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EARTHQUAKE PROOF
John 14:1-2, 27-30

On October 3, 1993 Task Force Ranger consisting of 160 American military Special Forces personnel was sent into the heart of Mogadishu in Somalia to capture key associates of warlord Mohammed Aidid. While the mission ultimately achieved its objective, things quickly went sideways when two Blackhawk helicopters were shot down. The raid was intended to be a one hour mission, but as the soldiers tried to rescue the downed aircrews they became trapped in the city, surrounded by thousands of armed hostile forces. The mission turned into a ferocious and hellacious 18 hour long firefight against overwhelming numbers. During the battle army Ranger Specialist John Stebbins was wounded when a grenade exploded near him. His M-16 rifle was shattered, his pants were almost completely burned off of him and he was hit by shrapnel up and down his body. He staggered back to shelter, dazed, covered in dust, bleeding from wounds all over his body. He had a golf ball sized chunk of shrapnel embedded in his foot and the entire lower left side of his body was burned. The medic who treated him, Delta Force Sgt. Tim Wilkinson, knew that he wasn't yet feeling the pain of his fearsome wounds but he soon would. Unfortunately the battle continued to rage so there was no way to get Stebbins to the medical care he needed. They needed everyone who could still fight so the medic handed Stebbins a rifle and told him to cover a particular window. Then Wilkinson said to him, "All I can give you for the pain is some Percocet. However, as your health care professional I feel I should warn you that narcotics and firearms don't mix."

It is amazing that in a situation that intense and desperate Wilkinson maintained a sense of humor. But his advice clearly wasn't very helpful. Today we are going to look at something Jesus said that might at first feel like it is equally unhelpful. Yet as we consider his message we will find it to be a powerful one that we all need to hear, one that is full of help and hope. It is found in John 14:1-2 and verse 27.

PREMISE: EVERY HUMAN BEING IS SEARCHING FOR PEACE

This section of Jesus' final briefing for his disciples starts with the words, "do not let your hearts be troubled." In Greek there were two ways to give a negative command like "don't let your heart be troubled." One way meant "don't let your heart start to be troubled." John used the other construction in this verse. The one he used here meant to stop doing something you were already doing. So it literally

meant, “Stop letting your hearts be troubled.” This saying assumes that their hearts were not at peace. That’s a good assumption for the human race in general.

The disciples’ hearts were agitated, troubled. Jesus had been talking of one of them betraying him and saying he was going away. He had been making dark allusions to him dying. All this was deeply upsetting. Jesus had said the time had come for him to be glorified. His men were hoping and expecting that he was going to set up his kingdom on earth and usher in this great kingdom of peace and prosperity in which Israel would rule over the entire world with him as king. But all this talk of dying and going away left their heads spinning. What about the kingdom and their role as leaders in it? They had been fearful even before that night. In John 11 Jesus had been out in a sparsely populated area, avoiding the confrontation with the religious elite of Israel that was inevitable and would end badly. Then his friend, Lazarus, died. Jesus headed toward Lazarus’ home town of Bethany not far from Jerusalem. Thomas, one of his disciples, in John 11:16 said, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Thomas and probably most of the others went to Jerusalem like men walking out to face a firing squad. The entire time in that city leading up to this last night was filled with conflict, confirming their suspicion that bad things were about to happen. To say their hearts were troubled would be an understatement.

If this passage only related to those guys in that particular situation it would be a somewhat interesting historical note. But what Jesus said here applies to more than just those 11 men and their particular situation. The most often repeated command in the Bible is “do not fear.” It is so heavily emphasized because humans continually are dogged by fear. We are afraid and our hearts are troubled. Having troubled hearts is part of the human condition. In his book, *Secrets In The Dark*, Frederick Buechner wrote, “part of the inner world of everyone is this sense of emptiness, unease, incompleteness.” He went on to say that all humans live like children on Christmas day opening presents. We keep opening one present after another in the hope that the next present will finally be “the one we have waited for so long, the one that fills the empty place, which is the peace that passes understanding.”

