

Title: Peace (Advent Week 2)

Series: Advent 2023

ME:

- [Intro Story about Thursday night – “peace and Quiet]
- Divine Irony...

“Do not be agitated...” – Psalm 37:1

“Do not be agitated...” – Psalm 37:7

“Do not be agitated...” – Psalm 37:8

- In ancient Hebrew writings, the way to emphasize an idea was to repeat it – especially in poetry like Psalm 37.
- David, in this Psalm of Wisdom, is passionately urging God’s people not to be agitated, frustrated, annoyed, and generally anxious people – even though what is happening around them would seem to justify those reactions.

WE:

- “Do not be agitated...” at this time of year seems about as reasonable as asking the local 6th grade band to perform Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker at Carnegie Hall.
- Psychologists and Social scientists tell us that the **most stressful month of the year is December!** Ironically, the month when we sing about **“Peace on Earth and Mercy Mild”**.
- One of the great human struggles, is that almost every time we make a societal advancement it is accompanied by a regression. Case in point, emerging generations are entering a world where extraordinary advancements in technology and health science have produced the greatest opportunities for comfort and long lives. Yet, simultaneously, scholarly research is showing that we are collectively experiencing a significant regression in emotional resiliency.
- Cars, computers, smartphones, AI and the like are designed to make our lives easier and more efficient. Gone are the days when we had to wait 2-weeks for a paper letter to reach a

loved one. Dinner can be ready in 12 minutes. Remote work has even eliminated the commute.

- And yet, we experience higher levels of stress and anxiety – with less emotional resiliency to overcome those challenges.
- Over 100 years ago, the Dutch Theologian Herman Bavinck wrote,

The more abundantly the benefits of civilization come streaming our way, the emptier our lives become. With all its wealth and power, it only shows that the human heart, in which God has put eternity, is so huge that all the world is too small to satisfy it.” - Herman Bavinck

- Another irony of our time, is that despite living in an “individualistic” culture – we still go with the crowd. We are influenced by the collective inertia of society around us.
- As stress, anxiety, outrage, and anger swell around us – we easily get caught up in it.
- **You don’t have to be a trained psychologist to observe unhealthy, destructive behavior in the world around you – in the news, on social media, at school board meetings, and ball fields.**
- **(The Wheel of Dysfunction) – Stress | Anxiety | Anger | Victimizing and Victimhood**
- It’s a vortex of unending dysfunction.
- We try to disrupt it through all sorts of measures.
- We oftentimes attempt to disrupt the **Stress** by powering through. If I put on more steam, get up earlier, stay longer, and work harder I can somehow, someday mitigate the stress.
- We try to disrupt the Anxiety phase through escapism or numbing effects. Whether it’s endless scrolling, laziness, food, alcohol abuse, or as is becoming more and more mainstream – various forms of narcotics to de-stimulate our over-stimulated lives.
- In the anger phase we tend to **release or suppress**. We rage on our kids, spouse, co-workers, or the driver next to us on

Kingston Pike. Or we **internalize** anger and become *callous, cynical, & detached*.

- We end up **hurting people, or perpetually being hurt by everything**. EITHER WAY – we deal with this dysfunction by blaming everyone else.
- And so, the treadmill goes. ... Because **reactive measures will not disrupt this system**. We cannot disrupt the system by addressing systems that ignore root problems. **We need a different way** to disrupt the system. We need what is Edwin Friedman, a Jewish Rabbi and Family Therapist called, **“A Non-Anxious Presence”**.
- **David paints a portrait of a Non-Anxious Presence in Psalm 37, even giving it a name – “A Person of Peace”**.
- **Jesus personified Non-Anxious Presence in his life and message**.
- In Matthew 6 Jesus talks of **being like birds and wildflowers** – neither of whom worry, obsess, or get agitated about what is to come.
- In Matthew 11 Jesus speaks of a Non-anxious Presence as people who **recalibrate their souls** by exchanging their burdensome and stressful yoke (a heavy farming tool) for his light and easy yoke.
- I have 3 points:

1) **What is Non-Anxious Presence?**

2) **Why Non-Anxious Presence is Possible.**

3) **How to Become a Non-Anxious Presence.**

GOD:

1) **What is a Non-anxious Presence?**

A non-anxious presence is ...

- The ability to sympathize in a hard situation, without being sucked into the situation.
- Empathize with another’s suffering, without being embroiled by it.

- It is not detachment from unhealthy people, uncomfortable circumstances, or moments of crisis. Instead, it is the ability to differentiate from those common sources of stress, anxiety, and anger.
- Non-Anxious Presence is not the absence of tension, but the ability to hold multiple things in tension.

