



"Where Is Your Focus?"
Scripture – Philippians 4:4-9
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, October 18, 2020

The Apostle Paul advises us: "Do not be anxious about anything." Let's see, is there anything about which we should worry? Nothing really comes to mind other than a global pandemic that has killed more than a million people; an anemic economy with millions of Americans out of work; wild fires, hurricanes, and melting glaciers; protests and riots over racism, hearings over a controversial Supreme Court nominee, and being on the verge of an election in the most divisive political environment of our lives.

What was Paul thinking? "Have no anxiety about *anything*?" I suspect most of us can rattle off a few things that keep us awake at night.

Pastor Jarrod Longbons confesses that he *majors* in worrying. Much of the time he imagines that he is suffering from some undiagnosed illness that will do him in; or he has a sense of dread that some calamity is about to come crashing down. He is also aware that his fretting is a source of major irritation to his family.

He recalls a period in his life when he was obsessed with thoughts that each ache, each pain, and each sniffle was likely a symptom of a serious illness. There was a weekend during this time when he and his wife decided to take their family on a hike.

It was early spring, the air was cool and crisp, and the environment was bug-free. That's when it happened. They were ascending a trail, his heart rate began to climb, and a thought slid into his psyche. He swiveled and blurted to his wife, "At this very moment I feel...healthy. I do not think I am dying of anything. In fact, I'm certain of it!"

She rolled her eyes and said, "Good. That's what I have been telling you. Now, let's just enjoy this hike!"

"Imagine that," he thought to himself, "having my mind freed up enough to simply enjoy the moment."

Later that night while he was watching TV, a show came on that focused on the health benefits of spending time in nature. Perfect timing since he had just experienced it firsthand. The program focused on something called, "Forest bathing." What spoke to him was that people who worry intensify their anxiety when they spend too much time indoors. The physical walls of a room prompt their mental thoughts to close in on them. Going outside – hiking in a forest or walking in a park or going to the beach – allows worrisome thoughts to escape into the atmosphere.¹

How often has someone encouraged us – or we have lectured ourselves – “Go outside and breathe some fresh air and soak in some sunlight?” Intuitively, we know this refreshes our spirit.

For several years, Dr. Quing Li has been studying the science behind nature’s power to rejuvenate us. She explains that forest bathing is not about hiking or exercising or jogging. Rather, it is focused on soaking in the atmosphere of the forest. It is intentionally connecting with nature through our five senses.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, most Americans spend 93 percent of their time indoors. Dr. Li has conducted several studies that demonstrate that even a small amount of time in nature can have a positive impact on our health.

She explains how forest bathing works. She says, “Leave your phone and camera behind. Find a spot and walk slowly...Let your body be your guide. Listen to where it wants to take you...Let nature enter through your ears, eyes, nose, mouth, hands and feet. Listen to the birds singing and the breeze rustling in the leaves of the trees. Look at the different greens of the trees and the sunlight filtering through the branches. Smell the fragrance of the forest and breathe in the natural aromatherapy...Place your hands on the trunk of a tree. Dip your fingers or toes in a stream. Lie on the ground. Drink in the flavor of the forest.”²

She goes on to say that when you put yourself in nature, you can walk, eat, meditate, do art, observe plants, whatever helps you drink in the natural environment. You do not even need to go into a forest. You do not need to drive hours to find the perfect place. You can go to a park or your own backyard and you can do it in any kind of weather.

God’s creation can go a long way to helping us overcome anxiety. There is healing in nature. It can broaden our line of sight when we have overemphasized the negative. It can open up new vistas when we dread the future. Spending time in nature may not completely eliminate our worries, but it has remarkable power to transform our perspective.

When I pondered Paul’s admonition: “Do not be anxious about anything” do you know what came to my mind? A Tom Hank’s movie. Did you see “Bridge of Spies?” It is a true story set during the Cold War when the Soviet Union and the United States were locked in a tense struggle for global influence. The film tells the saga of the U.S. swapping a Soviet spy for Gary Powers, the U2 pilot who was shot down over Russia. The Soviet spy is a small, middle-aged, unassuming man who never seems rattled by anything. At one point, when he is on trial for espionage and could be sentenced to death, his lawyer turns to him, and says, “Do you never worry?” The man calmly replies, “Would it help?”

There are times when I find myself worrying about something that is completely out of my control, and I ask myself “Does it help?” Does it change anything other than elevate my blood pressure and increase my anxiety?

Of course, being rational and giving yourself sound advice does not always cure the problem. To his credit, Paul does not imagine that he can calm our nerves by simply commanding us to stop being anxious. He also provides a prescription. He points to the importance of a spiritual life, by encouraging us to spend time in prayer. He does not say, “Pray for God to remove your anxiety and everything will be fine.” Instead, he points to the importance of prayers of thanksgiving.