Our hearts are troubled. Writer Fran Lebowitz said, “there is no such thing as inner peace. There is only nervousness and death.” In fact, studies have shown that when we human beings have periods of quiet with time for reflection our thoughts tend toward disquietude.

One of my favorite movies is the old baseball movie *Field of Dreams*. I like the baseball theme in it for that is a game I love. But it touches my heart on a much deeper level. The movie speaks to some of the most powerful longings of the human heart. There is a crucial scene in the movie when Ray Kinsella, the central character, is tempted to give up on his quirky and weird project of the baseball diamond in the middle of his Iowa cornfield due to the collapse of his finances. Then his friend Terence Mann says to him, “Ray, people will come, Ray. They’ll come to Iowa for reasons they can’t even fathom. They’ll turn up your driveway not knowing for sure why they’re doing it. They’ll arrive at your door, as innocent as children looking for the past. Of course we won’t mind if you look around, you’ll say. It’s only \$20 per person. They’ll pass over the money without even thinking about it: for it is money they have and peace they lack.” That movie claimed that all people everywhere lack peace, no matter what else they may have. That is an accurate depiction of humanity.

In his book *Rhythm of Life* Matthew Kelly related a conversation he had with an acquaintance who is one of the wealthiest men in the world. This is a guy who has everything. But in a quiet conversation he admitted to Kelly that he would give it all up, the mansions, the airplanes, the boats, the cars, the money, just to have real peace.

All of us know what it is like to have a troubled heart. Some of us only experience that during times of crisis, others of us live with it nearly continually. All of us long for real peace. Laurie had an unfortunate encounter with a neighbor this week. This woman, whom we’ve known for 20 years, took exception to the fact that the mother of one of Laurie’s music students parked on our narrow street across from her house making it difficult for her to get in and out of her garage. The lady was only parked there for 2 minutes, but our neighbor thought it was the wrong 2 minutes and went anabolic on Laurie’s friend. She yelled at her and called her a less than affirming name. Laurie told her not to talk to the lady but to come to her if she had a problem. It didn’t go well. For a couple of days Laurie’s heart was troubled. She wanted to have peace with her neighbor. Do you know how something like that nags at you? We would love to be free of the tumult of a troubled heart and have peace. That’s what Jesus tells us about in these verses we are looking at today. What are we to do about our need for peace?

CHOOSE PEACE

Jesus said, “Do not let your heart be troubled.” This is that advice I mentioned in the introduction that is sort of like that medic’s advice to Specialist Stebbins that firearms and narcotics don’t mix. It doesn’t feel very helpful. When you’re

seriously stressed and facing something ominous or difficult and someone says, “Don’t worry about it” Doesn’t that irritate you? You’d love to not worry. What you want most is to not have your heart be troubled. If you could, you would. That’s just the problem. You can’t. Yet isn’t that what Jesus said?

This is not the only place where he said that. In one familiar quote in Matthew 6:25 he said, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink.” In verse 34 he said, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.” The same message is in the Old Testament as well. Psalm 46 speaks of a time of fear and stress. Verses 2-3 picture a stressful situation in which, “the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.” In other words, the whole world seems in an uproar. Verse 10 tells us how to respond. “Be still and know that I am God.” The sense of the Hebrew word translated “Be still” is “relax.” Calm down, be at peace and don’t sweat it.

In his book, *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell at one point discussed what adrenaline does in times of extreme stress, especially life threatening ones like combat. It causes our hearing to sharpen and can cause our vision to narrow and sharpen as well, so we screen out extraneous inputs and focus only on the most important events occurring before our eyes. But most interesting to me is that for some people adrenaline causes their nervous system and brain to speed up and process information more quickly so that events appear to slow down. For these people in these stressful, life threatening situations things appear to almost happen in slow motion. There are people that just seem to become calm under pressure and stress. I would like to choose that. I would like to be able to do what Jesus says and not be troubled, but to be able to be calm no matter what is happening in life.

