

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, March 22, 2026

As we make the transition from announcements to the reading and proclamation of God's word, we do so each time we gather with a few breaths. So, I'll invite you to um to get comfy in your pews there. Take whatever prayer posture is appropriate for you and take a deep breath in with me.

Breathe it out slowly. Another deep breath in and breathe it out slowly

and breathe in God's mercies

and breathe out God's mercies to others. And breathe in God's mercies, and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Gracious spirit, you are as close to us as our very next breath. And so we pray that you would dwell within us and around us in these moments. That by your power you would quiet any voice within us but your own. That we might hear your word for us this morning. And that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

If you're joining us for the first time in this season of Lent, we need you to know that we've been navigating a sermon series entitled Marks of a Disciple. We believe that those who follow in the ways of Jesus are marked as they go out into the world. And so we've spent these several weeks of Lent reflecting on different marks. This morning we reflect on the mark of *peace*—that we believe as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are marked with and carry out with us into the world. Paul's words to the Philippians have centered our worship for the last several weeks. This morning we find ourselves in Philippians, chapter 4. We'll read together verses 4-9.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them. And the God of peace will be with you.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

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Each week, the sermon for this series has been entitled Marks of a Disciple dash whatever the mark was. This morning the title is Marks of a Disciple- Peace. But if I was to add a subheading to that title or subtitle, it would be The Slow Work of Peace. The Slow Work of Peace. On Friday at 9:24 a.m. we here in Memphis crossed the spring equinox. The moment when the calendar says that spring has arrived. But no one walks outside and says, "Oh yes, everything is now fully in bloom." Heck, if you walk outside this afternoon, you will have thought that we skipped all the way to summer equinox. It is going to be in the mid 80s, right? But if you paid attention, even as you walked into this place this day, there are trees that are in bloom, bushes that are beginning to flower, and others that remain bare at this time.

Spring is declared in a moment, but it arrives over time. So it is with the peace that Paul speaks of to the Philippians. The peace of Christ is promised instantly but cultivated gradually.

Paul declares at the beginning of this text, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near." In an instant he declares joy and the nearness of our God. He is not speaking circumstantially. He is speaking, he is writing theologically. Peace begins for Paul not with changed circumstances but with the nearness of our living God. This morning I want us to talk about what it looks like to be about the slow work of peace, peace that is cultivated. To continue the springtime image, I want us to think of ourselves as those who are tending the soil of our very souls this day. Over the last couple weeks, as the temperatures have begun to rise, my neighbors have gotten out in their yards a little bit more. Even here around the property those who tend to the grounds of this place have begun to put on gloves and begun to dig up, put down fresh earth and to plant. They have begun to tend the soil of this place. And I want us to imagine this day that if we are to be marked by peace as disciples of Jesus Christ, then we need to do some tending of our own. It's important for us to know that our faith is not formulaic, but I would posit to you that sometimes formulas can be helpful and that Paul actually lays one out for us in this text this morning. I want to posit to you that the formula involves three practices. You can write these down if you're a notetaker. The three practices are this: release, root, and reframe. Release, root, and reframe. In verse six, we begin with this cultivation of peace by understanding what it means to release. Paul says to the church in Philippi, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."

He does not say to them, "Stop being anxious. Being anxious is unfaithful of you." He doesn't shame them for their anxiety. Indeed, the world in which they live is an anxious world. The streets that they walk are streets that are teeming with a heightened temperature, a heightened anxiety.

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Instead of telling them simply not to be anxious, he invites them to, encourages them to release that anxiety in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. “Let your requests be made known to God.” He gives them a practice here of what it means to release. It means to lift before God these things which are anxiously gnawing at you. Paul knows that peace grows when worry is handed over. When anxiety is handed over. He knows that we cannot hold both our anxiety and receive peace at once. If our hands are wrapped tightly around those things which we anxiously grip in this season, then we cannot have them open to receive a peace that is gifted by our God. So he invites them. He invites them to redirect their spiritual practice to prayer and supplication. This is important. There is no release without drawing before our God and bringing before our God the anxieties that we carry.

The first step in cultivating tending to the soil of our soul is release. The second is an invitation to be rooted. In verse 7, Paul says, "And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." This is a reassurance of the strength of that which Paul writes—this peace of God. Paul is not describing a fragile peace for him. The peace that he is promising in Christ Jesus, that was indeed promised by our God, is active. It's defensive in its posture of our spirits and our souls. He actually uses, here, this military language of guarding, which is interesting for a man who's found himself in prison to speak of a different sort of guard standing watch. A guard that is tender and yet strong. He describes this piece as that sort of guard—surrounding the soul of the believer.

He wants to communicate in this the seriousness of God's peace. For Paul, God's peace doesn't just comfort us. It stands watch over us and for us. And he wants the people in Philippi to be deeply rooted in this understanding. And he knows that there will be plenty of opportunities for them as they look upon the world to imagine that they are planted in some other type of soil than that of the loving God that they worship. So he wants them to be deeply rooted—that the God they know, even though they might not be able to comprehend God's surpassing greatness, this God's going to guard them.

