

Whatever

Message #1 in the series, "Whatever"

Philippians 4:6-9

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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Pastor David Woolverton

Many of you know that seventeen years ago, I had a heart attack. I was 41 years old at the time – and it was one of the most significant defining moments of my life. While I do not ever want to go through that again, I've reached a point where I am actually thankful for all that I learned about myself, about life and about the Lord by having gone through it.

But that's not exactly what I want to share with you today. What I want to share with you is actually what happened the year *after* my heart attack. It was the year after my heart attack that my life started to unravel due to anxiety. You see, I started having repeated and often unexpected panic attacks. I would have them in the middle of the day. I would have them in the middle of the night. They would occur at the movie theater while watching a movie that I couldn't wait to see. And they would occur just before going out to dinner with Kristine. Sometimes I could feel them coming on. Sometimes they just happened suddenly.

It was a scary time. And it didn't make sense to me. Up to that point – even during the time immediately after my heart attack – I was the perfect example of a non-anxious person. I was always calm, cool under pressure, and ready to navigate through anybody's emotional storm. In fact, people would often say that they loved being around me because I always made them feel calm, as if everything would be okay.

But that year, everything changed. For over a year, I wrestled with it . . . trying to figure out what was going on with me, why it was happening to me, and – more importantly – how to stop it from happening. But nothing seemed to work.

When I think back to those days, it seemed like I was stuck in a crazy loop where no matter what I tried to do, the panic attacks would still flutter into the picture and wreak havoc in my life. I prayed so hard through that time, pleading with God to take away the anxiety. Many days, it just seemed as if God wasn't listening.

Then one day, after picking up several of my prescriptions from the pharmacy, I had yet another pleading session with God. I remember being on my knees, begging God to intervene and to grant me some wisdom as to what was going on and how to make it better. I even quoted Scripture back to God – reminding God that He had said in His Word that if any of us lacks wisdom, all we needed to do was ask Him for it. Well, I asked. In fact, I begged for that wisdom.

As I prepared for bed that night, I went to the bag of medicines that I had just picked up and got the one I typically used at bedtime. It was a type of steroid that I had been on for allergies. As I opened the box and pulled out the medicine container, the drug pamphlet popped out of the box. This pamphlet is that document that comes with some medicines that's filled with very small print, listing out all of the uses for this medicine . . . as well as a list of side effects.

Most of the time, I just throw those pamphlets away. But on a whim, I opened up this one and began to read it. What I discovered was that on the list of side effects for this steroid was everything that I had been experiencing. Everything. Apparently, in rare cases, this particular steroid can get into your blood stream and cause a form of adrenal insufficiency. Your adrenal glands are one of the main centers in your body that produces the hormones connected to our "fight – or – flight" responses. In other words, the medicine that I was taking, the steroid, was causing my panic attacks. At least that was my theory. Since it was a steroid, I began to wean myself off of it. Within two weeks, my panic attacks disappeared.

God answered my prayer that night. He provided the wisdom that I needed to help me in my desperation. I don't know exactly why I had to go through an entire year of struggling before that answer came . . . but I do know that that year taught me a lot about how utterly dependent I am on God's grace. It also made me very empathetic toward others who deal with anxiety, depression and other mental health concerns.

Anxiety. Panic attacks. They are very real. They are very challenging to life . . . and faith. And when you're going through them, you feel totally alone.

But you're not.

Research has shown that about \$50 billion dollars a year is spent on anxiety medicines and treatments in the U.S. In fact, between February 16th and March 15th of last year – the month when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic – the number of prescribed anti-anxiety drugs jumped over 34%. The pandemic was certainly hard on people who had previously struggled with anxiety, but it also impacted others who had not previously had any mental health concerns. The past 15 months has taken a toll on all of us.

Even for many of us who are Jesus followers, it seems that during the past 15 months, anxiety has really *scared the heaven out of us*. (See what I did there? ☺)

So, what exactly is anxiety? According to the dictionary, anxiety is "a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome" (Apple Dictionary Online). In other words, it's a feeling of worry, nervousness or unease about something that we have no control over. Have you ever been there?

Well, I believe that anxiety is actually a God-given emotion – when it's working the way it was designed to be working. Yes... I think it's actually a helpful hormonal response -- especially when we're facing situations that legitimately are a threat to us. Anxiety can let us know when something doesn't feel right. Or it can let us know that a person or a situation doesn't feel safe.

These are helpful things. But, when anxiety is allowed to run amok, it can become a force that causes us to experience major episodes of despair and depression. It can cause us to self-medicate with progressively addictive behaviors, or to chronically withdraw from living the life that God wants us to live. When it runs amok, or when we're under chronic situations of stress -- then anxiety can become a problem rather than a saving agent.

Yet, even in those times of chronic stress and anxiety, our anxiety can actually teach us something about ourselves, about our relationship with God, and about our relationships with one another. But therein lies the rub.

