

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Aye, it was in 1785, when Scottish poet Robert Burns penned the words: ***The best laid schemes of mice and men*** (to finish the quote) ***go often askew and leave us nothing but grief and pain, for promised joy.***

We tend to remember the first part only “the best laid schemes of mice and men” I suspect, largely because of the 1937 classic American novel “Of Mice and Men” by John Steinbeck.

It’s come to be an American parlance to signify: “**It just doesn’t matter how well you plan, there’s always that chance that it will go sideways, ... will go wrong, ... will turn out in an unpredicted manner.**”

Aye, the best laid plans of preachers and worship committees. ...

Just a bit of background: In August of this year, Janet and I gave to the Worship Committee the list of scriptures we would be using as sermon texts for the remainder of 2015. It was on October 10 and 31 that the Worship Committee met to plan our Advent worship services. It was then that we decided to use different themes, instead of the traditional Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love, but instead to use: (1) Be Alert, (2) Be Prepared, (3) Be Not Afraid, and (4) Be at Peace. The committee notes show that it was on October 31 where we came up with the sermon title for today: ***Bing and Rosemary.***

It was a reference to the scene in the classic Christmas movie, ***White Christmas***, when the character played by Rosemary Clooney is unable to sleep and goes to the kitchen to fix a midnight snack. Then Bing Crosby’s

character happens into the same place and sings for her the cure for worry, as written by Irving Berlin, that begins like this: [Here Joe Janisch sings:]

**When I'm worried and I can't sleep
I count my blessings instead of sheep
And I fall asleep counting my blessings**

And then you see, the game plan was for me to review the first week: For Advent we have to **be alert** for what's going on around us. Then we were told last week that like an interstate construction engineer who plans a highway, Isaiah and John the Baptist tell their audiences and us that we have to **Be Prepared**. We can't expect to be saved and not to be changed. And then you see, I was supposed to take today's lesson from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, and stress the importance of GRATITUDE to the change required in our living in order to quell the anxieties of life.

That was the plan.

But things have not remained the same in the world since October 31, when those plans came together. There was Paris, and there was San Bernadino, and then there has been a ratcheted up level of rhetoric in our culture that I can't remember since September 11, 2011. And even more so, in terms of the incivility of American purported Christians toward one another, let alone toward different religions and different nationalities.

Those plans from October 31 were written in a different time, during different circumstances.

I almost thought I had a way to draw it all back together when the Salvation Bell ringer said to me one day this week: ***Ah, brother, when our lives are grateful, it's impossible to be hateful.***

[Joe sings again:

When I'm worried and I can't sleep
 I count my blessings instead of sheep
 And I fall asleep counting my blessings

If we count our blessings then we won't be so strident in our conversations, maybe?

Nah! That's just not enough. We live in the most prosperous nation in the world-- in the history of the world. That doesn't stop us from being intolerant, uncivil, and mean-speaking to one another, let alone to outsiders.

So, thus in trouble, I tried to do two things in an effort to somehow speak a **Word of the Lord** in the midst of the shrill noise going on all around us. Two interesting things for a preacher to do: (1) I went back to the scripture, and (2) I prayed.

And now I'll share with you the result of that work. I don't want to build this up too much in advance, because the bottom line is that I think I have come up more questions than answers that perhaps we all need to wrestle with.

The scripture that Paul wrote to the church in Philippi does indeed talk about gratitude, about counting one's blessings. **[Joe starts to sing again, and I interrupt him, "No, not again, not now. But thank you."]**

But it also talks about one other really big thing F E A R (although the ESV read today uses the word "anxiety." (NRSV says "Do not worry.") And our Advent Candle lighting text spells it out V E R Y clearly: "**God gave us a spirit NOT OF FEAR, but of power and of love and self-control. There is NO FEAR in love.**"

