

Whatever, Part 2

Message #2 in the series, "Whatever"

Philippians 4:6-9

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown
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At seven thirty in the morning on September 12, 2001, I was on the radio at WJTL with my good friend Fred McNaughton, the station manager. We, along with everyone else in the United States, and many around the world, were still coming to terms with the devastating news of the prior day—the terrorist attacks on the World Trade towers and the Pentagon, and the deaths of nearly three thousand people, including those aboard United Airlines Flight 93, which crashed near Shanksville. Fred had invited me to join him on the morning broadcast, and together we interacted with the listeners around both the emotions of grief and the anxiety that resulted from our country having been attacked. Perhaps you remember where you were on the day after 9-11 – and how you felt as all of the details were flooding in.

As part of my discussion with Fred, I was drawn to the story of King Jehoshaphat in **2 Chronicles 20**. Feel free to turn there in your Bible as we take a look at it. Perhaps you've read it or heard it before.

In the account, Jehoshaphat had heard that a great army from several surrounding nations was amassing and was planning to do battle against the people of Judah. As soon as he heard the news, Jehoshaphat became scared and called a meeting of all of the people of Judah (v. 3). People from all over the region gathered under Jehoshaphat's leadership "to seek help *from the Lord*," as it says in verse 4. The people looked to Jehoshaphat, their king, for direction, and what they got was an invitation to a *prayer* meeting!

In response to the news of impending battle, Jehoshaphat led the people in prayer (v. 5). In this amazing prayer, Jehoshaphat gave voice to the corporate anxiety of his people. This is what he said as we read it in verse 12: "O our God, will you not execute judgment upon them? For *we are powerless* against this great multitude that is coming against us. *We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.*"

"We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you." That's the prayer for those who are facing anxiety! Have you ever been there?

Last week, we started a message series called, "Whatever," a series that is focusing in on **Philippians 4:6-9** – and the apostle Paul's framing of what to do when you're dealing with anxiety. We talked about how anxiety was actually a normal human response to situations that are out of our control. We also began to explore

how anxiety might actually be a good thing – at least, when it’s not so bad that it paralyzes us. I had shared that **anxiety may actually be a sign that something in us is ending and a new birth is coming**. I also wondered, **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?**

Well, today I want to take this another step further. In fact, I want to share two primary things with you . . .

1. First, with the possible exception of biochemical-related issues, when it comes to anxiety, we ourselves might actually be responsible for fueling the thought patterns that magnify our fears and multiply our panic.

In other words, when we are anxious, our anxiety creates a thought loop that actually *reinforces* our anxiety. We make our problem worse.

Last week, I shared with you my experiences with anxiety. After experiencing panic attacks at weird times, I actually started to anticipate when they might happen. I would start to worry about when they *might* happen. Did you hear that? -- I had anxiety that I *might* have anxiety! Do you see that thought loop? When you have anxiety, it can actually change the way you think – it can change your thought patterns -- causing you to preempt your life because you’re afraid that you *might* have a panic attack. When that happens, we begin to order our daily lives around our anxiety.

So, our thought patterns can actually magnify our fears and multiply our panic. Panic tends to breed panic. That leads me to the second thing that I want to share with you today . . .

2. **As a follower of Jesus, you can change your thought patterns.** Right now, because of the Holy Spirit within you, you have the power to change the way you think . . .especially in times of anxiety.

If you’re following along in your Bible, keep your finger in 2 Chronicles 20 for a few moments and turn with me to the New Testament letter called Romans, chapter 12. Starting in verse 2, Paul writes:

Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)

In Greek, the word Paul uses for “be transformed” is the same word that we know as “metamorphosis.” If you remember biology class, metamorphosis is a process by which a person, place, animal, insect, or thing changes in shape or nature. We know that word best when we think of caterpillars changing into butterflies. That’s metamorphosis. In this passage, the word is also in the middle-passive voice – which means that the action of change is being done *to us*. And according to Paul,

the transformation occurs “*by the renewing of [our] mind.*” The Greek word for “renewing” means “renovation.”

