

It's very easy for us to become anxious, isn't it? Wondering and being anxious about the future, wondering and being anxious about what might happen, wondering and being anxious about many things. There's all kinds of things that could happen. And we can be caught up in this anxiety, thinking that, "Who knows what tomorrow may bring?" Some of us, of course, are anxious by nature. We're worry-warts, the kind of people who are always worried about something, playing the "what if" game. What if this happens? Or what if that happens? Or what would I do if this happens? Or what would I do if that happens? And on and on and on the questions go, because that's just the kind of people that we are: worried about every little thing. But even those who are not quite so worried, even those who are maybe a little bit more laid back can find plenty of things to become worried about, especially when things aren't going quite like we expect them to. Right now, we're dealing with some difficult times. And it's very easy to become anxious about the future. And I suspect, if I had to guess, the reason why we're here tonight is because even if we don't want to admit it, we are anxious about this coming year. Are we going to have enough rain? Are we going to have a good harvest? Are we going to be able to make ends meet? Are we going to be able to have a good year? What does this year hold for us? And because we are so caught up in that anxiety, we are here looking for some kind of answer. And I think what really drives that for us this year is the fact that things are so dry already. Most of the state has been under a burn ban since February. We might expect a burn ban in June or July when things have dried out, but February? And now? What is this year going to be? And so we're left wondering, where can we turn in the midst of our troubles? Where can we turn to find help?

But the worst part about anxiety, Christians, is that it can very often disrupt and cause us to misinterpret our prayers, to approach our prayers with the wrong idea, to approach our prayers with the wrong assumptions. Anxiety has a way of twisting prayer, so that we lose focus about what we're praying about. We become disoriented, we start to wander, and we forget what it was we were even talking about, because we're so focused on the future. And that can leave us wondering, did we pray at all? Anxiety has a way also of making us speechless, of not being sure what to say at all, so that we come to God wanting to ask him for something, but then we are not quite sure how to put it. We're not quite sure how to ask him. And that can leave us wondering, did we pray at all? Anxiety also has a way of making us come to prayer only as a last resort, the kind of thing that we tried everything else and that didn't seem to work, so maybe we'll try prayer this time. Maybe that will be the answer to our problems. Maybe that will be the answer to our concerns. But when we approach prayer in that way, a kind of "try it and see" just to find out what happens, that leaves us wondering, did we even pray at all? And perhaps worst of all Christians, anxiety has a way of causing us to doubt what we're even praying about. It has a way of making us ask questions even while we pray. Did God hear us when we pray? Is God going to answer our prayers? How do we know that he's going to do something about it? What is our future going to hold? And on and on and on the questions go, so that what was meant to give us certainty, what was meant to give us comfort unfortunately becomes another reason to be anxious. What we supposed to do in the midst of that? Where can we turn to find certainty when anxiety seems to grip us?

To answer that question, of course, we need to look to the Scriptures, to look to what God's Word has to say. And Christians, if there was someone in the Bible who had a very good reason to be anxious about his future, to be very anxious about anything that might happen to him, it

was the Apostle Paul who wrote our reading for this evening. Because from the time that Paul became a Christian and started to proclaim the Gospel to the nations, his life was terrible. He had to suffer all kinds of things. On multiple occasions, Paul was beaten because of the Gospel. On multiple occasions, Paul was attacked both verbally and physically because of the Gospel. On one occasion, Paul got into a shipwreck. On one occasion, he was nearly stoned to death. If there was any man who had a good reason to be worried about his future, it was Paul in the midst of all of this. But worse than this still, when Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians, he was in jail awaiting a trial that he wasn't even guilty for. And you can imagine how that would cause us to be anxious, the kind of questions that that would bring up. What is going to happen in the days ahead? What way is this trial going to go? Am I going to suffer more? What will happen to me in the future? And on and on and on the questions could go. There would be very good reason to be anxious about the future if we were in Paul's place.

But Paul is not anxious, Christians. Paul is not worried about his future. Even though he is facing that trial, even though he has suffered much for the sake of the Gospel, Paul could confidently write the words of our text: "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand. Do not be anxious about anything." And Paul doesn't mean that as a kind of platitude. That's not just a nice little saying like, "don't worry, be happy," the kind of thing you might stick up on your wall as a decoration or post to your Facebook. Paul means this. Don't be anxious about anything! Don't be worried about what the future might hold, because the Lord is at hand. The Lord is at hand to help us. The Lord is at hand to hear us. And no matter what may happen in Paul's life or in ours, God has promised to hear us always. And for that reason Paul could rejoice even while he was in prison, because what need was there to be worried? What reason was there to be anxious? God was with him, and no matter what happened, nothing could change that fact.

And Paul brings this message to us today too, Christians. The Lord is at hand. Do not be anxious about anything. God is near us, not far off where he doesn't care about us or he doesn't hear us. God is near us. And because he is near us, he has promised to hear us through his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus himself says, "If you ask anything in my name, I will do it." That's the promise that we have, that the creator of all things, who holds all things in his hands, is here to listen to every one of our prayers, to listen to everything that we have to bring. So no matter what our trouble may be, no matter what we may be going through, no matter our anxiety, no matter our worries, no matter our concerns, God is with us. And when we come to him in faith, we know that we have that sure confidence that he will hear us through Jesus. And more than this still, God promises us in the book of Romans that when we pray, when we come to him, God will also give us his Holy Spirit, so that the Spirit prays within us and with us. God not only promises to hear us, he even helps us pray, so that we can be confident knowing that God is near, that God will take care of us in everything. And if we know that, Christians, why wouldn't we pray? Why wouldn't we come to him with all of our cares and concerns? Why wouldn't we come to give thanks for the things that he has done? Why wouldn't we come to worship him for all of his wonderful deeds? Because we have a God who is near, a God who always hears through Jesus Christ, so that we can pray to him in everything, through everything, before everything, after everything, at all times, knowing that God himself is going to take care of us through it all.

And what is the outcome of this prayer? What has God promised to us when we pray to him? Paul tells us: "The peace of God which surpasses all understanding." That peace which comes only from the Lord, the peace which banishes all of our fears, which takes away all of our anxieties. That peace knowing that God hears us that no matter what happens, God is not far away, but listening to us at all times. That gives us a peace that the world cannot possibly know. And this is a peace beyond all understanding, because even if things don't turn out the way we think that they should, yet we know that God still hears us, that God is still listening to us and will answer our prayers. So that even if things take a lot longer, even if we have to wait, yet we know that we have a gracious God through Jesus Christ, who will take care of us. And this peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Guard us from that worldly anxiety, that worldly care: "What shall we eat, what shall we drink, what shall we wear, what will tomorrow be like?" God will guard us from all of that, because he gives us his Son and his Holy Spirit and promises to hear us in everything.

So Christians, come. Pray for rain. Pray to your heavenly Father, knowing that he will hear us, because the Lord is at hand. Come, give thanks for the rain and the snow which we have already received, knowing that it comes from his love and his graciousness, because the Lord is at hand. Come, rejoice in the Lord always, even if things don't turn out the way we might want them to, even if this remains a dry year, because we know that God loves us and listens to us in his Son. And he will take care of us through everything. Come, pray to him. Call on his name. And keep praying! Because God is your loving heavenly Father.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have promised to hear us through your Son Jesus Christ. We pray that you would continue to strengthen us so that we may always come to you in prayer, praying to you at all times, knowing that you will answer us; through your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.