

The Peace of God

Philippians 4:1-9

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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This week a book with an interesting title arrived in the mail. The title of the book is *Breaking Bread with the Dead: Reading the Past in Search of a Tranquil Mind* by Alan Jacobs.

I haven't started the book yet, but the subtitle grabbed my attention this week. "In search of a tranquil mind."

That sounds promising, particularly on this Sunday that we devote to focusing on gratitude. A tranquil mind is surely an important component of giving thanks, right?

Yesterday, Naomi introduced me to the story of a man named Nathan Apodaca.

Nathan is a thirty-seven-year-old Native American man from Idaho Falls, ID. Nathan, by the sounds of it, has a tough life. He lives in a RV without running water. He bags and stacks potatoes for a living. He lives a state away from his teenage daughters and doesn't see them as often as he'd like.

He's also a global TikTok sensation. I barely understand what TikTok even is, but it seems to be an app where you record yourself doing things while there is music playing in the background. If that seems an inadequate explanation, ask someone younger than forty in your life to explain it to you. 😊

Anyway, On September 25, Nathan was driving to the potato warehouse when the battery on his old beat-up truck broke cut out. He was about 15 minutes from work.

So, naturally, he did what any of us would do. He swore, pounded the steering wheel, and grouchy waited for a tow truck... Well, no, that's not at all what he did.

What he in *fact* did was grab his phone, his large bottle of Ocean Spray Cran-Raspberry juice and his longboard—the skateboard kept in the car just for such emergencies—and wheeled the rest of the way to work.

As he did so, he filmed himself grinning, swigging his Cran-Raspberry juice, and singing along to a Fleetwood Mac song on his way to the potato factory.

At last count, this TikTok video has been viewed 7.5 million times (I checked this morning). Nathan Apodaca has met Mick Fleetwood (the lead singer of Fleetwood Mac), has had Ocean Spray buy him a new pickup truck, has been hailed by local politicians. He’s become something of an internet sensation.

Why? On one level the video is pretty unremarkable. Apodaca doesn’t have the chiseled good looks of a celebrity and there’s nothing terribly exciting happening in the video. It’s a middle-aged guy on a skateboard drinking juice and singing along to a rock song.

But it seems to have connected with people in a unique way. One writer put it this way:

I’ve surmised that the reason Apodaca’s video resonates so much with so many people is because we long to be as unbothered as he is, especially during a time of increasing chaos. This level of undisturbed harmony frankly feels unachievable for a lot of us who have been under increasing amounts of stress in the last year.

It seems like we wake up every morning to news that outrages us, saddens us, or quite possibly both. Our digital culture is a culture of outrage. It’s exhausting us and we’re left to face it while dealing with personal problems of our own. The effect is overwhelming, so much so that a man simply enjoying his life on a longboard, taking pleasure in Fleetwood Mac and a jug of juice is enough to remind us of what life is truly supposed to be about: taking pleasure in the small things.¹

Maybe we see in this video a little glimmer of what we most long for. A tranquil mind.

A mind not always racing ahead to the next thing, not drifting off into fruitless worry and anxiety, not led around by the “sky is falling” news headlines, not constantly worrying about what it’s missing, not always bracing for hypothetical disaster on the horizon.

¹ <https://medium.com/swlh/a-guy-a-longboard-a-jug-of-juice-and-fleetwood-mac-de83e66c8bd5>

A mind that is settled, secure, non-anxious. A mind that isn't fragmented into a thousand different directions. A mind that trusts that all shall be well.

Our reading this morning contains what I think is one of the most beautiful and hopeful verses in all of Scripture:

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7).

This verse is a promise that has sustained followers of Jesus from the Apostle Paul down through the ages. The words originally written from a jail cell have been experienced to be true by Christians in all kinds of circumstances, including deep suffering.

The peace of God, standing guard over our hearts and minds. What an image! What a promise.

And yet, the peace of God can often seem just as elusive as a tranquil mind.

"Peace" is one of those words like "hope" and "love"—they roll off the tongue easily and hopefully, but sometimes they seem so far from reality, always eluding our grasp.

I was speaking with a dear Christian friend about my sermon this week and they asked what I was preaching on. "The peace of God," I said.

What followed was a pretty honest conversation. *Why don't I experience this? Why does anxiety and worry come so much more easily to me?*

I didn't have to think very hard to resonate. The peace of God can be elusive, even for pastors. There's so much out there that wars against an experience of the peace of God.

The pandemic, yes, but also anxiety about kids, concerns for the church, the frantic restlessness created by digital technology and our media culture which keeps the news ever before us, the future of the planet which can seem fragile and tenuous, and feelings of helplessness in the face of the scope of our challenges.

And is the peace of God even something we're *allowed* to hunger for? Isn't devoting time to the search for a "tranquil mind" or "the peace of God" synonymous with complacency in the face of the world's evils?

Focusing on inner peace is a luxury for the privileged, right? Shouldn't we instead be animated by a holy anger on behalf of the poor, the victims of injustice?

Aren't there a whole bunch of things in the world that we should be busy fixing in the world? Racial injustice, climate change, poverty, gender inequality, food security, inter-religious conflict. There's so much to do for Jesus! Who has time for inner peace?

At times, and in some spheres of Christian discourse, it can seem that failing to be driven by a kind of restless activist impulse is evidence of a failure of faith.

What do we do with these words about the "peace of God?"

