Series Road Map

Series Overview:

Week Overview: What does it mean to be “filled with all peace” when anxiety is constantly surrounding us from all sides. Through the lens of the Christmas story, we are going to look at how even amidst anxiety God has given us the weapon of peace.

*Outline:*

Grab the Room (Intro): White Elephant Gift Exchange

Tension (what’s the struggle): Anxiety is the gift that nobody wants

The Christmas story through the lens of anxiety:

* Mary finding out she is pregnant
* Joseph wanting to divorce Mary
* The census called and no inn to stay
* King Herod trying to find/kill Jesus

Text: Romans 15:13, Luke 1:26-33, Matthew 1:19 Luke 2:6-7, Matthew 2:13-15, Philippians 4:4-7

THP: The Peace of God Transcends All Understanding

Supporting Points:

Peace “guards” because it is active and on the offense.

1. Prayer
2. Petition
3. Thanksgiving

Application (call to action):

Reflection moment to put into practice

*Red – Scripture*

*Blue – Personal Story*

*Green – Prop/illustration*

*THP/Main Points – Bold*

GRAB THE ROOM

I love Christmas traditions and one of my favorites is the White Elephant gift exchange (maybe you call it the Yankee Swap or Dirty Santa). If you’re unfamiliar with the idea, long story short, everyone brings a mystery gift and you take turns unwrapping them, giving your reaction, swapping gifts, and you make a game of gift-giving. For those that have participated in a white elephant, you know there are a few different kinds of people when it comes to gift-giving. There is the person that buys a random pre-packaged present at Wal-Mart because they don’t know what else to get. There’s the person that bought their gift on the way to the party because they forgot about the gift exchange. There is the person that disguises their gift by wrapping it in really unique and tricky ways. There is the person that definitely went over the $20 spending limit. And we all know…there is the person that brought the weirdest gift ever.

We all know that one person that seems to have found the most odd, confusing, “how the heck did you think of that” gift? Some from gift exchanges in years past for me have included (accompanied by photos) a live fish, a yodeling pickle, a machete, and my personal favorite – a $20 bill frozen in a block of ice. We all know that guy, that friend, that brings the weird gift. The reality is nobody wants to pick that person’s gift. Sure, it’s funny and exciting, but nobody really wants to get stuck with it. It’s the gift that nobody wants.

\*\*\*Sub out your own experiences/thoughts/feelings with the White Elephant tradition. Needs to include a section on “getting a gift that nobody wants” to tie with the next piece.

Now, picture with me a different kind of gift exchange. It’s a White Elephant but the gifts aren’t quite what you would think. Instead of a gift card to Starbucks it’s joy. Your gift is joy – the guarantee that you will have lasting happiness and delight. Instead of a new hat and gloves it’s hope. Your gift is hope – the feeling that something good is right around the corner about to happen. Instead of a new pair of air pods it’s love. Your gift is love – deep affection and connection with those around you. These all sound like pretty incredible gifts, right? I want these! But then, that one friend shows up with the weird gift that nobody really wants. You unwrap it. Anxiety. Your gift is anxiety – the feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, just in time for the holidays.

\*\*\*Have actual gifts on the table with the words, “joy”, “hope”, “love”, and “anxiety” written on them that you turn around as you talk about each one.

TENSION

Anxiety is the gift that nobody wants. It’s the odd one out, the gift that doesn’t seem to add any value to our lives, not anytime but especially not right around the holiday season. Unfortunately, some of us feel like this is the gift we have been given. This is the weird present we are stuck with at the gift exchange this Christmas. But thankfully, most gift exchanges have a swap rule. The chance to trade your gift for something else. Today, I want to give you the opportunity to swap out anxiety and keep it that way.

Throughout this series we are unpacking Romans 15:13

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Last week we talked about being “filled with all joy”. Scripture tells us that the joy of the Lord is our strength, and even though we struggle with hard and heavy emotions we can take heart in the fact that finding our joy in the Lord grounds us in truth. This week we shift our focus to what it looks like to be “filled with all peace”. We all need to care for ourselves spirit, soul, and body. Your soul is a reflection of the image of God and we are tasked with caring for it well. Soul care prepares us for encountering God and allows us to live our lives with freedom and wholeness.

Today I want to look at the story of the birth of Jesus, hopefully one that you have heard a few times throughout your life. However, we are going to look at it through a different lens. If you’re unfamiliar with why we celebrate Christmas - for the church it is a celebration of the day the Savior of the World, Jesus Christ, was born. You can find pieces and parts of the Christmas story throughout Scripture as we look at the beginning of the most important life ever lived, Jesus.

