

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Daily Rhythms

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This weekend we honor the life and legacy and dream of Martin Luther King Jr. His letter from Birmingham jail put out this prophetic call for new perspectives and new postures that eventually changed history. It's amazing to me that this man felt that not even the walls of a prison cell could keep him from rooting out the toxins of injustice and racism in our nation. And I just pray this weekend that we would be people of similar prophetic imagination and resolve. This weekend we're also going to be looking at another letter written from a prison cell. If you have your Bibles with you this weekend turn over to the book of Philippians, I'll get there in just a moment, if you don't, no problem we're going to put the scriptures on the screen.

And while you're turning over there, I'm just going to give you a little update on the Zempel household. Thanks for asking. We have been in a circus of sickness over the past week and a half. Little three year old Sawyer kicked us off Thursday a week ago with a little stomach bug. She had this stomach bug come on her after she had eaten the equivalent of like an entire clamshell full of berries, raspberries, blueberries, and strawberries. And around 9:00 PM that night, they all decided to make a reappearance in her bed. Well, not all of them around 10:00 PM, wait, there's more, they came again at 10:30. That child, she's never had a stomach bug before. And so it was very unsettling, a little fearful for she didn't know what to do. And like most three year olds was not very receptive to our coaching. And so she managed to decorate two sets of bedding, three bathrooms and six sets of pajamas with splatters and streaks of blue and red. That would make even Jackson Pollock proud. And then you fast forward a couple days later and I find myself sick in bed with strep and tonsillitis. And let me say this to you know, when you're a parent, the scorecard changes a little bit, like the things you're really proud of take on a new form. I would just like to say this weekend that I am a wizard at getting out strawberry stains and blueberries stains and blackberry stains from all manner of surfaces and fabrics. So you know, this is why it's particularly... I mean whenever there is sickness in the house, it's, it's annoying, it's frustrating but here's why it's particularly frustrating right now. Because at the beginning of a new year, I always embark on this season that I like to call first 50 where I take the first 50 days of the year and I go really intense with everything health wise and spiritually. I mean I am diving into scripture in a very fast and rapid rate. I am going into intense workouts like I don't do normally during the rest of the year. I'm managing my diet to a very high degree of eliminating sweets. And also it takes on the form usually trying to get some things done around the house to improve the house. So for the first two weeks I was crushing it. I mean crushing every goal I set, I was going to kill it this year with my first 50 and then two weeks in I can't work on home improvement projects because I'm scrubbing strawberries out everything. And I can't get on an elliptical when I feel like I'm dying in my bed and instead of having a good reset to the year, I just experienced a setback. I bet some of you are in similar situations. You come into a new year wanting to set new priorities, new rhythms, new disciplines, new courses of action and never quite get around to succeeding at it. And it's not because you have a lack of willpower or because you don't have a good plan in place. It's because there is something that needs to be rooted out first that's getting in the way of you accomplishing that. I can't get on with

the home improvement without scrubbing out the toxins in my bathroom. I can't get on with my workout goals while I've got sickness in my physical body. Sometimes before we can engage in a reset, we have to take a step back and deal with the toxins that are standing in the way. It could be the negativity that is weakening us, an attitude that's crippling us, a habit that we can't shake that is wearing us down. Before we reset, we need to step back and deal with the toxicity, before we can crush the goals we have to deal with the underlying actions and attitudes that are in the way.

We're in a series this weekend called 'Detox' and we're going to look at the writings of Paul. He wrote to a group of people in Philippi; were going to be in Philippians four, verses four to eight, and I'll start reading.

"⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

Now, within this passage are tools for detox in our life, but let me back up a little bit before we dive in these words and give some back-story on who these people are, why Paul's writing to them and where they're located. So Paul is in prison, he's a guy, who founded a church in Philippi, and so he's writing to them from a prison cell; it's a church that he had founded many years earlier. The city Philippi was originally named after Phillip II of Macedonia. He was Alexander the Great's father, if you remember from your seventh grade world history class. He founded the city because of the amazing gold and silver mines that were in the vicinity. Now, the city of Philippi became famous a few hundred years later when Mark Antony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius at what would become known as the battle of Philippi and that's what really put Philippi on the map. This was part of the culmination of the war that was started after the assassination of Julius Caesar. After that battle that Octavian and Antony won, Antony took the east, Octavian took the west; Octavian would become known as Augustus which would set the stage for Luke two when Caesar Augustus sent out a decree that all the world should be taxed. This was a city that was a Roman city so the people there were considered Roman citizens. Many of them were retired military because after the battle of Philippi, it was expanded to allow a place for many of the soldiers to settle there. It was a place where they were rewarded with land, with property, with resources, and there was a major highway that ran through Philippi, the Via Egnatia that ran east, west in the Roman Empire. Now I bring all this up because I think it's really important that we remember that the Bible is a product of a place and time, that these are real people living in a real time, in a real place dealing with very real issues. This was a very wealthy city; it was a very prominent city geographically and politically and in the area of commerce. It was a city in which women were actually given more civic and social standing than in most other Roman cities of the time. This was probably why a woman named Lydia was an entrepreneur and became the first convert to Christianity and began to help lead the first church in Europe, in her home. It's also a city where people really love their Roman citizenship. They love the gifts that come along with that, the opportunities and the access that

come along with that. There are people that, many of them again, are retired military, so they believed in the empire, they love the empire, they had fought for the empire. So, when they become followers of Jesus, there has to be a little bit of rewiring, of reframing, of recalibrating, of maybe detoxing. And so Paul writes to them from prison to talk about attitudes and actions that they should take as followers of Jesus.

So, let's dive a little bit deeper into some of the things he said. The first thing he says, *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!* I love the way the message translation renders this verse. It says, *Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him!* The book of Philippians is only four chapters long, but the word joy shows up seven times. The word rejoice shows up eight times from a man sitting in prison. Clearly the joy that Paul is talking about is not a joy that is found in his present circumstances, but it's found in the presence of God in the midst of those circumstances. See, I think a lot of times we direct our energy and our prayers towards asking God to get us out of situations without realizing that the situations we're in may be propelling us to a more intimate relationship with him. Sometimes we don't realize that the circumstances we are in are making room for a new relationship with God. It's interesting the Psalmist doesn't claim to have found comfort and strength and fear from deliverance from the valley of the shadow of death, but from the presence of God in the midst of it. We aren't always promised deliverance, but we are promised presence.

This weekend our worship team released a new song fall into kindness which many of our locations have sung this weekend. That was a song that was born out of pain and suffering. Chris Douglas is our worship pastor and he writes about the back-story of this song in this month's next magazine. I remember talking with Carolina just a couple of days after she was diagnosed with cancer, meeting her a couple months after that. I remember those days of hoping and waiting and prayerfulness and confusion and frustration with Chris and Kat Douglas as they watched their baby girl Keelan Joy go to be with Jesus, and those events in Carolinas and Chris's lives came together to create the song. In the article and Next Chris writes this, he said, "we found that in the middle of intense pain and struggle, we had discovered a new kind of goodness of God that was unlike any we had known during easier times of life. The goodness and the unending faithfulness of God in the midst of our deep pain was almost inexplicably sweet. His kindness overwhelmed us and sustained us when we thought we had nothing left." Even in the midst of their most intense pain and suffering, they found joy in the presence of God in the midst of it, they found a way to enter into a space where they could say, rejoice always. Now, for many of us, it's not the big things in life necessarily that trip us up it's just the everyday walking around life, the little annoyances, the little frustrations that keep us from rejoicing always.

I think in my life, one of the things that has helped me very practically step into a place of rejoicing more is by keeping a gratitude journal. Two weeks ago, Pastor Mark talked about how he and Lora had started keeping a gratitude journal, and I have found that keeping a gratitude journal moves me as Max Lucado, an author, would say it moves me from a place of if only to already. It moves me from a place of saying, if only I had to I already have. It moves me from a place of saying, if only God would to saying God has already done. It moves me from a place of wishful thinking to grateful living. Because if we're not careful, we will never move from the if only places and I believe that gratitude, rejoicing, experiencing joy in his presence in the midst of our circumstances is what moves us to a place of already living.

