aspirin" of "prayer and petition," it doesn't automatically help my emotions unless I allow it to turn my eyes back to Jesus. It is not a mystical magic of folding our hands and bowing in prayer that treats moments of anxiety. It is that prayer points us back to the Lord. Then we say: "*Oh yes! I forgot for a moment you are here and you know what is happening and you know how to get my Netflix back if that is what I truly need!*"
- Let's not talk just about quick prescriptions of over-the counter pain relievers to take care of an occasional headache. Let's ask about dealing with the pressures of an anxiety that can build and build in us in days like these when there are so many unexpected changes—so many unknowns—so many things we felt we controlled but now we know we never did.
- Loss of feeling in control strikes at our self-made sense of significance whether we realize it or not. It reveals the lie of autonomy from God.
- I again go back to *Genesis*. I've seen and learned truths this time through that book that maybe I just wasn't ready to learn before.
- One thing I saw in a new light or at least with a new emphasis that still grips my thinking was that matter of God building into the Creation a particular pattern.
- In *Genesis* 1 and 2, God was prepping a perfect environment for humans to fulfill their created purpose.

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- We were made to *"image God"*—to be his representatives in the righteousness that brings LIFE and to spread that *"image"*—that representation—throughout the earth to glorify His NAME.
- Even before sin made fulfilling that purpose exceedingly more difficult, God built a pattern of a rhythm of days into Creation to remind humans of something they might easily forget.
- God said watch my example. *"I will "rest"—that is I will refrain from creating on the seventh day. Watch me, and you humans do the same. Cease, rest, refrain on the seventh day—a "Sabbath". This day will be a reminder for you to speak regularly to yourselves this truth: "The LORD is God and I need Him always."*
- This is *"Lesson #1"* for all of us humans.
- Humans, so wonderfully created, so marvelously purposed by the grace of God, to image him in Creation could easily come to believe it was up to us to *"do-fix-& control"* things. We could so easily forget God and begin to find our significance in what feels like the success of our own hands without needing his help. *"Ambitious autonomy!"*
- Israel, many generations later, still struggled with this lesson #1. So do we.
- The *"Sons of Korah"* wrote a Psalm of worship to remind Israel of what they were to be reminded of by the Sabbath God had built into the very structure of Creation.
- It is a familiar Psalm—***Psalm 46***—to many, and I will not attempt to teach it all. I will, in a moment, take us to probably the most familiar verse of this familiar Psalm and ask us to think deeply about how the words there might apply to us now at this time even though we are not Israel and not in the same tough spot they were in at the time.

- **Psalm 46** begins...

¹*God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.*

²*Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,*

³*though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging. Selah*

- The Sons of Korah wisely reminded the Israelites, who, in their day, were in a bad situation of some kind, that their **strength** and their **"sheltering in place space"** for their hearts, was God himself.
- Because of this reality, they don't **HAVE TO FEAR**—they **can** fear but they don't **have** to fear, even if the whole world they know is shaking and quaking. Even if the control they felt they had is falling apart as their world seems to be falling apart around them.
- The Psalm continues in verse 4...

⁴*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.*

⁵*God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.*

⁶*Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.*

- For God's people, there is a divinely powerful river that makes it through any blockade of any enemy. That sustaining, miraculous, divinely powerful, LIFE-giving river is already on the inside of the gates literally for those folks. But even more importantly it is inside the gates of their hearts. It is the presence of God with his people. **"The Lord is near,"** said Paul.
- Verse 7 then says...

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⁷The LORD Almighty is with us;

the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah

- IN case we didn't catch it, the Psalm just says it plainly. ***The LORD Almighty is with us...*** Yes he is! Verse 8 continues...

*⁸Come and see the works of the LORD,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.*

*⁹He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear,
he burns the shields with fire.*

- Think about what you know God has done. Think about his "works." He is the Creator! If he needs to do so, he could flood the earth as in Noah's day, for his good purposes.
- But here is the problem. None of these truths—these words—will make a difference in anxious times unless you do what that *Genesis* Sabbath was intended to remind you to do. Cease—rest—refrain from your do-fix-& control inclinations. WE all tend to have them especially in times of crisis. STOP and remember something...Look at verse 10...

