

[Genesis 32:22-31](#)

[Psalm 17: 1-7, 16](#)

[Romans 9:1-5](#)

[Matthew 14:13-21](#)

PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO ON THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, AUGUST 2, 2008 AT ALL HALLOWS CHURCH, SOUTH RIVER PARISH, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Summer is a high time for going on vacations. There is a couple in town planning to get away from the stress and burdens of their working life. They are going to the Bahamas. Because of their different work schedules, the husband has to fly down on Thursday, while his hardworking wife, has to come down on Friday after work. After arriving at the resort complex, the husband discovers that there is a computer in his room with high-speed internet access. So he decides to send his wife an e-mail to surprise her. However, he is a little confused about her e-mail address and he's taking a bet on his memory. Alas, he misses it just by one letter. Meanwhile, in Annapolis, a recently widowed woman has just returned from the funeral of her husband. Due to the urgent nature of his passing away, many relatives overseas were not able to come to the funeral. Therefore, she decides to check the computer to see if any relatives have sent her condolences through e-mail. However, as soon as she reads her first e-mail, she is frozen in a state of shock. She shouts to get her son from downstairs to read the email together. In the "To" line, it says, "My beloved wife"; in the "From" line, it reads, "Your departed husband"; Subject: "I'm down here now." The e-mail then goes, "Darling, they have computers down here now. So I'm sending you this e-mail. I'll see that everything is ready for your arrival tomorrow evening. I will come pick you up. You really deserve this for all you've done. And by the way, be ready: it is really hot down here!

You see, we create our own stress, fear, and anxiety based on our perceptions. A glitch in cyberspace can lead to a cascade of events that scare some people while entertaining some others. While we as humans sometimes create our own scenarios of stress, fear, and anxiety from little or no cause, there are times when our anxieties are the result of real and significant causes. The difficulty or inability to satisfy the basic necessities of living, for example, can give birth to profound anxiety and angst. In our Gospel lesson from Matthew today, we saw a glimpse of a hungry, wandering crowd of people in the wilderness: five thousand men in addition to women and children. Can you imagine their stress, anxiety, and fear in being hungry and in not being able to know when and where their next meal will come from? The disciples of Jesus are pragmatic folk. So they urge Jesus to release the crowd from his preaching and teaching so that they may go in the village and buy food to eat. But what if they don't have money, what if there is not enough food to buy? That is beyond the disciples' scope of worries and concerns. But that is within Jesus' compassion and mercy. So from five loaves and two fish, Jesus feeds the hungry, eager crowd. This story is traditionally *called the Miracle of the Feeding of Five Thousand*. Much has been focused on the miraculous power of Jesus, justifying his divinity through the ages. But I suspect Jesus' true intention is not so much to make miracles, but to demonstrate God's Providence. It is Divine Providence that feeds the hungry crowd; it is Divine Providence that relieves their stress, dissipates their anxiety, and conquers their fear.

What is Divine Providence? God's Providence is the reason of our being. Indeed, creation and providence go hand in hand. God did not just create the cosmos and walk away. The planetary

system, the geological features, and the evolution of species all attest to the handiwork of God's creation and providence. God's Providence ensures and provides for the preservation and maintenance of creation constantly. Each new birth is a sign of this hope. In the Old Testament, Abraham gave the name Jehovah-jireh to the place where his son Isaac was spared from being offered as a sacrifice to God. This name commemorates the intervention of the angel of God, who appeared to prevent the sacrifice, (Genesis 22:14) and provided another victim instead. And Jehovah-jireh means "God will provide." [You may hear our Jewish friends will say Adonai-jireh, meaning "The LORD will provide" because God's name is not supposed to be pronounced in their tradition.]

In the Heidelberg Catechism of our brothers and sisters in Christ in the Reformed Tradition, we can find solace and refuge in God's Providence, knowing that:

*A. We can be patient in adversity,[1] thankful in prosperity,[2] and with a view to the future we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from His love:[3] for all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move.[4][1]*

Friends, if you have issues with stress, anxiety, and fear, rely on God's Providence to cast away all your worldly cares. The greatest enemy in our spiritual growth is not lack of faith, but our fear: the fear that God might not come through, the fear that we might not have enough to live on, the fear that we might be lonely, the fear that we might spend our lives unfulfilled at the end.... All these are our spiritual enemies. In the First Epistle of John, we are told that love casts out all fears. And Divine Providence is an attribute of God's love for us.

Trusting in God always, relying on his Providence is not an easy task, especially when we are visited by the ups and downs in life. Sometimes, even clergy can get dismayed at God, as Father Ted Jones, honestly, admirably and vulnerably shared with you a few weeks ago in his sermon about the speed bumps he encountered in his spiritual life. But even if we feel that God has forsaken us, he has not and he will not forsake us. The answer to Jesus' most agonizing pathos at the cross, "Father, Father, why have you forsaken me?" is his mighty resurrection and glorious ascension.

You may ask, "how can we increase our faith in God's Providence so that we may live without stress, anxiety, and fear?" We can begin to do so by imitating Jesus' extreme humility. Paul's letter to the Philippians illustrates Jesus' extreme humility for all times and places (Phil. 2:5-8):

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.*

Some theologians call this the kenosis or self-emptying of Christ. The more we empty of our own volitions, wills, and desires, the more we will put on Christ, the more we will rely on God's Providence. St. Francis of Assisi perfected his kenosis or self-emptying by leaving his privileged life and entering into voluntary holy poverty for the sake of the Kingdom of God. He embraced scarcity, yet God filled him with abundance---the authentic abundance of God's Providence. In his heart, Francis was at peace with God and men, holding no grudges against anyone, even those who persecuted him. In his practice of faith, he was among the first "green" saints, respecting and safeguarding all of God's creatures. He could achieve all that exactly because he lived and breathed God's Providence.

Sisters and brothers, I pray that our embrace of God's Providence in Jesus Christ will bring us the peace and comfort beyond the measure of the mind. As the bishops of the Anglican Communion finish the once-a-decade Lambeth Conference, may we hold them and the entire Communion in our prayers that together, we will rely on God's Providence and cast our all stress, anxiety, and fear. As Anglican theologian, Dr. Jenny Te Paa has said,

*“And to what extent then, if at all, do the current tensions, fights and flights, claims and counter claims, bruising and blaming, petulance and pettiness, bullying and bribing have to do with the [other gloriously precious small ‘c’,] communion of saints in waiting??[2]*

Indeed, we are the communion of saints in waiting. May we embrace God's Providence in all aspects of our common life and develop a kind of brave unselfishness for Christ, so that we can truly encourage the full flourishing of all of God's children and creatures!

Amen.

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[1] The Heidelberg Catechism

**28. Q. What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by His providence?**

A. We can be patient in adversity,[1] thankful in prosperity,[2] and with a view to the future we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from His love:[3] for all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move.[4]

[1] Job. 1:21, 22; Ps. 39:10; James 1:3. [2] Deut. 8:10; I Thess. 5:18. [3] Ps. 55:22; Rom. 5:3-5; 8:38, 39. [4] Job 1:12; 2:6; Prov. 21:1; Acts 17:24-28.

[2] Te Paa, Jenny Plane, **Full Inclusion in the Anglican Communion** *Some thoughts about Communion...*, Chicago Consulation, 2007

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