When you're going through anxiety, you're not really looking to learn a lesson. You just want to stop the panic that you're feeling.

And to stop the panic, sometimes we will do a whole bunch of things that are not necessarily helpful. Like, some of us try to control our anxiety by controlling other people. We get angry or we get bossy or we bully people around – unconsciously trying to control them because we feel out of control ourselves.

Or some of us try to escape the panic by drinking alcohol, or getting high on drugs, or taking high doses of pain medications, or engaging in risky or aggressive sexual behaviors, or staying up late at night watching reruns of *The Brady Bunch* – all in an attempt at numbing our feelings of panic and the emotional pains that accompany it.

Or some of us just try to suppress our panic – and we internalize it, keeping it to ourselves rather than getting the help that we need. So, it shows up in other ways – like with repeated migraines or irritable bowel disorders or palpitations . . . or repeatedly showing up late for work, or calling in sick a lot.

Anxiety. It's an occasional feeling for all of us at some point in our lives --- but for many of us, like roughly 30% of the U.S. population, it's more than just a fleeting moment of worry. Much more. And for many over the past 15 months, it became a pandemic that was more challenging than COVID-19.

It's a reality even for those of us who are persons of faith. Faith does not mean that you don't get anxious. But faith does give us the ability to face into our anxiety with some powerful tools to not only survive, but to thrive.

In fact, the phrase "*do not be afraid*" occurs at least 365 times in the Bible. And some of our strongest Bible heroes struggled with anxiety.

Take, for example, the Old Testament prophet Elijah. He knew anxiety. After successfully winning a major battle with the false prophets of Queen Jezebel, in **1 Kings 19:3-4**, we read . . .

³ Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴ while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."

King David also struggled with anxiety. In **Psalms 55**, just one example, he writes:

Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my plea; ² hear me and answer me. My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught ³ because of what my enemy is saying, because of the threats of the wicked . . . ⁴ My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen on me. ⁵ Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me.

Jesus, Himself, had moments of anxiety. In the Garden of Gethsemane, just before His arrest, Jesus faced into the reality of His pending death. In **Matthew 26:37-39** we read . . .

³⁷ [Jesus] took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. ³⁸ Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved,

even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.”³⁹ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.”

Now, if Jesus faced the difficulties of anxiety, certainly we can give ourselves permission to admit when we struggle with it.

But there’s hope. The fact that we have so many illustrations in the Bible of people of faith coping with anxiety means that God wants us to know that He’s created a positive way for us to face into it.

That’s what this sermon series is all about. We’re calling it, “Whatever” and we’re focusing in on a very powerful passage from the apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians – specifically, Philippians 4:6-9. The original receivers of this letter were Christians in the church at Philippi – a major city in the northeastern part of Greece. It was a congregation of new believers that were facing seasons of persecution and challenges while living as followers of Jesus in an increasingly hostile culture.

Look with me at this passage – **Philippians 4:6-9** . . .

⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Okay, notice something about verse 6. It says, “*Do not be anxious about anything.*” Do not be anxious. Easy to say, right? Well, the fact that Paul says it here indicates that his readers were dealing with times of anxiety. In Greek, the word that Paul uses for “*to be anxious*” literally means “to expend careful thought.” In other words, he’s saying, “don’t spend a ton of time fixating on things that you can’t control”. . . “Don’t obsess.”

Notice also that he says, “*do not be anxious **about anything.***” Anything. Rather than obsess about things we can’t control, Paul says “*in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*”

Author and motivational speaker, Vivian Greene once said, “Life isn’t about surviving the storm, but learning to dance in the rain.” If I may, I want to change that up just a bit to say, “**Faith isn’t about surviving the storm, but learning to dance in the rain.**” I really believe that we serve a God who never wastes a hurt. In fact, He never wastes anything. He uses every situation – even the seasons of our anxiety – to conform us into the disciples that He has called us to be.

Now, Jesus’s disciples certainly knew anxiety. Turn with me to Mark 4. In **Mark 4:35-41**, Jesus and the disciples get into their boats and begin to cross the Sea of Galilee and a huge storm arises causing these seasoned fishermen to panic. Now, their boats were not large. The wind and the rains pound them so badly that they fear for their lives. But all the while, Jesus is asleep in the boat! Look at what it says, starting in verse 38 . . .

³⁸ Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" ³⁹ He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. ⁴⁰ He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" ⁴¹ They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

One of the things this passage teaches us is that **in every situation, Jesus wants us to trust Him**. Jesus Christ, the Lord of Life, the King of Kings, our Savior, Redeemer, and Friend – the One who took on the sins of humanity, endured a horrible beating, as well as the torture of crucifixion, the One who died a humiliating death . . . and who three days later was raised from the dead . . . *this* Jesus has promised to be with us in the midst of our storms . . . and even to thrive *within* them. Even – and perhaps especially – when we're knee deep in anxiety.