*¹⁰"Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."*

- That's' the *well-known* verse of this *well-known* Psalm.
- The Hebrew word for "be still" is a command meant to *cause* something—to make something happen.
- But, Raleigh, you just told me I am not in control. You told me trying to fix stuff *is* the problem. Well, we are in control of at least this one thing in times that seem out-of-control. We can **stop!**

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- The command is "Be still—release—refrain"—are used to translate it at times. Release what? Refrain from what? Stop and refrain from working when you are supposed to be ceasing.
- *"You mean don't do anything in times of crisis—in times like we are in?! You mean become passive? If my family gets sick they get sick so I'm not even going to bother to wash my hands?"*
- No, I mean release the thinking—STOP the thinking that somehow do-fix-and control of this situation is in your hands.
- I think we think we do that more than we actually do. I think we think we have let God be in control, but when times are frightening and there are many unknowns, I think we often jump to Do-Fix & Control, believing we have allowed God to be in charge when we haven't.
- Practice a Sabbath in at least this sense. Pause and truly remember in prayer: ***You, LORD, are God and above all else I need YOU right now to walk through this crisis.***
- I could translate this well-known verse something like, *"Release your false sense of control—refrain from believing you have to have the answers—pause—cease and remember God is God and He is what you need!"*
- You don't need all the perfect information. You can't get it anyway. You don't have to come up with all the perfect plans. You don't know the future. You don't have to replace all you had before the crisis to make things seem normal. It won't be normal anyway.
- And look again why that is. This is really the third time the Psalm has reminded us of this...in verse 11 it says

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- He is always there, just as he was at the time of the creation. But, he knew we would get wrapped up in our own wonderful abilities he gave us and try to do-fix-control things autonomously—that is, make life work, even in crises, without him.
- I sense something in many of those emails and texts I am getting. It is a frantic, anxious need to **do** something—to **fix** something—to get back **control** of something. But I sense much of it misses that God is here and he is what we most need.
- Even as an *old guy* to some of you, I am grateful for advances in digital communication. I couldn't even get this message to you very easily without it. But, I watch as people are swept up into it as if this will be the *answer* fix Jesus' church in this crisis.
- Jesus' Church isn't broken. Though the earth give way and mountains fall into the heart of the sea and so on...Jesus is still in the midst of his Church. We don't **have** to be filled with anxiety to do stuff—fix—stuff—control stuff. If we are filled with anxiety that is a sure sign we are operating autonomously even if we didn't think we were. I have seen in myself these past weeks.
- Again, am I saying be passive? Am I saying don't meet on Zoom? Don't look at the beautiful webpage FBCCS.org—again that's FBCCS.org--a bunch of folks are working on? Nope!
- I am saying, if there is momentary anxiety take an aspirin. Stop. Pray. Look to the LORD. Put the eyes of your heart on Him.
- And I am saying, rather than just treating the symptom of a sudden headache. How about us all striking at the heart of the "ambitious autonomy virus" while living with the Corona virus?
- If you are not doing so—practice this—be still, release, refrain from trying to do God's work. Remember he is always there. Remember that the LORD is God and we need HIM. You need HIM!

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- Any other way of living today, or any day for that matter, will fill us with anxiety, BUT, especially in times like these.
- I miss seeing you face-to-face and sharing the LORD's Supper with you.
- Thank you for honoring me by listening.
- I do hope we can meet together again soon.

- **BTW:** I now have 352 emails in my inbox. Twenty-one new ones. I'm not sure I feel less anxious now. I'm not more certain we will all OK. I'm told I should be... because, now I know, Tucano's, Biaggis Ristorante Italiano, Uber Eats, Outback Steakhouse, Southwest Airlines and even the Pikes Peak Library District all promise they are going to get me through the Corona virus Crisis!
- Everyone feels like they have to **DO** something. ***"Be still and know that the LORD is still God!"***
- I will try to send you a YouTube link with this sermon. It's an old Steven Curtis Chapmen song I don't ever remember hearing. It isn't even one of his best, in my opinion. But, it sure has a few lines that mean something to me right now.
- Pray for one another!
- ***"The Lord is near!"***