

AN ADVENT PRAYER  
Philippians 4: 4-7

Do you ever have one of those weeks when everything seems to be going along quite well, thank you? Then you watch a newscast or read the paper or receive a phone call. That's what happened to me this week, but this time it was an email. On Tuesday my good friend Bob Busch, our elder for finance, sent me an email that went something like this, "Our pledges right now are about \$50,000 below what our anticipated expenses will be for 2010." \$50,000! That pretty much ruined my morning coffee!

So then I let myself get into a funk, one of those financial funks, where you start worrying about money. Wondering how we will pay the light bill around here next year. Wondering how we will pay our mortgage, how we will pay the staff. Wondering? Probably closer to stewing, fretting. Then I said, "Self, you should be hoping, indeed praying that we all turn in our pledge cards and make this financial dark cloud pass over us." So, please, go ahead, make my day! Turn in those pledge cards today. Dean Rovang our stewardship elder and Bob Busch will be strategically located at the exits after worship with pledge cards in hand.

Then on Thursday I got in the mail my annual report from the Social Security Administration. You know the document that tells you how much you have paid in and how much you will get back from the government-maybe. Here is the phrase that got my attention and set my heart to beating. It was under the ominous heading, "About Social Security's future...."

This is what it said, "The Social Security system is facing serious financial problems. In 2016 we will begin paying more in benefits than we collect in taxes. Without changes, by 2037 the Social Security Trust Fund will be exhausted and there will be enough money to pay only about 76 cents for each dollar of scheduled benefits." 2016? 2037? I did some speedy calculations-Steve Stogner would have been proud! And I figured, the good Lord willing, that I would be 89 when I begin receiving 76 cents on the dollar in retirement benefits. That is, if no changes are made between now and then.

Then I started imagining what kind of changes could happen by then. In 2037 will they even be able to find the key to the Social Security Trust Fund "lock box"? Will the Chinese still be lenient toward its greatest debtor nation, the United States? Will global warming be better or worse? Will we

have withdrawn our troops from Afghanistan? Will people have jobs in our country, especially young African-American men? Will the mortgage crisis be resolved? Will Wall Street behave? Then on the church front-will the Presbyterian Board of Pensions remain solvent? And on a personal level-will Sharon still love me? Will our boys come see us? Can I count on the aids in the nursing home to be kind to me?

Once you get in anxiety mode, everything, I mean everything, becomes questionable. Your breathing becomes short with that tightening around your throat. Remember that anxiety comes from a Latin word, which means a narrow place. Anxiety is like the constricted quarters in a submarine that press in upon you. Anxiety mode squeezes you and makes you breathless. I know that feeling. I suspect you do as well.

This is a time of year when we often feel anxious. It is typically generated by money worries. How to pay for Christmas and those end of the year expenses, even finishing off your pledge-all these and more often make us anxious. And so this morning, the third Sunday of Advent, I offer this Advent Prayer, one based on our passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians: "Lord, we would rejoice in you always. You are near to us and so we will show gentleness to all. O Lord, help us not to worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving to make our requests known to you. Only this, O Lord, may your peace, which passes all understanding, guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen."

It's a prayer we need to pray often. Paul reminds us, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." When a thousand worries threaten to snuff out your joy, be grateful nevertheless. And may the peace of Christ, a serenity that defies all logic and reason, guard your heart and buoy your spirits in ways that only your faith can comprehend.

I believe that anxiety can be overcome in prayer, intentional and meditative prayer. A prayer life that reminds us who we are and whose we are. Paul reminds us that our lives are hidden with Christ in God. We have been buried with Christ already in our baptism. So death holds no terror for us. We have been crucified with Christ and the life we now live is in and through Christ. We are not our own. We have been bought with a price. Thus, I have given up the notion that I must guard and protect my life as though I alone were the captain of my fate. In life and in death I belong to Christ and Christ alone. This is the source of my peace that passes all

understanding. It is the peace of Christ that dwells in my heart richly by grace alone. It is not my own doing. It is a gift of God.

So I remind myself again and again, “Do not worry about anything.” Rather, “make your requests known to God.” In everything give thanks. In everything offer up your prayers and supplications to God. At the heart of a serene lifestyle is a deep conviction that God loves us and wants the very best for us. Regardless of what happens to us or to the ones we love, God is present. God cares and God hears our prayers.

What God wants from us is an anxious free presence in the world. We would bear witness to the truth of Jesus’ words, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink or about your body what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” The secret of an anxiety free life is the feeling, lodged firmly in your heart, that God will provide what you need. Without that certainty, every phone call, every email, every newscast, every newspaper article, indeed, every conversation with others is an occasion for yet more anxiety.

I received yet another letter in the mail on Friday. It was the opposite kind of experience described at the beginning of this sermon. My dear friend Conrad Rocha, a fine Presbyterian brother with whom we traveled to China, wrote this in his Christmas card: “Upon my return to the United States, I went for my quarterly checkup with my urologist to check on the progress of the prostate cancer treatment. It was good news and bad news. The bladder remains cancer free after seventeen months. But the prostate cancer appears to have returned. In fact, the issue now is not whether, but how aggressively it has returned and then what treatment to undergo. Yet, I am not afraid. I have not lost hope, I am not angry for I know that Emanuel, God with us, is indeed God’s unfailing, faithful and true promise which I can trust and upon which I can rely. Thanks be to God for indeed in this Advent season I am reminded that God became flesh in Christ Jesus, Christ lived and died for us and God is with us unto the end of all time.” That from a brother in Christ facing aggressive prostate cancer!

And so this is my Advent Prayer for Conrad and for us all: “Lord, we would rejoice in you always. You are near to us so we will show gentleness to all. O Lord, help us not to worry about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving to make known our requests to you. Only this, O Lord, may your peace, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.”