Kristine and I just finished renovating several rooms in our home. Those rooms look totally different than what they used to. They’ve had a complete make-over. That’s what Paul is getting at here – only in spiritual terms.

But how is that transformation done? The clue can be found in the preceding verse – Romans 12:1. This is what it says:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to *offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God*—this is your true and proper worship. **(Romans 12:1)**

In effect, what Paul is saying here is this – “Place your whole life into the hands of the One who knows you, the One who loves you, the One who died for you, the One who rose from the dead to give you new life. Make a decision today,” Paul says, “to no longer conform to the patterns that you see in those who are not followers of Jesus. Instead, allow the Holy Spirit to transform you from the inside out – giving you a total make-over . . . starting with the way you think.”

According to Paul, because of the Holy Spirit in us, we have the power to change the way we think.

The question is, “Do you want to? Do you want to change your thought patterns?”

The reason that question is important is that when our brains do that mind game – when they loop into a thought process that tries to anticipate our panic and anxiety attacks, it’s our way of preparing us for something that we believe is inevitable. We don’t want to be caught unprepared – so we actually over-compensate . . . we try to control our panic.

But here’s the deal . . . control is an illusion. Control is a relative term. Discipleship and spiritual formation depend on our willingness to *relinquish* control to the Holy Spirit. So trying to exert control—over our circumstances, over other people, over God—simply communicates how out of control we are . . . and how vulnerable we are. But the Bible actually teaches us a better way.

Let’s get back to our Bible story in 2 Chronicles 20 . . . What happened next in Jehoshaphat’s story is powerful to read. The Spirit of the Lord comes upon this guy named Jahaziel. Who is Jahaziel? Prior to this moment, he simply was one of the many in the crowd of worship leaders. Verse 14 says that he was “a Levite of the sons of Asaph.” Asaph was the chief worship leader – and so Jahaziel was one of Asaph’s descendants. Jahaziel, was one of the many who stood there in the crowd, afraid. Yet, with God’s anointing, his voice would deliver a message of hope and deliverance to both Jehoshaphat and to the crowd. Through Jahziel, this is what God says to the people -- “Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude; **for the battle is not yours but God’s.**”

“The battle is not yours but God’s.”

In response to Jahaziel’s prophetic word of encouragement, Jehoshaphat, along with all the people of Judah, bow down and worship God (v. 18). Now look at this . . . in the morning, Jehoshaphat appoints *worship leaders* (not generals, worship leaders!) to walk before the army of Judah (v. 21). And so they sing, praising God with loud voices. It says in verse 22, that it was “**as they began to sing and praise**” that the Lord “set an ambush” against the invading forces, causing these terrorists to become so confused that they ended up fighting and destroying each other (v. 23).

In the midst of our anxiety, it’s important that we remember who we are, why we’re here, and where God is calling us to lead God’s people. **We do that best by singing.** Yes, singing! **Worshipping God in the midst of our fears gives strength to our faith as we face into the unknowns.** Singing gives voice to our trust in the redemptive character and promises of our Lord, reminding us of our identity as children of Almighty God. It also disengages us from the often, paralyzing emotional loop that prevents us from moving out of our moments of anxiety and panic. Amid confusion and chaos, singing (along with laughter—especially when we face times of anxiety) communicates that **we are not defined by our anxiety or its pain.**

Let me be clear . . . When we’re experiencing moments – or even seasons – of anxiety, we don’t feel like singing. But as people of faith, it’s important for us to sing anyway. It’s actually the spiritual discipline of worship – and it’s rooted in our choice to intentionally submit ourselves to the only One who has control, to the only One who can determine our destiny – Jesus Christ.