The Christmas story opens with two familiar characters. Mary is a young woman engaged to be married to a man named Joseph but her plans are interrupted when she has an encounter with an angel named Gabriel. Gabriel tells Mary that even though she is a virgin, she is going to bear a child. Gabriel describes the child like this,

“...you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Luke 1:26-33 (ESV)

Can you imagine this moment? You are a young woman, about to be married, when an angel of the Lord appears to you. First things first, angels are not cute little fairy-like creatures with white wings and togas. The thought of seeing a divine being would be too shocking to even put into words. This angel then delivers the message that you have been chosen to be pregnant - not with your husband’s baby - but with a baby from the Holy Spirit. This is not going to be an ordinary baby. This will be a baby that will carry the name Jesus. He will be GREAT. He will be the SON OF THE MOST HIGH. He will carry the throne of David and REIGN over God’s people.

Mary is an incredible woman but can you imagine her thought process? The questions, the confusion, the fear, the doubt, the questions her fiance would ask her? Anxiety.

Maybe you have some of the same feelings. No, you’re not about to welcome the Savior of the World BUT you’re fearful of the future. You are struggling with doubt and insecurity. You are worried about what others think of you. You’re worried about how someone sees you. It’s an anxious Christmas.

Thankfully, Mary says yes to Gabriel. Then we turn to Joseph, a man who is about to be married only to find out that his wife is pregnant. But she’s not pregnant with another man’s child, no a child from God. He hears of Mary’s pregnancy and this is how he sets out to respond.

“...her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.”

He loves Mary. He cares for Mary but he can’t carry the shame and ridicule and questions of walking around town knowing that the woman he is about to marry is pregnant and NOT with his child. In biblical times this was a BIG DEAL, even bigger than it would be today. His future was about to change. Everything he thought he knew about his soon to be wife changed in an instant. A man about to be married is now a man about to be divorced. Anxiety.

Maybe you can relate to Joseph in some ways. You feel like you’re being hit on every side with unexpected situations and pain and heartache. You can’t seem to keep away the bullying and negativity and taunting from the people in your circle or at your school. You’re worried about ridicule and shame being thrown at you from others. It’s an anxious Christmas.

Thankfully, an angel appears to Joseph and assures him to continue on his plans to marry Mary. Fast forward in the story, Mary is about to give birth to Jesus. She is very close to the end of her pregnancy when a census is called. They want to count every single person living in the region so Mary and Joseph must return to Joseph’s hometown in Bethlehem to be accounted for. It’s an uncomfortable journey that takes hours, maybe days. There is tension and fear and pain and discomfort and a baby about to be born.

They arrive in Bethlehem and Mary is ready to have baby Jesus.

“And while they were there (Bethlehem), the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” Luke 2:6-7

Laying on hay among animals and their food and their waste in the middle of the night, Mary and Joseph are left to deliver their firstborn child on their own. There was not a single inn or hotel or whatever you want to call it in the city that could take them. So they find a manger, like a barn, and prepare to have a baby. I can imagine they are panicking and searching and questioning if they are ready to be parents. They are probably wondering how on earth to deliver a baby. They are probably hoping and praying that the baby will be healthy and they will know how to care for him. Anxiety.

Maybe you also feel the anxiety of the situations that are out of your control. You feel the pressure and the fear of the unknown. You’re wondering if it’s all going to turn out okay. It’s an anxious Christmas.

Mary and Joseph welcome baby Jesus into the world then the King hears that Jesus has been born. King Herod has heard that the one they call Messiah, one more worthy of worship than him, has been born. The King sends three wise men to find Jesus telling them that he wants to worship him, when in reality his plans are much worse.

“...an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remain there until the death of Herod.” Matthew 2:13-15

Their beautiful baby boy that they welcomed into the world is now in danger. Mary and Joseph must now pick up their life and flee to Egypt. King Herod kills all the male children in Bethlehem under 2 years old. Imagine fleeing to an unknown city in the middle of the night hoping that nobody stops you, that nobody reveals your location, that your firstborn child is not handed over to the king to be killed. Anxiety.

Maybe you feel like you are constantly running and avoiding and dodging all of the bad things that seem to be appearing in your life. Maybe you are just tired of the anxiety that is filling your life.

While the Christmas story was beautiful, while God had his hand in every single moment orchestrating it for good, there was anxiety, There were moments of confusion and doubt and questioning and pain mixed in with all the good. It’s tempting to think about the Christmas season and assume that only joy is allowed but the reality is that anxiety can find its way into any situation or moment or celebration.

But just like God did in the Christmas story, He offers us hope. Though this moment was filled with anxiety and fear, God made a way for Mary to find peace. Are you looking for peace this Christmas?

