

**SERMON TITLE: "PEACE IN THE MIDST OF UNCERTAINTY"**  
**A SERMON BY REV. RICHARD CLEWELL**  
**FAIRMOUNT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**CLEVELAND HEIGHTS, OHIO**  
**OCTOBER 9, 2005**  
**SCRIPTURE TEXT: Philippians 4: 1-9**

Our recent experiences have shaken many folks' sense of security and well-being. The events of 9/11/01, the war in Iraq with seemingly no end in sight, the devastating impact of the tsunami last December and the destruction of life and property from hurricanes Katrina and Rita have left people feeling vulnerable and questioning their outlook on life and its meaning. One of the common questions heard in these days is "How could God let this happen?" or its corollary, "Where is God?" So many of our friends and neighbors are anxious and fearful. Perhaps we are too! How are Christians to deal with such continual uncertainties? Does our faith make a difference or is it an illusion in coping with life's realities?

It seems to me that the first issue we must confront is the deception that we can control our life course toward certain goals and outcomes. There is nothing necessarily wrong with establishing goals and establishing courses of action to move toward their accomplishment. Although we would like to feel that we are in control, the unexpected often happens, upsets our equilibrium, and produces anxiety and fear. How can our Christian faith impact the reality of daily living?

The Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Philippi may offer a response to this question (Read Philippians 4: 1-9). The context of this letter is another time of uncertainty as are all times. Paul is sitting in prison charged with a capital offense. His responsibility for the churches he started was a constant concern. The people in this congregation to whom he wrote were unlikely to be living comfortable lives. They were an outlawed sect, most of them were poor, many were slaves, and few of them would have known the meaning of security.

Despite his and their situation, he lauds this community of faith whom he loves and misses and calls his joy and sense of accomplishment. He urges them to stand firm in the Lord who gives them grace in every circumstance to know the living Christ and to embody the gospel. They are there to care about each other and others in the midst of everyday uncertainties. Teresa of Avila expressed it this way: "Christ has no body on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now." Because Christ was in them, they had the privilege and responsibility to be the people of God. That's what the world called them – Christians or "like Christ" in their community care and compassion for others. That presence of the living Christ was their certainty and basis for a maturing living faith. For them peace was not the absence of trouble. Rather, peace was the presence of God in their lives.

As those who call ourselves Christians today, we need to ask ourselves, "Do others see Christ in us, in our life and behavior?" To reject Paul's call to share to mind of Christ and be like him is to live as an enemy of the cross. Dietrich Bonhoeffer declared, "Those who live as enemies of the cross see religion only in terms of benefit and advantage and are not prepared to share the humiliations and devaluation that commitment to Christ can involve." We too often can deny or avoid the way of the cross which impairs our faith growth and sense of Christ's presence with us.

I do take heart in recognizing that these Christians in the Philippian congregation were not perfect. There was dissension or a difference of opinion between female pillars of the church. Paul deals with them gently speaking well of their work on behalf of the gospel and urges them to use their common faith in Christ to come to agreement even with the help of another Christian. This advice could

be taken well in our church and our denomination if we would recognize and follow through, not from our own narrow opinions, but by listening to God's spirit.

The very crux of handling our lives on the basis of our Christian faith is focused in verses 4-7. The rejoicing he describes is not a superficial cheerfulness but rather a deep joy response to what God has done and continues to do by Christ's presence and transforming power within those who live in him. That joy develops through a deepening relationship with Christ and is expressed in sharing his love and concern for others. Perhaps the reason many Christians lack such joy today is because they see their faith to a great extent as an individual matter, and so do not see Christian life in terms of mutual respect and concern or do not experience the love and support of fellow Christians. It takes such living the gospel to experience its joy. In dealing with conflict, being of the "same mind in the Lord" means working things out from first principles, worrying less about who is right and who is wrong and asking instead what does it mean for us, as a community of faith, to seek together Christ's direction and presence.

Anthony Bloom in his book, *Courage to Pray*, states, "The fact that we are present in a situation alters it profoundly because God is then present with us through our faith. Wherever we are, at home with our family, with friends when a quarrel is about to begin, at work or even simply in the subway, the street, the train, we can recollect ourselves and say, "Lord I believe in you, come and be among us." And by this act of faith, in a contemplative prayer which does not see, we can intercede with God who has promised his presence when we ask for it. Sometimes we have no words, sometimes we do not know how to act wisely, but we can always ask God to be present. And we shall see how often the atmosphere changes, quarrels stop, peace comes - -Such contemplation is a vision not of God alone, but of the world in God."

Paul's direction to not worry or be anxious (v.6) but to pray with thanksgiving comes between the reality of the Lord being near and the assurance of being guarded by the peace of God which is beyond human understanding. The peace of God is internal in our bond with Christ and counters the external anxieties and fears to which we are all exposed in daily living in this uncertain world. That peace is based on the divine transforming presence of our Lord in any and all circumstances. The freedom from worry and anxiety does not imply an irresponsible attitude toward life or one's obligations but is a mark of Christian maturity in distinguishing between the anxiety which cripples and destroys the individual and the concern for others that builds up the whole community. The prayer is centered in thanks for this relationship with God in Christ and in the new life and transforming journey of faith. Too often our own prayers are nothing but a "shopping list" without thanksgiving; our anxiety about the future obscuring the benefits graciously given us in our faith relationship. Such gratitude opens us to have our hearts and minds in tune with the certainty of God's presence and peace when circumstances in life might overwhelm others.

Harry Cargas, a Christian philosopher and teacher, in his book, *Encountering Myself*, puts it this way: "When we choose the spiritual path of trying to experience God's divine presence in us at all times, ceaselessly, then we receive the assistance from God that we need. - - - Again, our imaginations can help us to project the effects living in the divine presence might have on us as spouses, drivers, neighbors, members of a racial or economic group, citizens - the list as long as each of us wishes to make it. Asking God's help to be with God and working toward that end can lead to "ordinary" life lived on a transformed level."

The final instruction by the apostle comes from his experience and modeling as a Christian himself. Being in relationship with Christ, one's mind in concert with the mind of Christ is enabled to manage one's walk in the world we live in. The virtues mentioned are highly valued and honored in the secular and non-Christian world. We can engage that world on the basis of these virtues and express through them Christ's compassion and concern. Our concern is not to make everyone we engage or

relate to like us. Rather it is to share the love, joy, and peace that God can give in a world of turmoil. We are called to live and to witness to this truth. God will do the transformation.

So, what hope is there for genuine peace in the midst of so many fears and uncertainties? Peace begins internally in the hearts and minds of men and women. When peace is experienced in Jesus Christ, transformation occurs which translates to our lives and behaviors toward others. Judith Johnson-Siebold, a Methodist pastor, describes this process well, “Christians are invited to take very seriously the invitation to divine intimacy and community with others. In doing so, we become light that shines in darkness. We are to be like the rising sun, highlighting what had previously been obscured by darkness with the light of God’s grace and justice.” May the God of Peace be with us in a transforming way so that we may represent this light in our lives and actions so others in our community of faith and in the world around us may also come to experience that peace which passes all understanding.

Amen

**Rev. Richard Clewell, D.Min., Pastor**