When I was an engineering student, I had to go to labs and I love labs because I like the hands on stuff, but what I hated is when all of our professors would make us draw things in our lab notebooks. I am not an artist, if I wanted to be an artist, I would not be in engineering classes. But they made us draw stuff and we had to draw the specimens we saw under the microscope, we had to draw the chemicals that were reacting, we had to draw the different elements of the things that we were observing and I hated it. Until I finally realized that there was something really dramatically different about my experience of learning when I was forced to draw what I was seeing. Because when I had to draw, what I was saying, it forced me to look again and look again and look again to make sure was that the right color? Was that in the right place? Was that the right shape? Is that the right angle? Is that the right form and the right texture? It caused me to see things that I would have never seen otherwise. I think that was what a gratitude journal does, it helps us to see more, it helps us to make sure that we notice the little blessings, the sustaining grace of God, the power that we see in his power that we see in our lives on a daily basis, it allows us to find joy in the midst of pain.

Let's keep reading. Paul says,

"⁶ Don't be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Don't be anxious for anything, in every situation, prayer. These words are referencing back to a teaching that Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount in Mathew six. In fact, many of the words are very similar where Jesus had told his listeners, look, do not worry, look at the birds of the air, look at the flowers of the field they don't toil, they don't spin, they don't work, and yet your heavenly father takes care of them. How much more will he take care of you? Jesus looks across at his followers and he says, you are kids of the king, don't worry, relax, the creator of the universe has got you. The king is on the throne and he sees you and he knows you and he loves you, so take a deep breath, don't be anxious about anything. Jesus uses the phrase, oh, you of little faith, four times in the Gospels and in every situation it's referring to people who believe that maybe God will not take care of them. Just walk in every moment. Anxiety; see when we live in that anxiety, we're dismissing God's presence and subtracting his power from the situation and I believe that we can move to a place of peace, not by knowing every detail about our future, but by knowing the one who holds the future. We move to a place of peace, not by knowing every detail of how things are going to come together, but by resting in the presence of the one who already sees the next step. But it doesn't come by just knowing that information, it comes by taking that step of coming to God in prayer. I believe that we can replace anxiety with anticipation through prayer. In those moments in our day where we become nervous about something, we find ourselves worrying about something, all of a sudden we are becoming anxious about something, a decision we're going to have to make a person that would have to talk to, a decision or a problem we're going to have to navigate instead of allowing that to just stew in you, what if you turned that into a prayer prompt. The minute it comes into your mind, the minute it comes into your heart, just turning that into a quick prayer, that's when we learn how to pray without ceasing because when we recognize that God is with us every moment of the day and every moment of the day becomes an opportunity to connect with God and say, God, I need you in this place. We can move from anxiety to anticipation through prayer.

The second thing that I want to encourage us to do in those moments is to let someone else in and I want to be careful to draw a distinction between the everyday walking around anxiety that we all experience and the anxiety that comes on some of us and cripples us. And I would draw the distinction in some of these ways; is the anxiety you experience something you can control or is it controlling you? The anxiety that you're experiencing, is it affecting you just like in your mind or is it affecting you physically? Is it hindering you from doing normal everyday life? Is your anxiety something you can name? You can say, well, it's this decision, it's this problem, it's this circumstance, or is it something that is just generic and you can't put your finger on it? If your anxiety is one of those things that is crippling, it's hindering, it's affecting your normal everyday life, it is controlling you. Will you please let somebody in? Here at NCC, we want to be a safe place for healing to happen, for physical healing, for emotional healing, we want to be a place where mental health is something that we talk about, we don't run away from. Would you let someone in? We've got a slide that we'll put up. If you need prayer, you need counseling, you need to be in a group of people that can walk alongside you, you need pastoral care. Would you just visit care.theaterchurch.com. In fact, if you want to go on and take out your phone and snap a picture of this and don't feel silly snapping a picture of this because here's the deal everybody In this room, if we don't need this ourselves, somebody in our lives needs it. Let someone in and find peace by turning moments of anxiety into prompts for prayer.