To become a non-anxious presence is ...

- to be calm, in the midst of the storm.
 - to be compassionate, in the midst of suffering
 - to be at peace, in the midst of panic
 - to be present, in the midst of the rush
 - to be wise, in the midst of recklessness
 - to be clear, in the midst of confusion
 - to be faithful, in the midst of fear
- Jesus is the ultimate model of a non-anxious presence...
 - He sleeps through the same storm that terrifies the disciples.
 - He refuses to bow to the tyranny of the powerful and urgent, but slows down to be present with anonymous men and women who do not possess the means to enhance his social capital or contribute to his bottom line.
 - The Pharisees and Sadducees are mystified that Jesus seems to be unphased by their threats, questions, and accusations.
 - Samaritans, Tax Collectors, and Women are confused when they experience hospitality from Jesus, rather than hostility.
 - When faced with untold suffering, Jesus responds, **“Not my will, but yours be done.”**
 - Which begs the question “Why was Jesus like this?” Why does David presume this sort of life is possible?

2 Why Non-Anxious Presence is Possible.

Do not be agitated by evildoers... – Psalm 37:1

- ***If there is anything*** that could give me a license for an angry and anxious presence it is those who do evil.
- Is God soft on this sort of thing? ... Not hardly. Why then is David suggesting that we do not have to be agitated in the face of evil?

¹ Do not be agitated by evildoers; do not envy those who do wrong.

For they wither quickly like grass and wilt like tender green plants. ... For evildoers will be destroyed ... A little while, and the wicked person will be no more ... – Psalm 37:1-2, 9, 10

**For the Lord loves justice and will not abandon his faithful ones.
– Psalm 37:28**

Why is a non-anxious presence possible?

1) God's justice is perfect and will not fail.

- I once asked a friend, who is a Christian Criminal Court Judge, how he dealt with the pressure of getting “justice” right. His answer was phenomenal.
- He said, **“I try my best to faithfully render justice, but I know that I do and will sometimes get it wrong.”** However, I sleep at night knowing that when I get it wrong, God will not. **He will perfectly render justice when all is said and done.**
- A non-anxious presence is possible because of God's perfect justice. But also because...

2) God's provision is steadfast and exactly what we need.

³ Trust in the Lord and do what is good; dwell in the land and live securely.

⁴ Take delight in the Lord, and **He will give you your heart's desires. – Psalm 37:3-4**

⁵ Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in him, and **he will act,**
⁶ making your righteousness shine like the dawn,
your justice like the noonday. – Psalm 37:5-6

I have been young and now I am old, yet I have not seen the
righteous abandoned ... He is always generous..." Psalm 37:25-26

the person of peace will have a future. – Psalm 37:37

- And Jesus in his own words:

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you
will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not
life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at
the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in
barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not
much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by
worrying add a single hour to your life?

³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall
we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after
all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need
them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all
these things will be given to you as well. – Matthew 6:25-33

- **Life with God, is a life lived from abundance, not scarcity.**
- The Gospel not only changes where we will live forever – it changes how we live today.
- The Gospel gives me identity, so I don't have to create or find identity out there ... it's already in here.
- The Gospel gives me security, so I don't have to go searching for it.
- The Gospel gives me a new family, so I don't have to keep trying to fit in. I already belong.

So, how do we work this out? **3) How do we Become a Non-Anxious Presence?**

- Remember our wheel of dysfunction? **I'm going to propose a 4 Phase reversal of this.** This is not a formula or an equation. Just as you don't become instantly become a stressful, anxious, or angry person. You are formed into a stressful, anxious & angry person – In like, you do not flip a switch to a "non-anxious Presence". However, there are principles and practices, that overtime will lead you to **"BECOME" a non-anxious presence.** Listen to the text ...

"Trust in the Lord..." – Psalm 37:3

"Commit your way to the Lord..." – Psalm 37:5

"Delight in the Lord..." – Psalm 37:4

"Be silent before the Lord..." – Psalm 37:7

"put your hope in the Lord..." – Psalm 37:9

"Wait for the Lord and keep his way..." – Psalm 37:34

"take refuge in Him [the Lord]" – Psalm 37:40

1) De-center Yourself and Center God.

- I was careful to begin each of these practices with the decentering process. Our default setting is a self-focused and centered life. Our flesh's instinct is to seek instantaneous happiness, not ultimate joy.
- Very practically, here are two ways to De-center ourselves:

Don't read the Bible as a self-help book.

Don't pray as if prayer were primarily a divine wish list.