Well, I learned long ago that bible verses should always be read in context. And so, what is the context of Paul's words about the peace of God guarding our hearts and minds?

Right before this verse, Paul says this:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God (Phil. 4:4-6).

Joy, gentleness, prayer, thanksgiving. Important dispositions, these, particularly on this Thanksgiving Sunday where we are reminded of the importance of gratitude.

Surely lives devoted to these things are lives that are well-positioned to experience the peace of God. I seem to encounter three articles a week advocating the importance of gratitude and focusing on the positive for mental health.

And then the words immediately following verse 7:

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)

This is more undeniably good advice, surely, for those seeking a tranquil mind, those seeking the peace of God. It is undeniably true that what we choose to focus on affects our mental and spiritual well-being.

We have the *choice* of what we will attend to. We sometimes forget this.

We can be led around by hysterical headlines or the endless suggestions from Amazon or Google or Facebook. We can allow our attention to be colonized by massive corporations that have a vested interest in keeping us anxious, restless, and afraid. This is easy enough to do.

We can feed the things that make us anxious and afraid.

But we can also choose to pay attention to what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy. We can attend to what is right and hopeful and good in the world and in our lives.

All of this is good advice and we know intuitively that Paul is right. These are undoubtedly all good things that would contribute to more tranquil minds and more settled experiences of the peace of God.

But my friend had another really tough question: *If the peace of God is a gift, why do I have to do a whole bunch of things to get it?*

Is Paul giving us a moral checklist here? Is he itemizing all of the character traits, dispositions, and disciplines that are the prerequisites for experiencing the peace of God?

Is Paul saying that if we can just summon up the right combination of joy, gentleness, gratitude, prayer, and positive thinking that this will unlock the gates of blessing and the peace of God will descend upon us?

Is the “peace of God” is just another way of describing a formula or a list of techniques that are up to me to do well enough?

What if we don’t feel up to the task? What if we can’t actually bear the thought of one more thing to do?

What if what we long for is for the peace of God to stand guard over hearts and minds that are actually feeling kind of heavy and uncertain and weak?

And if it's all about us and what we have to do, how is it the peace of *God*? Isn't it just the peace of *us*?

Very often, when I'm struggling with something Paul says I go to Jesus to sort it out.

This is a classic Mennonite move, I know. Historically, we are people who kind of camp out in the gospels and the clear teachings of Jesus rather than the dwelling with Paul's letters. Paul can be confusing, after all. Jesus is clear, direct, straightforward, right?

I went to the gospel of John, to a moment in the story of Jesus surely characterized by heightened and anxiety and a decided lack of tranquility—the moments Jesus spends with his disciples right before he was led out to his execution.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid (John 14:27).

We return to the idea of peace as a gift. Something we don't create or conjure up. Something that is settled, secure. Something that doesn't depend on how the world or our lives are going at any given moment.

Something that is given to us by Jesus Christ. The peace of God is inextricably tied to the God of peace.

And the God of peace is most clearly revealed in the Prince of Peace who embodied peace in life and in death, and who promised his followers that peace could be theirs, too.

A deep experience of the peace of God depends on the settled conviction that God has made peace on the cross, that God has done all that is necessary for our salvation and for the redemption of the world.

The peace of God proceeds out of this bedrock trust that God is sufficient.

Nothing bad that we endure or contribute to is final. No suffering is the last word in our story or the story of those we love.

And nothing good is lost. No joy or beauty or love or truth will fade into nothingness. We don't have to grasp and cling to these things before they drift away forever because they will be part of the new world God promises.

Of these things, I am deeply convinced. There is peace in this realization.

And there *is* a profound sense in which the things that Paul mentions in Philippians 4—gratitude, gentleness, prayer, and joy—are the means by which we position ourselves to experience the peace of God.

It is *true* that choosing to think about those things in our world and in our lives that align with God's purposes for us *are* part of the means by which the peace of God comes to be experienced in our lives.

Paul makes an undeniable connection between the peace of God and our cultivation of specific disposition and disciplines.

Jesus does the same thing. In the chapter immediately following his promise of peace, he gives the metaphor of the vine and the branches, and about how we will only bear fruit—including the fruit of peace—if we abide in him.

We have something to do. We are not passive spectators but active participants in the drama of God's story and in the shape and quality of our own lives, including our experience of the peace of God.

Why would we expect anything else? The Christian faith never leaves us uninvolved in any of God's good gifts.

Forgiveness must be accepted and extended, joy must be cultivated and practiced, gratitude must be chosen, mercy must be received and reproduced.

In none of these areas do we sit passively by and expect God to download goodness into our lives. All gifts have to be received.

But in the end, I do love this image of the peace of God standing guard over our hearts and minds. There is great comfort in this, particularly in a year like 2020 where gratitude and tranquil minds seem somehow a little harder than usual.

Even when peace seems elusive and beyond our present experience, by faith we believe that the peace of God surrounds and sustains us, silently protecting, preserving, beckoning us ever deeper into trust, and into faith, hope, and love.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday 2020, in the middle of a global pandemic and economic uncertainty and tumultuous politics and a highly polarized culture, my prayer for you is a simple one: that you would experience the peace of God that transcends human understanding.

Peace that stands guard over our world and over our hearts and minds.

And I pray that you would know, deep down in your bones, that the God of peace is with you, now and always.

Amen.

