

Philippians 4: 4-7

Don't be anxious! Relax! Rejoice!

Good advice from the apostle Paul.

Don't be anxious. Anxiousness is a human experience. We all are anxious at times. Some of us feel a non-stop, 24/7 anxiousness.

Anxiousness differs from fear. Fear is a real life threat. Imagine you are a caveman or cavewoman. You walk with your spear and bow and arrow in the woods, and all of a sudden there's a huge brown bear on your path. Your eyes open. You start sweating at the spot. Adrenaline kicks in. The bear is approaching you. The fear is overwhelming and you have two choices: fight or flight. You choose to fight.

Ten minutes later. That wasn't too hard. The bear was smaller than you thought and you drag it home. To your cave. Off hill with the bear, that must be doable in about an hour. But then, anxiety starts haunting you. What if the bear was a young bear? What if his mum is coming? What if his mum is three times bigger than this one? You start to transpire. Your heartrate fastens. You become dizzy. Will you faint? At the end you leave your game and run home, to the safety of your cave.

That is the difference between fear and anxiety. Fear is a reaction to a real threat. A ferocious animal in the stone age. A fast car that nearly hits you in our century. You have to react, to fight or flight. You kill the animal. You jump to safety to avoid the car. Fear is an emotion that saves your life.

Anxiety isn't healthy. It is a 'What-if'- emotion. What if the mamma bear comes? What if I lose my job? What if I'll never be happy again? Anxiety is like daydreaming a nightmare. You imagine things that are not there, threats that are not real, and by doing that, you put your brain in fear position 2.0, but there is no real danger, no bear, no car at high speed coming, nothing that can put your life in danger.

Still, most of us suffer from anxiety in one way or another. We are so stressed out as a society, that many of us use Valium, or other medicine against anxiety and stress. Or we self-medicate with alcohol or we smoke or use drugs. All to soften our feelings and to free ourselves from the non-stop stress that we experience.

Beautiful words from Paul, and according to the Huffington Post the most underlined words from the Amazon Kindle E-reader. Comforting words maybe, but at the same time challenging words. Do not be anxious. But how? And how do these words appear on the Advent Church calendar, how do they connect with Christmas?

Paul gives us a few life-changing tips to quit being anxious and enjoy Christmas throughout the year by having a Christ-filled life

Tip 1. Rejoice. Always.

Paul uses an imperative here: You must rejoice :-). But how? His advice is: Rejoice 'in the Lord.' That appeal is especially meaningful when we are faced with situations marked by sorrow and difficulties. Paul isn't promoting entertainment, joy without foundation, but he specifies where to find the real joy: In the Lord. Always! He even repeats it: again I say: rejoice!

The joy Paul himself had, was a joy in the Lord. Not in his circumstances. Paul writes this letter while he is imprisoned. Prisons are unpleasant environments. I have visited prisons in the Netherlands, in Colombia and in Rwanda, and none of them were inviting. Prisoners are confronted with loneliness, fears, rivalry, sometimes even beatings and killings. It is from a prison that Paul writes to the Philippians, to always rejoice.

His joy is not an emotion based on his experience of the circumstances. He rejoices in the Lord. Paul practices a joy that doesn't get effected by external happenings. His joy -writes Karl Barth- is a defiant 'nevertheless' which Paul sets like a full stop against resentment and fear, that might otherwise well up within him.' Meaning that although Paul was imprisoned, nevertheless his joy was in the Lord, who knows and loves him even in those circumstances.

His joy is 'in the Lord.' In the Kurios. The biggest joy Paul had, was that God became man, that Jesus came to this world to give himself as a sacrifice for our sins, to rescue us.

We look many times at our circumstances and forget to take our burdens to the Lord. The eagle, when fighting a snake, catches the snake and takes it out of its own environment, into the air. The snake is deadly on the ground, but powerless in the air. Let us take our circumstances to the Lord and find our joy in Him. He conquered and we are more than conquerors through Him who loves us. That was the joy Paul had. And his advice, tip 1 against anxiety is: Rejoice in the Lord. Find your joy in his love, his mercy, his character. Find your joy in the Lord himself. That is something you can practice in all circumstances: the real joy-giver is God and focusing on Him will help you, uplift you, give you the strength you need in the most challenging moments.