There are many people for whom anxiety and depression are relentless scourges. It may be that there are physical causes for this that need to be treated. But outside that the thing that grabs my attention is that Jesus clearly was saying that we can *choose* not to be troubled. His commands to not be troubled, not be afraid, not worry, not be anxious, are pointless and callous unless we in fact, can obey them and choose peace. If we can’t choose not to be stressed this command is pointless.

It sure doesn’t feel like it at times. Sometimes you face something that just gnaws at you. You wake up in the middle of the night and keep going over it repeatedly, creating disaster scenarios. You tell yourself to stop thinking about it, but it’s like you’re powerless to stop it. Your mind goes right back to it as though it exerts

some powerful magnetic force on your thoughts. You decide you are going to not worry about it, and two minutes later you're thinking about it again.

Was Jesus wrong on this? Is it impossible to choose peace? It may feel like it, but Jesus always spoke the truth. He's telling us we're not doomed to be victims of stress, worry and fear. There is hope, but we must choose peace. There are specific things we must do to choose peace. Jesus tells us what they are.

TRUST GOD

Jesus says we should trust God and trust in him. This is the key to peace. We have some friends who grew up in Jacksonville, Florida. They live there today. Their names were Storm and Angie. They ended up out here because Storm played baseball and was traded to the Padres. Angie never really liked California. But it got worse. Storm eventually went to Oakland to play for the A's. They got into the 1989 World Series where they played the Giants. It was great, a World Series where the teams were just across the bay from each other. Unfortunately that World Series was interrupted by a major earthquake in the Bay Area. Angie was at the game when the quake hit and she could see the tiers of the stadium moving. One thing she had always been able to count on in her life was that the ground was solid and stable. Suddenly she discovered that she couldn't count on that in California. In her mind that meant she could never be at peace. She said was done with California and would never live here again. And she has not!

Angie's experience illustrates the truth that we need something solid to stand on to be at peace and not have our heart be troubled. Jesus says that something is the character of the Father in heaven and his Son, Jesus.

So is the idea that we should trust God because he is going to make sure nothing bad ever happens? In a few hours Jesus would be arrested, abused, tortured and executed in one of the most inhumane ways people have ever devised. The worst thing in history, the thing the disciples were so afraid of, the thing they prayed would not happen, was about to happen. Clearly this suggests that Jesus was not saying that we should trust God to guarantee that things will always go the way we want. They weren't going to go the way the disciples wanted.

Then what can we trust God for? Jesus identifies two absolutely critical things. The first is our *eternal future*. Jesus said in verse 2, "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you." When he spoke of "many rooms" he meant there's room for all of us. Jesus didn't have to go build some new suites in heaven or remodel some that

weren't in very good condition. That's not the point. In his commentary on John scholar D. A. Carson wrote, "it is the going itself, via the cross and resurrection, that prepares the place for Jesus' disciples." The horrific events that would take place that next day were the preparing Jesus had to do.

The rooms have been prepared for Jesus' followers. Imagine that you are going on a vacation with extended family and you're going to stay in a nice hotel. You arrive around noon even though check in time is 3 P.M. When you walk into the lobby you find a family member is there to greet you. He says, "I'm paying for the room. It's ready for you. I've already checked you in. Here are the keys, let me help you move your stuff in." Jesus has already checked you in to your suite in the Father's eternal house and obtained the keys, so all you have to do is move in. If you have put your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, all is ready for you. Understand that Jesus prepared the way for you. If you are not putting your faith in him, you still don't have the keys to the house. There is no other way than the way Jesus prepared to move into those rooms.

We get stressed over a lot of things in life. Maybe it is the big test that is coming up and your whole future depends on the outcome. Maybe it is a tidal wave of unexpected bills and you don't know how to pay for them. Maybe it is the loss of a job or some poor choices a child is making. The list could go on indefinitely. As important as these are they all are totally eclipsed by this one matter. What will happen after you die? Death is the most irreversible event you will ever experience. So you'd better have an answer for it. And it had better be an answer that is more than speculation or wishful thinking.