Philippians 4

“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. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

On the surface, this passage doesn’t feel like a solution. If you’re someone that struggles with anxiety whether occasionally or frequently, you know that anxiety is so much more than just choosing to not be anxious. But this passage commands us to do just that. It says, rejoice in the Lord ALWAYS, DO NOT be anxious, but in EVERY situation. These are direct commands from God. But when you’re in the middle of the struggle, in the middle of the fight, in the middle of a seemingly impossible and painful situation you wish you could just not be anxious and it would happen. But that doesn’t feel realistic, right?

The author of these verses is Paul. He is writing them from a prison cell after being arrested for spreading the Good of News of Jesus around the world. From a damp, dark, cold, miserable place he writes, and truly believes that we can live our lives as non-anxious people. He truly believes that **The peace of God transcends all understanding.** The peace of God transcends all understanding, meaning it’s greater than anything we could even comprehend.

The key to believing this lies in the last verse. It says that “**the peace of God, which transcends all understanding** will guard your hearts and your minds.” I think we fall victim to believing that peace is passive and hard to grasp and fleeting from moment to moment. When in reality, it says that peace is a guard. The word “guard” is active and on the offense. The ability to have peace in our lives is something that we have control over. We can choose to use peace as a weapon to fight the anxiety in our lives. We don’t have to sit back and allow anxiety to take control of our lives, when just like Paul did, we can usher peace into our lives. Not just calmness but **the peace of God which transcends all understanding.**

The peace that God offers is far better than anything we are able to obtain from this world. The peace of God is not just numbing our pain in front of tv and phone screens. The peace of God is not just shoving down our problems and stifling our emotions. The peace of God is not just pretending everything is okay when we’re with our friends and crying ourselves to sleep at night. The peace of God transcends all understanding. The peace of God is so good, so healing, so perfect in it’s timing that we can’t even humanly understand the way that God works. The peace of God is active and moving and a weapon that we can use to combat the things of this world that trouble our hearts.

**Application**

Paul gives us three action steps to welcome the peace of God in our lives, to get rid of anxiety for good.

1. Prayer

“But in every situation by prayer…”

Prayer feels like a cliche in our Christian world sometimes. When we sit down to eat meals we pray. When we confide in a friend and they don’t know what to say they encourage us to pray. When we are hit with the unexpected and the painful things in life the solution we know is to pray. Oftentimes prayer feels like a band-aid fix, but it’s not. Prayer is an open line of communication with God the Father. Prayer is our opportunity to approach the throne of God and pour out our hearts. It’s not a place to look pretty, to fix ourselves up, to soothe our emotions. It is a place of raw honesty and vulnerability with a God that wants to hear where your heart is hurting.

Notice that Paul doesn’t say to pray occasionally or to pray only when we’re anxious. He says “in every situation”. There is nothing that is off limits in your conversations with God. When you find anxiety beginning to flood into your life, you always have a safe space at the feet of the Father who wants to hear what you have to say. To access the peace of God that transcends all understanding, we must care for our souls by bearing our souls to God. The good, the bad, and the ugly included. Start by finding a place to be alone to talk with God. Maybe that’s in your car as your driving, writing your thoughts in a journal, singing your prayers to Him through worship. Find a space where God feels like a friend and open your heart to Him.

1. Petition

Oftentimes we get points 1 and 2 confused. When troubles arise and anxiety fills our lives we begin by asking God for something. We ask him to mend the situation that’s hurting us, to comfort us, to provide for us. We petition God for our needs and for our solutions. God wants to hear your requests, but only after hearing your heart first. Be honest with God, pray to Him about the honest condition of your soul. Then, after opening up your entire heart to Him, ask Him to meet your needs in faith.

1. Thanksgiving

Finally, if you’re willing to pray to God, if you’re willing to petition God, remind yourself that no matter the outcome He is good. The God that offers a peace that cannot be comprehended is a God worth praising and worshiping at all times. It’s easy to lose sight of His power and His glory when there is real pain and anxiety in our lives. But if you truly believe that He can provide the peace to mend and care for you heart, He is worthy of thanksgiving. Praise Him, thank him, glorify Him for who He is amidst the anxiety and the peace.

There is another part of this verse that we can’t miss. Paul says,

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”

This holiday season, the thing that is more important than anything else is the reminder that the Lord is near. On Christmas of all days God became more near than ever before. He sent His one and only son, Jesus, to live on earth among people. God became flesh and blood so that He could be NEAR to us. Not just the best parts of us, but all of us. The anxiety, the hurt, the anger, the pain, He experienced it Himself. He knows and he sees you. That is why He offers peace. His peace, the peace that transcends all understanding, is a gift of His nearness to us in times of need. Today and everyday you have access to the peace of God.

In order to care for our souls well, we are extended and invitation to swap out anxiety for the peace of God this Christmas.

Response time:

* Worship song or background music as students pray/petition/gives thanks to God for peace.