Clever advice, Paul. When we are anxious, our worries often mount to the point that we squelch all feelings of gratitude. We block out all blessings and focus ever more intently on the things that get under our skin. We

intensify the spotlight on all that is horrible in the world, and we cast to the shadows all possibilities for hope. Praying for the things for which we can be grateful prevents us from being sucked into a black hole.

Finally, Paul shares this crucial piece of advice:

“Whatever is true,
 whatever is noble,
 whatever is just,
 whatever is pure,
 whatever is lovely,
 whatever is admirable —
 if *anything* is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things.

This idea could not be more in line with contemporary understandings of the human brain. If you have read anything about neuroplasticity, you know that Paul’s advice to focus our mind on beautiful and uplifting thoughts is crucial.

A colleague, Drew Rick-Miller, shares his astonishment at the way the pathways in our brains can be altered. His mother suffered a stroke that damaged the right side of her brain. It caused her to lose movement on the left side of her body. The stroke did not weaken or damage her left arm or leg. The reason she could not move them was because her brain had lost its connection to them. The challenge she faced in recovery was **not** to strengthen the muscles in her left arm and leg, but rather to **retrain her brain** to send commands to the muscles on her left side. In some cases, the brain “regains lost connections, (in other cases) the brain can create new connections to compensate for the areas that are severely damaged.”³

In the first week his mother was home from the hospital, he helped her with exercises the doctors had recommended. She sat in a chair and lifted her right leg, but when she tried to do the same with her left leg, nothing happened. He had to lift it for her while she concentrated on mentally telling that leg to rise. The next day she tried it, she could not do it, but her son noticed slight twitches in her leg muscles as he lifted it for her. Meanwhile, she kept telling her leg to rise.

“Day three, same exercise – she lifted her foot off the floor! While she expressed her delight, her son’s jaw dropped as he realized that over the course of three days, he had seen her brain literally relearn how to raise her knee.”⁴

Not all changes come quickly. It took a month for her left arm to respond at all. But our brains can change over time.

This suggests that we can train our brain to better manage our emotions. Imagine what might happen if we spent time each day in prayer and reflection pursuing thoughts that inspire gratitude, joy, and hope. Might it diminish thoughts of anxiety, fear, and despair?

I leave you with this:

Relish a bath in God’s creation.
Open your pores to the glory swirling at the edges of your life
and savor the tranquility nature bequeaths to you.

Sidestep the trap set to entangle you.
Disarm the dread that dominates your thoughts.
Will it help to worry? Will it heal the world? Will it snare the pathos of God?

Grace your gray matter with images of what is true, noble, and just;
Focus your prayers on what is pure, lovely, and admirable.
Allow the holiness that is within you to emerge from your depths.

May the walls that encase your psyche collapse
unleashing the anxiety that holds you hostage
and answering the longings of your soul that suspect new possibilities hover nearby.

NOTES

1. Jarrod Longbons, "An Answer for Our Ruminations," *Day1.org*, October 11, 2020.
2. Quing Li, "Forest Bathings Is Great for Your Health," *Time.com*, May 1, 2018.
3. Drew Rick-Miller, "Brain Power," *Scienceforthechurch.org*, September 22, 2020.
4. Ibid.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God – in whom we live and move and have our being – from our first cries to our final breaths, we are your own. We give thanks that you have claimed us as beloved children and called us to life with you. We give thanks that you surround us with love, shower us with grace, and sustain us in hope. We give thanks that you, O God, have given us so many reasons to rejoice!

For some of us, words of praise flow freely.
For others among us, they catch in our throats.
We long to be people who heed Paul's command:
"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"
But there is much in our lives, much in our world,
that tempers these expressions of praise.

God, we bring before you *all* that makes us anxious:
A virus that threatens the health of our bodies
and the health of our communities;
An election season that has some feeling discouraged,
some feeling hopeful,
and nearly all feeling 'on edge';
An economic crisis, a climate crisis, a mental health crisis,
a crisis of trust in our common life;
The stresses of work, or school, or caregiving, or coping ...
all during a time when networks of support are scattered
and many feel alone.

Yes, we bring before you *all* these burdens, and we lay them at your feet.
God – Sharer of Sorrows, Bearer of Grief – fill us with peace, we pray.

But not only us ... Fill our community, our country, our entire world with your peace that transcends all understanding.

God – What a privilege it is to carry everything to you in prayer!
And what a blessing it is to be called to your work.
Inspire us to seek that which is true, that which is noble, that which is just, that we may be agents of peace, beacons of light, and instruments of love.

This we pray in the name of Jesus, our Faithful Friend –
the One who gave us words to pray: **Our Father ...**

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.