

*Philippians 4:1-9*  
*October 11, 2020*  
*“The Peace Which Passes Understanding”*  
*Rev. Randy Smith*

It is Paul's *command* in the reading this morning from Phil. 4 -- "**Do not worry about anything...**" -- and Paul's *promise* -- "And the **peace of God**, which *surpasses* all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" -- that led to this morning's sermon. And no one within the reach of my voice this morning need ask "Why?" The "**why**" is easy: because of the *extraordinarily* **worry-filled** and *un-peaceful* era in which we are living.

Just a few **examples** that have caught my ear the last several months. First, my hearing the story that, just after George Floyd was killed on May 25 by a police officer in the streets of Minneapolis MN, and the violence in many American cities which followed this, an acquaintance's 32-year-old **boyfriend** -- who, by the way, has his own **private armory** in his basement -- "has been waiting for this moment all his life", *viz.*, has been waiting for some kind of **race war** to break out, right here in the upstate of S.C., a war for which he apparently considers himself armed and ready.

And then, just last week, in a dentist's chair (with my mouth, naturally, wide open), my 30 year-old **hygienist**, a married mother of a 3 year-old -- knowing I am a pastor -- felt compelled to ask me whether I thought the so-called "**End Times**" were drawing near, on account of all the turmoil she has undoubtedly seen and heard over the last 5 months. Given that a dentist's chair is not the place to try to hold an in-depth conversation, I simply told her that my short answer was "No."

And then, finally, a YouTube video I stumbled across just a few weeks ago, featuring a man I'd say was in his 40s, advising people on how to prepare for -- what he considered was -- the **inevitable breakdown of the whole civil order** following the November 3 election, including, of course, adequate weaponry, but also food for the long-term and a defensible shelter. The man didn't indicate in the video where he was located, but I have a suspicion he is acquainted with our neighbor in Pickens County, Mr. Brenton Bruns, who has been building a defensible shelter, in phases since 1999, which he calls "**Doomsday Castle**". National Geographic even featured him and his Castle on a "reality TV" show until 2013 (maybe you watched it?).

So, as I say, it seems clear to me that we are living in an *extraordinarily* worry-filled and *un-peaceful* era. **No one is at peace**. The presidential candidates are not at peace. Did you see their first (and now maybe only) **debate**? Was it peaceful?

**No one is at peace.** Family members are not at peace with one another, can't talk with one another. Facebook Friends are busily "un-friending", "unfollowing" or "snoozing" each other, so **in the grip** are we of a **polarization** of opinions, perspectives, policy differences so *severe* that we actually cannot have any *civil* conversation with each other about them.

**No one is at peace.** A global viral pandemic has become in the U.S., not just a public health crisis but yet another source of **outrage** and *rage* among us, with reports of retail and restaurant workers being **shot** (some fatally) because they asked patrons to wear **masks**, and -- just this last week -- a foiled plot by **militia** members in Michigan to kidnap the Democratic Governor of that state because of her strong efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19.

**No one is at peace.** And so I wondered *how* we -- *if* we -- as the Church in this era, might *hear, understand*, and, in some way, **appropriate** Paul's words from long ago to the early Christians at Philippi. Bear in mind that Paul writes this letter while a *prisoner* in Rome, in the early 60s AD, and he writes it to a congregation which is suffering some sort of **persecution**, to *encourage* them. And, yet -- *even* in such a context -- he can write to them about "**the peace of God**". So, maybe even in *our* context, we can find some of this for ourselves?

But we first have to hear and deal with Paul's command to "**Rejoice always!**" Who can *rejoice* at all when consumed by **worries**? So, next: "**Do not worry about anything...**" And how are we supposed to do *that*? By being, Paul says, **thankful** for **what is**, while *also* faithfully letting God know in prayer what you'd *like* to be the case.

The **problem**, of course, is that it's *hard* to be grateful for **less than you were wanting**, or *expecting*, whether of other people, or of life in general -- **isn't it?** Being thankful in that context means *yielding* to the reality of what *is* or -- i.e. - **giving up control**. Or *perhaps* giving up what is, in the final analysis for us human beings, the *illusion* of control. That may be, I decided, **the real key** here, in terms of experiencing the "peace of God which passes all understanding", namely *surrendering* the **illusion of control**.