Although I struggle very hard to not use the pulpit for discussions of politics, the more I prayed this week about what we are going through in this

country, the more convinced I became IN PRAYER that a political speech given over 80 years ago, has a great deal of scriptural and theological integrity in it. (I am not saying that the original purpose of the words was anything other than political rhetoric, just that there is NONETHELESS a great deal of scriptural and theological wisdom in these words: **the only thing we have to fear is fear itself**. (FDR first inauguration speech, March 4, 1933))

Let me be very clear in what I am saying here: **Fear and guilt are both fantastic early warning signs that something in our world is not right, and we ought look into the situation. Often the real problem is NOT with the external stimuli, but with our self. Fear and guilt are great early warning signs but are terrible, cancerous long-term companions, which will destroy our vision, our will, our insight, and our faith.**

TWO HUNDERED FORTY-EIGHT times in the Bible, God, a prophet for God, or an angel messenger of God says to humans: either **“Do not be afraid!”** or **“Fear not!”**

That is compelling, but I’m not here to just talk about counting in the Bible. We are facing some serious stuff in our country and world and in our individual lives. I need to cut to the chase here.

It’s not just an oft repeated message of God (summed up in **God gave us a spirit NOT OF FEAR but of power and of love and self-control. There is NO FEAR in love.**)

But it’s also an issue that **didn’t just come about now.**

It’s been part of the political religious landscape since the beginning of the story of God and God’s people.

We keep thinking this is the first time this dance has been danced.

Following the burning death of his wife, and the serious wounding of his son in the Civil War, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, one of the greatest American poets penned **on December 25, (Christmas Day) 1863**, expressions of the same frustration, anxiety and fear that many people are feeling today:

**I heard the bells on Christmas Day
 Their old, familiar carols play,
 and wild and sweet
 The words repeat
 Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
 And thought how, as the day had come,
 The belfries of all Christendom
 Had rolled along
 The unbroken song
 Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
 Till ringing, singing on its way,
 The world revolved from night to day,
 A voice, a chime,
 A chant sublime
 Of peace on earth, good-will to men!**

**Then from each black, accursed mouth
 The cannon thundered in the South,
 And with the sound
 The carols drowned
 Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
 It was as if an earthquake rent
 The hearth-stones of a continent,
 And made forlorn
 The households born
 Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
 And in despair I bowed my head;
 “There is no peace on earth,” I said;
 “For hate is strong,
 And mocks the song
 Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”**

Do you hear a similar fear 150+ years later?
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But Longfellow did NOT quit there. He finished the poem, as one who understands that **God gave us a spirit NOT OF FEAR but of power and of love and self-control. There is NO FEAR in love**
Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.”

Ultimately, my prayer life brought me to a serious, serious question that must needs be answered by all who wrestle with fear today, in today’s world, as it has been wrestled with throughout the ages:

How strong is your God? “In fact, deep down, although we don’t say it, we sometimes have the impression somehow that God is weak and can’t really do much anyway.” [“Pray as You Go” devotion, Wednesday December 8, 2015]

You see: the peace of which Paul says “passes all understanding” NEVER is achieved by simply trying to overcome the object of fear in life. There will ALWAYS be something of which we might fear. Always.

Rather, the issue for us is: **Just what are we willing to trust to our God?** Just what fears are we willing to allow God to handle, and which ones do we think that God simply is not up to the task, and that we need to do something that is wholly inconsistent with the word of Jesus, the Prince of Peace?

Here’s the deal, my sisters and brothers: if we aren’t willing to trust God to handle some of our fears, then how in the world do we think we can turn to him for others? We either trust God or we do not.

Can you believe: **Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:**
“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;

The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.”

And so, strangely enough, I end up back where I started:

[Joe sings again:

When I'm worried and I can't sleep
I count my blessings instead of sheep
And I fall asleep counting my blessings

You see, it really is about counting our blessings enough that we come around to trusting God to solve that which makes us anxious.

We can't be saved, if we aren't willing to be changed. And that change begins with counting blessings, and then it flows into trusting God IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES.

Lots of questions, perhaps. And I can't answer them for you. Only you can answer for yourself: **What do you trust God with and what do you not?**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.