- Go to the Scriptures to find God. Look for *who God is*. What is true and beautiful about Jesus? The Bible is a wellspring, in which we discover the unending depth of the God of the Universe. It is the Revelation of God on a page. This reframe will have a profound effect on your spirituality.

- And when prayer becomes first a way to seek after and commune with God, it will re-engineer your prayer life.
- Overtime, these practices will begin to form you. They will de-center you and center more of God.
- And herein lies the Upside-down Economy of the Kingdom of God. The more you de-center yourself and Center God, the more you begin to experience the fullness of WHO YOU were made to be.
- **In God's economy – from the very lips of Jesus: “The more you LOSE your life, the more you FIND it!”**

2) De-center Outcome and Center Faithfulness

³ Trust in the Lord and do what is good; dwell in the land and live securely. – Psalm 37:3

- Whenever you see “good” in the Old Testament (“**do what is good**”), keep in mind that it represents 3 specific concepts. **Ethics, Kindness, and Beauty**. So, do what is Ethical, Kind, and Beautiful.
- When you live an outcome-centered life, you are driven by pressure to make your expectations a reality!
- This oftentimes motivates us to cut corners, to use people instead of love people, and to put all our energy into manufacturing an acceptable external image, at the expense of the work of our heart.
- **But when we redefine success as faithfulness, we obey God and entrust the outcomes to his capable and caring hands.**
- **This is not fatalism. This is faith in action.**
- David expands on this idea...

²³ A person's steps are established by the Lord, and he takes pleasure in his way.

²⁴ Though he falls, he will not be overwhelmed, because the Lord supports him with his hand. – Psalm 37:23-24

- David envisions the Christian life like a parent holding their tiny child's hand as they learn to walk.
- We exhibit non-anxious presence by learning to not leave God behind at church or wherever we do our devotions, but embracing God's faithful presence in every aspect of our day – **from the laundry room to the board room.**
- A life oriented around faithfulness over outcomes will cultivate a non-anxious presence.

3) **De-center Hurry, and Center Slow.**

- David writes,

"...wait expectantly for him." – Psalm 37:7

"Wait for the Lord and keep his way." – Psalm 37:34

- Throughout the Psalm David contrasts the speed and fragility of the wicked, with the patience and stability of the wise, non-anxious person who perseveres.
- C.S. Lewis wrote,

"We must stop regarding unpleasant or unexpected things as interruptions of real life. The truth is that interruptions are real life."

- We sometimes hear religious leaders dramatically say, "The greatest threat to the church is _____" something polarizing.
- Honestly, our biggest threat probably isn't very sensational. **The greatest threat to the spiritual vitality of the church is probably hurry.**
- **We're just too busy for the very things God made us for.**
- **Dallas Willard**, Christian teacher, and Philosopher wrote,

"Hurry is a crushing burden to the soul."

- It is simply not possible to live a hurried life and be a “Non-anxious Presence in the world.”
- If you want to become a non-anxious presence you must learn to slow down. To Sabbath. To embrace your noble limitations. To give priority to that which fosters deeper connection with Christ.

4) De-center Noise, and Center Quiet

“Be silent before the Lord...” – Psalm 37:7

“The instruction of his God is in his heart...” – Psalm 37:31

“The Lord helps and delivers them... because they take refuge in him.” – Psalm 37:40

A.W. Tozer said,

“Distractions must be conquered or they will conquer us. So let us cultivate simplicity; let us want fewer things; let us walk in the Spirit; let us fill our minds with the Word of God and our hearts with praise. In that way we can live in peace even in such a distraught world as this.”

- [Illus: Intergenerational life: Instagram/Pinterest & Smart Phones]
- Consider the life of Jesus.

¹⁵ ... the news about him spread even more, and large crowds would come together to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. ¹⁶ Yet he often withdrew to deserted places and prayed. – Luke 5:15-16

- Even the Son of God needed to escape the noise...the demands and the distractions of life to get quiet with the Father.

YOU:

- I think most of us in the room probably desire to become a “A non-anxious presence”. We want that for our lives. We don’t want this: **(Cycle of Dysfunction) image**
- But you know what else? The world needs a “non-anxious presence”. In a world like **this (cycle of dysfunction), a “non-anxious presence”** becomes a beacon of light, hope, and love.
- Being a “non-anxious presence” might be the greatest missional strategy of our time.
- After all, for the follower of Jesus, the goal isn’t just to live better, but to love better.

WE:

- If I could synthesize this idea of a Non-anxious presence down to a singular point of reflection, it would be this:
- **Am I becoming less fearful and more loving in word, thought, and deed?**
- **This is how we embody the Peace of God, as the People of God.**