Finally, we release, we root, and then we reframe. That's what Paul invites the Philippians to do in verse 8. “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Paul knows that peace is shaped by attention. Peace is shaped by attention. What we dwell on forms the climate of our souls. Paul speaks of it in a spiritual sense, but psychologists will tell us this years and years later. Your mind is the soil. Your heart is the soil. What you plant there will grow. And so he invites them to ponder

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something different in a world full of anxiety and fear. He tells them, "But y'all also know what is abidingly true. You know what is honorable, behavior that is honorable. You know what it is. You know what it means to actually be just. You know what purity looks like, not in toxic form, but in loving form. You know what is pleasing to God. God has made it clear to you. You know what is commendable. You saw it from myself and from Timothy when we came when we were with you."

Paul wants them to focus, to reframe their current environment, their current thought process to that which they know to be good and true and honorable. Release, root, and reframe.

Paul understands that peace is cultivated over time. It's tended to. It's practiced, actually.

Paul says to them in verse 9, "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things." Don't just expect the peace of Christ to fall on you. You must engage in the work of being a disciple.

Peace is not a switch that you can turn like at 9:24 a.m. on Friday. It's a practice. It will not instantly bloom, but it will slowly grow.

When you came in this morning, or when you woke up and walked outside, you didn't yell at one of the trees in our parking lot or in your front yard, "It's March. You should have flowers now. You should have leaves," because that's not how spring works. It's not how peace grows within us either. We trust in this season that God is doing something unseen. Peace is not achieved. It is practiced over time in the presence of our God. Beloved, we know that we live in an anxious world. Political anxiety, well founded, real, is very present amongst us in our nation. Global instability from war and the growing distance between the rich and the poor. That's to say nothing of the personal burdens that you have carried with you to this place, the relationships that are weighing on you, the diagnosis, that assignment at work or in the home. We are surrounded by a world that offers urgency and anxiety.

And yet we worship a God who offers formation.

To those striving to be disciples of Jesus the Christ, Paul offers a simple invitation to practice peace. If Paul was present with us this morning, I wonder if he might posit to us that practicing peace might be the most faithful personal protest against the powers and principalities of the world in which we live.

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I wonder if we disciples in 2026 might hear Paul's invitation to the Philippians as our own. That in the week ahead we might be invited to practice peace. That we might follow a bit of this formula, that we might be willing to lay ourselves bare, vulnerable, to release to God that which we anxiously carry with us, to find ourselves rooted once again into the continual presence of our God. To reframe all the negativity and to claim for ourselves what we know to be true and honorable and just and pure and pleasing and commendable.

When you are anxious this week, I wonder if you might hear the invitation to pray immediately to actually practice peace by pausing. A few weeks ago, we were having a conversation at the session table and Pastor Mary perfectly, pastorally encouraged us to to pause.

(It is a lot of p's. I know. Sorry.) To pause and to pray. I wonder if we might have that invitation into our lives this week. When we are anxious, we might pause and we might pray immediately. When we are overwhelmed, when you are feeling overwhelmed, I wonder if you might draw back from that overwhelm and name aloud things that you know to be good and abiding and true and honorable and just, because if you pay attention, there are people who are doing true, honorable, just, pure, and commendable work in our community and in the world. I wonder if you find yourself restless this week, if you might be encouraged to hear Paul's reassurance to the Philippians that the Lord is near. It's not a question mark. It is a statement, the deep theological belief that the one that we know in Christ has not simply drawn near, but is near.

I wonder if in this practicing of peace this week, you might see something growing within you, being cultivated within you.

It was certainly the hope of Paul for the Philippians that they might grow as people of peace, embody it, carry it with them out into the world.

But I would also encourage you to be patient with yourself, to not imagine that this peace will simply fall upon you, but that it must be cultivated, especially in a world that preaches anxiety and fear.

Yesterday morning, Melissa Kursk in the New York Times had a beautiful piece about spring breaking forth into the world. She said this, "Right here, just on the other side of the equinox, daylight now exceeds dark in the Northern Hemisphere. Each day sunset is a little bit later. What is all this juice and all this joy? Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote in his poem "Spring." Indeed. What is it? What's with the dampness of sidewalks and the smell of thawing earth? Are there more birds singing or am I just waking up to them? They are the tiny increments of spring

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arriving. The equinox is a planetary demarcation, but real life spring arrives gradually, a halting nonlinear progression. Residue of winter, hints of future summer, doubling back before settling into itself, a season getting its footing, finally, eventually, again.”

Spring may arrive slowly, but it always arrives. And so does the peace of Christ for those who are rooted in Christ. So I invite you to practice and to practice and to practice peace.

There might be no more meaningful personal protest to the anxieties of the world than the practice of peace in this time. May you hear the invitation of Paul and may you hear his reassurance that the Lord is near.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, mother of us all. Amen.