Most of us have had some encounter with death, either through a close call personally or through losing a loved one to it. Having lost both a son and a father I can verify that it is horrendous and gut wrenching. In its shadow nothing else matters. To know that Jesus has prepared the way for us, that living in the Father's house eternally is a certainty for us is the most precious, most valuable thing we can ever have. It is the foundation of peace. If we have this we can be at peace no matter what else may happen. If we don't have it nothing can ever give us peace. No matter what else we do we will have the most ominous, most threatening, most awful event hanging over us and as a result we will always be fearful and uneasy.

The second thing that we can trust God for is that he has a *good plan*. The disciples are confused and fearful and the next day their worst fears would become a reality. Their beloved Master would be mocked, rejected, tortured and killed. Their dreams would be totally destroyed and they themselves would be in danger. Jesus was

telling them that through all of this they could trust God. God was working his plan. What an astounding thing that was. A good God who only wants good for everyone, somehow allowed pure evil to create the greatest injustice in human history, and somehow that was part of his plan. It was necessary for it to happen in order for a way for us to enter the Father's house. If it didn't happen, then we would have been forever exiled from that which we most need.

Jesus was saying to his followers, "Yes, something bad, the thing you fear is going to happen. But relax boys, I got this. It's all under control and is part of the plan." God had a plan, one they could never have imagined. Somehow what felt to them as though God had completely failed and allowed an incomprehensible, unmitigated disaster to occur, actually was his eternal perfect plan being worked out before their eyes. This same reality is at play every moment of our lives. This does not mean that life will always be a smooth road for us. It wasn't for Jesus or his disciples. But it was God's good plan.

As we think about this issue of choosing to not let our hearts be troubled we need to understand that we are faced continually with a decision we must make day in and day out between two alternatives. Alternative number one is to run things in this world for ourselves. We decide for ourselves the good that we must have and we try to exert enough control over ourselves, other people and circumstances to bring about that good end. We must force our will on our world in order to get what we want. Alternative number two is to trust God. Trust his wisdom, his goodness, his love and his ability to care for us and bring about his good plan. It means to let him decide what is best and then bring that about.

A picture that helps me is to recall a flight we were on coming home a number of years ago during the winter. A big storm was hitting California and as we were flying through it we encountered some severe turbulence. The plane started bouncing all over the sky and suddenly dropping what seemed like thousands of feet. It got so bad that the flight attendants, who had been serving drinks, gave up and strapped into seats. Turbulence is never fun, but I usually find it helps to look at the flight attendants. When you see that they're not worried you realize this is normal. In that case it didn't help. The flight attendants had tight faces and they looked pale and worried. Not good. In that situation I had a choice. I could freak out, unbuckle my seat belt, rush the cockpit and try to wrest control of the aircraft from the pilot. Or I could trust them to use their skill and training to fly the plane. Which is the best strategy? Of course I couldn't fly the plane, but if I tried what would happen? We'd crash for sure. The wisest course is let those who are capable

fly the plane. So in life. When I try to take over for God and control the universe myself, disaster is going to follow.

Some of our greatest stress and anxiety is caused directly by choosing alternative number one. Insisting on our own control and getting that thing we are hanging onto so tightly inevitably causes frustration because we actually control very little. It causes conflict and struggle with other people because we are trying to manipulate and control them so they will aid us in getting what we want. It causes us to be ever threatened because we know that those brief moments when we can exert enough control to hold on to what we want could unravel in an instant. Frustrated, in conflict, struggling, easily threatened. Is that not the very definition of having a troubled heart totally lacking peace? So choose the other alternative and trust God. In doing so you are choosing peace!

Oh, okay, trust God and let go and I'll have peace. Nice formula. There's nothing quite like a nice easy, pat answer that doesn't help even in the least bit, is there? You have had the same experience I have had. You "gave it to the Lord," trusted him and still felt that pit of anxiety in your gut. You would love to "let go" of it, but you tried and somehow found you were still tied up in knots over it. What can help us? I will give you some suggestions shortly as we apply this sermon.