Which does not **at all** mean that as Christians, and as the Church, we *surrender* our responsibility to be involved in the *agonies* and *miserias* of the life of the world we are a part of, sitting back *passively* -- really, *fatalistically* -- and waiting on whatever is going to happen to happen. No, God has **a stake** in what's going on all around us, and God has made the largest investment imaginable in calling us to follow Jesus, and claiming us by Baptism to be his Church, to be **witnesses** before others as to what the gospel -- the Good News -- of Jesus *looks* like, how it changes *lives*, yes, but how it *also* -- at the *same* time, and to the same *degree* -- **changes the life of the world** we changed *people* are a part of.

Such that we have the **opportunity** -- *if* we will claim it -- to offer the world around us something **no one else can**, namely "**the peace of God which passes all understanding**". You may have noticed how many on each side of the divisions in our nation like to claim that **God is on their side**. Some say they are trying to **bring God back** into American life. Others say they are trying to lead America closer to becoming **the kind of society** the OT prophets are always calling Biblical Israel to be, namely a **way of life** founded on **social justice**.

But as followers of Jesus, we ask: "Am *I*, are *we*, on *God's* side?" Because only *God's* purposes **matter**. My friend, James Howell, points out wisely that those purposes will *sometimes* seem "**liberal**" to us human beings, and *sometimes* "conservative", in terms of our contemporary political definitions of those terms. All that demonstrates, however, is just how **limited** our human perspective is, and this, in turn, leads us as Christians, as the Church, to **an essential humility** in how we involve ourselves in the politics of the world around us.

James, and another colleague from Duke, Andy Langford, pointed me to the wisdom of the former 3-term Republican Senator from Missouri, John Danforth, who is also an Episcopal priest:

"If we believe our political positions are absolute implementations of God's will, then our political causes become religious crusades, and reasonable accommodation becomes impossible. If our faith brings modesty about ourselves and our politics, our effectiveness is more likely. I believe that such modesty is, or at least should be, **Christianity's gift** to American politics."

**Can** we as the Church offer this *gift*, can we offer any better way to the world around us? **Can** we offer the "peace of God which passes understanding"? **Or** will we simply **import** the *angry* and *fearful* **divisions** going on all around us into the life of the Church and allow them to divide **us**, as well? **Or** -- even **worse** -- will we drive away from the Church all those whose perspectives differ from ours by insisting that the Church be a **thoroughly homogeneous** body, a group of those who see things *just* the way we do?

As you all know, one of the candidates for President, Joe Biden, launched his campaign by saying "We are in a **battle for the soul of our nation**". The huge **irony**, of course, is that folks who will vote for Donald Trump almost certainly feel the same way, while possessing a very different vision of America's "soul". Our Methodist founder, John Wesley, made it one of the "**rules**" of his "Class Meetings" -- **small groups** which met weekly, with the goal of helping members grow and mature in their faith and accountability -- to ask this question: "**How is it with your soul?**" From my observations, the "**souls**" -- our **essential selves** in relationship to God and others -- of a great many Methodist, and other Christians, are **far** from being in a **healthy** state, on account of the ways we are choosing to respond to all the social and political turmoil stirring all around us at present.

It strikes me that it would be critically important for **all** of us -- **me included!** -- to pause for just a moment -- or maybe for a whole day! -- to take a break from the news cycle, and ask ourselves: **How is it with my soul?** Is the way or ways I see myself responding to the *extraordinarily worry-filled* and *un-peaceful* days we are living through *strengthening* my trust in God above all else, or *degrading* that trust?

Maybe this will help us **not fall prey** to the message out there that, unless you vote the "right" way on November 3, **everything** -- *everything!* -- will *fail* and *fall apart!* Christians need to vote, i.e., *as if everything depended* on it, while at the same time understanding that *not everything depends* on it.

Because on **November 4**, *God* will still be *God*, and *we* will still be the **people of God**. And we will still have **the responsibility** to *embody*, in our life-together as the Church, and to *continually* find ways to *share* with the world around us, "the peace of God which passes all understanding".