When our minds get caught in the crazy loop of anxiety, it’s important to try to break out of the cycle of thoughts that paralyze us. Singing can do that. And **the more intense the anxiety loop, the louder the song should be.**

Look, **worship is not therapy, but it is therapeutic.** When we sing in anxious times, we realize several things:

1. That God is in control of your life and destiny and nothing is going to happen to you that falls outside of His sovereignty.
2. That you are not defined by your fear – no matter how bad you feel.
3. That your anxiety – even your panic attack – will pass. Even when it feels like it’s lasting a long time, it will get better.
4. That you can choose your response to your circumstances.

Choosing our response to our anxiety starts with changing how we think. In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul is responding to accusations made against him by false teachers who were maligning his character. This is what he says starting in verse 4:

⁴The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, [our weapons] have divine power to demolish strongholds. ⁵We

demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and *we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.* **(2 Corinthians 10:4-5)**

"We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." What that means is we can choose what our thoughts will focus on. Will it be easy? No. That's why it's a discipline. But it is possible because of the Holy Spirit within us.

That's what Paul was getting at in Philippians 4:8 when he says –

Finally, 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 **(Phil. 4:8)**

Paul reminds us that **we need to put boundaries on our anxious thoughts.** For sure, it's important for us to be open to our emotions, to be aware of what we're feeling – and to feel them deeply, since they may be telling us some important information about what God may be birthing in us or in our circumstances. But it's also important for us not to get sucked into the vortex of our emotions – since in times of anxiety, our thought patterns can actually reinforce the very panic we're trying to stop.

When under stress – or when we're experiencing times of anxiety -- we have a tendency to get sucked into a mental game of "What ifs." You know that game, right?

What if . . . something bad happens?
What if . . . I'm not the one chosen?
What if . . . we run out of money?
What if . . . I get bad news?

But we don't just stop with the basics. Our anxiety loop adds layers, right? ---

What if . . . something bad happens and we get into an accident and then we're not able to work, so we end up losing our job . . . and then because we have no income we can't pay the mortgage, so the bank forecloses on our house and we become homeless . . . and because we're now needing to live in a shelter, they'll have to split up our family. . .

"What ifs" are one of our mind's coping mechanisms. We actually cope with stressful situations by creating a playbook of fantasy scenarios to try to help prepare us for "the worst."

Well, let's be honest . . . Sometimes we just have to put our thoughts into a "time out." If we don't, then anxiety can actually make us slaves to our emotions. Our emotions can be deceiving....causing us to do or say things that we would not normally do or say.

But look at what Paul says to think about . . .

- **Whatever is true** – The Greek word means “true, honest, or genuine.” In other words, what are the facts that are underneath your fear. Sometimes focusing on the facts will point out the irrationality of our fears, calming our anxieties.
- **Whatever is noble** – In what ways do we see God actually honoring us? How has God been showing favor to us – even in the midst of tough times? Try naming those examples out loud.
- **Whatever is right** – Instead of looking at all that’s going wrong, try focusing on what is going right.
- **Whatever is pure** – Instead of resigning yourself to using alcohol or drugs or pornography or over-spending or over-eating to cope with your anxiety, choose to call a friend and ask for prayer.
- **Whatever is lovely** – Choose to focus on things that are beautiful. Go walk in a garden and look at things that bring you peace.
- **Whatever is admirable** – When you’re feeling anxious, try choosing to go help someone less fortunate. Doing so, reorders your thought patterns – getting the focus off of yourself.
- **Whatever is excellent or praiseworthy** – Engage yourself in the daily discipline of giving thanks. Look for things in each day for which you are thankful. Write them down in a “gratitude journal” or post them on your social media accounts.

By thinking of these types of things, by singing in the face of our anxieties, by spending time laughing in the midst of stressful situations, we are reminding ourselves of who we are in Christ, giving God a chance to create something new in us and in our discipleship. We do not grow – in faith or life or relationships – without leaving what is for what can be. Therefore, we do not grow without navigating through seasons of anxiety.

God, and God’s plans for my life, are bigger than my “what ifs.” And the same is true for you. It’s time to replace our “what ifs” with “whatever.”

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.*