LIVE IN THE PEACE OF CHRIST

In verse 27 Jesus returned to this theme of not being troubled. He said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." Jesus said he gives peace and that his peace is different from what the world gives.

What sort of peace does the world give? The world offers us palliatives. To truly be at peace we need several things. We need a connection to our Creator. We need to know that we are forgiven, that our guilt has been taken care of. We need to know that we are all right despite the flaws we are all too aware of. We need to know that our lives have real meaning. We need to know that we are loved and not alone. We need to know that we are safe and secure and we need to know that our future is good and certain, even after death. We need a life that is earthquake proof.

But the world's answers for finding peace inevitably fall short. There is no security in this world, no matter how many resources and how much power we have. Laurie and I had our trials with the TSA on our recent trip. In Atlanta we had to go through security lines that looked like something out of the longest rides at Disneyland. It was such a trial. I've got a carry on bag, a back pack, my ID, my

boarding pass, then I have to empty my pockets, take off my shoes, put my jacket on the conveyor, and it is like a juggler with too many balls in the air. It is such a hassle. As I was going through all this I reflected on something I read in a book titled *The Next Decade*, written by security expert George Friedman. He said that the whole TSA routine is there primarily to pacify passengers and convince them they are safe. It is mostly theater, because it won't stop a dedicated terrorist. I reflected on the fact that pretty much every time I have flown in the past few years I have carried something through TSA that was against their rules, always inadvertently, and they've never caught it. In other words, there is no real security. If any of those things is missing or distorted, there is going to be a lack of peace within us. This is why studies show that there is in all of us a sort of background uneasiness. We don't feel as loved as we should, we fear we aren't really lovable, we don't have an answer for guilt, we don't have a sense of purpose for our lives and death...well it scares us to death. As for safety and security we can only have that by ignoring the reality of life. There is no security here. That is just one example of the fact that there is not real security in this world. It is simply a dangerous place.

The world's answer for our lack of peace about ourselves also falls short. Recently we got our bill from SDG&E. It compared our usage of electricity with other users. I started feeling proud because we were way better than average. In fact, we were better than the most efficient households. Aren't we ecologically righteous. Then I realized why we were so much better. We were out of town for a week, so they were comparing our 3 weeks of electricity usage to other people's 4. What struck me is this weird need to somehow be better than other people. That will never fill our need to be all right, to be approved and at peace. No matter how much we try to prop up our sense of esteem it will never bring peace to our souls. The same is true of the world's answers for all the other aspects of peace. The world has no real answer for our guilt, no way to connect us to God, no meaning to offer us in life, no hope for our eternal future.

Jesus promised that he gives peace that's not like any of the ersatz peace the world tries to sell us. He said he gives the real thing. He deals with our problem of guilt by offering us forgiveness. He does not give us a stricter set of rules, more threats to punish failure or more encouragement to try harder. All any of those things could do is add to our guilt. He gives us grace and unconditional love. He took the punishment we offer so that we are now free of the fear of it. He can accept imperfect people the way a parent loves imperfect kids. He deals with the uncaring emptiness and meaninglessness of the universe by loving us, proving his reality

and connecting us to himself. He gives us a real point to our lives that has eternal significance. He infuses every moment of our lives with meaning. He gives us that hope for life after death as we saw earlier. Finally as we saw earlier he says to us about the fearful things that we stress over because they might happen to us, “relax boys, I got this.” He has a plan.

He actually can and will give us a supernatural peace that is like nothing the world can give if we will trust him. Graig Eastin had a very big and very upsetting meeting with his boss this week. He said just before the meeting verses of Scripture came flooding into his mind. As they did so, he said, he great calm, a peace came over him. He went into the meeting relaxed and at peace, and it was his boss who was anxious and upset. Jesus does give us peace.