Faith isn't about surviving the storm, but learning to dance in the rain.

But how do we do that? Allow me to share with you a couple of things that I've learned while navigating through my own anxiety.

1. Listen to your anxiety.

Not everyone will have major panic attacks. Thank God, right?! But many of us will have times – or even seasons – when we deal with anxiety. And when it comes, we need to remember that **anxiety reproduces anxiety**. Thinking about being anxious makes us even more anxious. But here's the thing, **anxiety also reminds us that we are not God**. Anxiety is an inward and outward sign that we are facing a situation that we cannot control. That's a pretty scary place to be. But at the same time, it's also a very freeing place to be. We are not God. Anxiety reminds us that we need God to be God. We need the One who created us, the One who calls us, the One who knows us better than anyone else . . . we need that God to be the One in the driver's seat of our lives (to play off of the Carrie Underwood song). And the truth is – He can. God wants us to trust Him – to trust in His goodness. To trust in His love for us. To trust in His plans for us. As we listen to our anxiety, we can move more quickly to that place where we confess both our need for our Savior as well as our trust in His goodness.

Our anxiety tells a story. It's trying to get our attention – to let us know that something is not right, that something is out of alignment. Our anxiety is actually an invitation to lean into God more closely – even when things don't make sense – because we are choosing to trust the Lord.

I believe King David had this in mind when he wrote Psalm 56. This is what he says in verses 3-4 . . . **"Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You. In God whose word I praise, in God I trust. I will not be afraid."**

These two verses have gotten me through many an anxious moment. I encourage you to memorize them, as I have done, so that you can call on God's Word when you're facing into your anxious times. So, first, we need to listen to our anxiety. It's trying to tell us something.

2. Listen through your anxiety.

In the New Testament letter to the Colossians, we read that all of us were made for the purposes of Jesus Christ – for the purposes of the Kingdom of God. To inaugurate that

Kingdom movement, the Bible says that Jesus came down, took on flesh, and dwelt among us. He knows what being human is all about. And He cares for us as we face our struggles. But He also is calling us deeper into discipleship – deeper into what it means to surrender more and more of our lives to what He is birthing in and through us.

You see, **anxiety may actually be a sign that something in us is ending and a new birth is coming.** Anxiety may indicate that something is about to be exposed that will reveal our utter dependence on the Lord. Or anxiety may mean that God is asking us to leave something that once was a place of security, but now no longer is what is best for us. Or anxiety may indicate that we're needing to let go of a relationship or an addiction or a role that we've served in order for God to expand our capacities for what's yet to come. Or anxiety may indicate that we've been dealing with a body chemistry that is not working the way it should and it's time to get help.

Regardless, we need to listen *through* our anxiety toward whatever it is that God may want to birth in us. In **1 Peter 5:7**, the apostle Peter tells us to, "**Cast all your anxieties ON HIM.**" That's "on God . . . **for He cares for you.**" **What if our moments of anxiety are actually signs that we're not supposed to be in control – of our circumstances, of others, of our own lives?**

In **2 Corinthians 12:9-10**, Paul reminds us that "**God's power is made perfect in weakness.**" He says, "**for when I am weak, then I am strong.**" In the original Greek of the New Testament, that verse literally reads like this: "**when I am weak, strong I am.**" Word order in Greek shows emphasis. Paul is emphasizing the word "strong."

In other words, our strength comes when God becomes our champion, when God upholds us with His mighty arms, when God embraces us with His grace. Hear me . . . **When we are in the presence of the Almighty, nothing can harm us. Nothing.** What I learned going through my season of anxiety is that whether facing times of anxiety or stress, or times of normal sanity – or normal insanity --- **I want Jesus Christ to be magnified in me.** In my weakness, I want Jesus to be my strength. In my anxiety, I want Jesus to call me *out* of the boat and *into* the stormy waters because I know that I am safe when He's around. Because of Jesus, when I am weak, *strong I am.*

Will you say that out loud with me – "**When I am weak, strong I am.**"

In your weakest, most anxious moments, you have a Savior, a Deliverer, a Rock, a Fortress, the Mighty One, the Prince of Peace, the Risen Christ . . . Jesus . . . and He's got you. *His* plans for your life are your destiny. That's why you don't have to be afraid, you don't need to worry, you don't need to be anxious. Nothing is going to happen to you that is outside of His Lordship and control.

As I said a few moments ago, anxiety reproduces anxiety. It can become a vicious cycle – a loop of one scary thought after another. Next week, we're going to look at a couple of ways to interrupt that cycle – based on the advice of some of the heroes of our faith that knew what anxiety felt like.

Until then, **hold onto the One who is holding onto you.**

Let's pray our prayer together . . .

*Lord, what do You need me to see, what do You need me to hear, what do You need me to know, and what do You need me to do? I am Your servant, in Jesus's name.
Amen.*