Tip 2. Pray . Always

Are you always praying? Please meet me after the service, because I need to learn this. Paul writes: do not be anxious about anything, but *in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God*. That is his secret, to never be anxious. Pray in every situation. The alternative to worrying and to keep your balance in this world full of anxiety-creating situations is: prayer.

The text uses three synonyms: prayer, petitions and requests. So what he is saying is that the right reaction is prayer and more prayer. That helps us, because -as Paul says in verse 5- the Lord is near.

The Lord is never far away, but he is near, he knows about our situation as he shared our humanity in Christ Jesus, and he is still near through his Holy Spirit and able to guide us, encourage us, comfort us, strengthen us, assist us, transform and renew us and give us all things we need in whatever situation we face.

That is why we can pray with thanksgiving. Even in fears, in prisons, in sickness, in want, in whatever situation we are, we can thank God for his presence and love. Looking at ourselves and at what might come, result in fear and anxiety. Looking at the Almighty is the end of anxiety. When we give thanks and cast our burdens on Him, we let our problem be God's problem.

Tip 3. Let Peace prevail. Always.

As a preparation on this topic, I read a small booklet written by Max Lucado. He compares a perfect storm with perfect peace.

When I was a teenager, I once experienced a terrible storm. I remember it was somewhere between Vastervick in Sweden en Tallin, and the storm was so terrible, that we had to switch to another direction and face the storm, otherwise the boat could have tilted by the waves and tumbled over. Max Lucado compares the worst moments in our lives with a perfect storm. He writes: *You've consulted the bank, changed your diet, called lawyers, called supervisors, tightened your budget. You've gone through counseling, rehab or therapy. Yet the sea churns with angry foam. Is fear coming at you from all sides? Let God give you what only He can give: Perfect peace.*

We can even find ourselves in a storm of our own making. We have made bad choices. We have looked for solutions without finding advice from other Christians, the Bible or without praying to God. Fear is coming from all sides. You are anxious about everything. Then, let God speak to you. The Lord is near. You can confess whatever went wrong. Bring everything before the Lord. We can rejoice, because God

is a God of mercy. He is very willing to forgive and to cleanse you and me from all our sins. We can rejoice, because of the Prince of Peace that came to the World: Jesus Christ. That is why Paul says: The peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

He is the perfect Peace, even when we are in a perfect storm. When we commit all our anxieties to God, the result is that God is protecting us by his peace.

Our heart and minds will be relieved from anxiety. The basis for this peace is the assurance that through Christ Jesus we have been reconciled with God.

Let peace prevail. Allow God in Jesus Christ to fill your heart with the presence of the Holy Spirit, and be at rest.

Paul writes this letter to the Philippians. Caesar Augustus gave the city of Philippi a special treatment. It was filled with war veterans. The citizens were even exempted from taxation and were given many privileges. So Paul writes to people acquainted with war, trained soldiers who have been on the battle field. And he writes: The peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

The peace of God will protect you. He uses a military terminology. Paul is picturing God's peace as a detachment of soldiers standing guard over a city so as to protect it from attack. The soldiers from Philippi understood perfectly what he meant: God's peace, like a garrison of soldiers, will keep guard over our thoughts and feelings, so we will be safe against the assaults of worry and fear as He Himself is our fortress.

By grace

This text is almost impossible to apply in real life. It is the 'always' and the 'never' in the text. I just can't rejoice 'always', whatever the circumstances are. And I cannot NOT be anxious ever, because I am anxious sometimes. It doesn't work well.

It only seems to work by grace. It seems that the only way to take the words of today to our hearts, is to receive them just as Mary and the shepherds received the advent gospel.

Do not fear.

The Lord is with you.

I bring you tidings of great peace and comfort. And so on.

Let us therefore pray to the Lord to have His way in our lives. So that we learn to live without fear. Knowing that He is always with us and even intercedes for us, also in

those moments when we fall short. So that by grace we'll rejoice, we'll not be anxious, we'll be praying in the Spirit and we'll receive, by grace, the peace that surpasses all understanding which will guard our hearts and thoughts in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior. *Amen.*