APPLICATION

LOOK TO JESUS

Where do you go for peace? Getting away from it all is a nice respite, but it will all be here when you get back. There are people who try to escape the trouble in their heart by running away, by subduing it with drugs or alcohol, by entertaining themselves so frantically they don't notice it. None of those can ever give the supernatural peace that Jesus gives. The world tells us to do something impressive so we can be at peace with who we are because we've propped up our self image and our sense of self esteem, but all that does is make us vulnerable to criticism, failure, rejection and even self recrimination. It is never enough to put us at peace. So start with being clear on where peace comes from. It comes from Jesus so we should always look to him for it, not to the strategies of this world.

HAND IT TO JESUS

Remember that we create our own anxiety by holding on tight and by trying to control the circumstances of life so we get what we want from it. We are all going to desire things and wish life would go smoothly. There is nothing wrong with that. But we must give those desires and that control to Jesus. Like the disciples we need to say, “All right, Jesus, if you insist you have to go to the cross, so be it. We'll do it your way.” As Paul instructed us in Philippians 4:6-7 we should make all or our requests to God about anything that might cause us stress, then let God decide what should happen. If we will do that we will experience his peace.

One aspect of this that can help us is if we will live in the moment. Remember Jesus said "do not worry about tomorrow, each day has enough troubles of its own." Most of our stress comes from either hanging on to things that happened in

the past or stressing over what might happen tomorrow. Jesus said let tomorrow take care of itself. So often the things we stress about never even happen.

In September of 2012 Michael, who is now our son-in-law, received a new assignment from the Marines. He is a fighter pilot, flying the Marines hottest jet, the F-18. He is one of the best pilots they have. Yet, as happens with all Marine pilots at one time or another, he was given a ground assignment. Unfortunately this assignment was in Afghanistan. He told us he was going to be a forward air controller. This immediately set off alarm bells for me. He would be a *forward* controller who would be assigned to a *forward* operating base. Then he began his training. He was training as part of a team. I realized what this was. He was going to be part of a special operations team. I've read books about that and I knew how dangerous his mission was going to be. I was seriously concerned. I said a little to Laurie about it, but nothing to Carissa. I didn't want to worry her, but I became quite anxious about this assignment. Shortly before he deployed his mission was scrubbed and his team was broken up. He wasn't going to be in the dangerous situation I feared. He had to go and he did face shots fired in anger at him, but the biggest obstacle he faced was boredom. And possibly a commanding officer who was a real nut case. The worry had been for nothing.

A similar thing happened for Laurie. She stressed over the problem with our neighbor for a couple of days. But she baked some cookies for her and went over to talk to her to try to resolve the issue. When she did she said it was anticlimactic. The neighbor was fine and had no problem whatsoever. The stress had been for nothing. These are good reminders that we should let tomorrow worry about itself.

FOLLOW JESUS

What will free us up the most is if we will simply want what Jesus wants most. If what we want most of all is to do God's will as Jesus did, to glorify God more than anything else, to love people the way Jesus loves them, then nothing can stop us. We will always have what we desire. Nothing can threaten us for nothing can stop us from obeying God, glorifying him continually and loving other people. Keep focused on God's wisdom and goodness. Trust in that.

A number of years ago I saw a segment of *60 Minutes* that was about some young men who grew up as orphans in Sudan. They grew up in grim refugee camps. What was striking about these young men was their great faith in God and their great hearts for him. They focused on one of the young men who was selected to come to America. He was overjoyed at this incredible blessing. He was settled in Atlanta where he faced enormous obstacles. He has nothing, lives in poverty, has no

preparation or skills for making it in our country. He is trying to adapt to this strange new land. After he had been here some time they interviewed him and asked how he felt about his new home. His faced split into a huge grin and he said, "This is like a second heaven." It helps me to remember that young man.

THANK JESUS

The problem with the Philippians 4:6-7 passage is that it promises peace. But there have been things that I have prayed about and still felt anxious about. Why does that happen? I forget part of that verse. It is the part where Paul tells us to make our requests "with thanksgiving." That implies we are thanking God for what he has done, for who he is, and for whatever he chooses to do as we submit our request to him. In other words, we let it go and be thankful for whatever he does. If we can do that we will have peace.