Paul goes on to say this...

"⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

The toxin that Paul is addressing here is the toxin of negativity. He saying, change your focus. Amplify the voice of God over the voices that bombards you. Exchange the truth of God for the lies of the crowd. Exchange negative thinking for constructive thinking. Paul is saying, you can find joy even in my circumstances, I'm sitting in prison. I can find joy because I'm focused on the right things. He said, in essence, your focus will determine your reality. Now, that phrase, "your focus will determine your reality" was originally coined by the great theologian Qio-Gon Jinn. Look, I'm a great lover of Star Wars, I love Star Wars. I do believe most Jedi theology is trash, but that one filters through scripture. "Your focus will determine your reality". Paul sitting in prison, but he knows that he has created by someone bigger than himself for a story larger of his own making and the prison bars around him do not hold him back. He says change your thinking and it will change your living. It's all about what you focus on.

I want to talk about two areas of our thought life. One is what we think about God and secondly, what we think about ourselves. First, let's talk about God's character. We have to filter our circumstances through the character of God. We often do it the other way around. We filter the character of God through our circumstances, so we find ourselves in this really hard circumstance and we think, well, this isn't going well, I don't see anything working itself out for good. I don't see me being more than a conqueror. I don't see that God is pursuing me with love and kindness, so God must not be. What if instead we flipped it and we put God's character as the filter and let our circumstances run through that. So you think there's two ways to live; we can either let what we believe to be true about our circumstances dictate what must be true about

God, or we can let what we know to be true about God change the way we view our circumstances. It's all about how we frame things. I probably say this in every message I preach so I apologize, but I'm going to say it again. Whenever I read the Bible, I have a pen or a highlighter in my hand and I take a moment whenever I see a name or an attribute or a characteristic of God and I circle it, I highlighted, I underlined it. I mark it in some way so that the character of God comes screaming off the pages of scripture at me, so that the character of God is the thing that I cling to. It's the thing that I focus on, it becomes the filter for my circumstances. Let the character of God frame your life. We can rest in the chaos when we understand the character of God.

The second set of thinking I want to talk about is on our identity. This is where we have to exchange the truth of God for the lives of the world around us. God apparently loves nicknames. I think we see it the first time when he says to Abram, you're going to be Abraham because I'll make you the father of many nations, and then he says, Jacob, you're not going to be that deceiver Jacob anymore you're going to be Israel, he calls Gideon a mighty warrior, and then Jesus continues this pattern. He calls James and John, sons of thunder, he says to Simon, you are Peter you are the rock. He tells the woman who has been an outcast he calls her daughter. I think it's really important that we let God name us because for our entire lives we have allowed the world; we've allowed others to label us. Now some of those labels are positive, but the labels that are holding us down are the negative ones, labels from teachers, labels from coaches, from parents, maybe from pastors. If we take a big step back and like Paul says, focus on what is good and what is true and what is noble and what is lovely and what is admirable. What if we take a step back and let God name us.

You're thinking, wow, I've never heard the audible voice of God so I don't know how this is going to go. I think we can just start in scripture. Instead of saying, I'm not lovable we turn over to Jeremiah 31:3 and we say, no, 'I've loved you with an everlasting love'. Instead of saying I'm a failure; we replaced that with Romans 8:1 'there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus'. Instead of saying, man, I am too fat, I'm too skinny, I'm not pretty enough, I'm too short, too tall to freckly, to pale, too dark; 'I am fearfully and wonderfully made'. Replace you're to broken with 'the same power that raised Christ from the dead lives in you'. Replace I'm always the last to be picked for the team with Jesus who says, 'I have chosen you, I've marked you, I have adopted you, I've redeemed you, I've forgiven you, I have healed you, I have cleansed you and you're my kid'. Exchange the lies of the crowd for the truth of God.

Now, this is not some kind of name it and claim it, pie in the sky, positive self talk, hocus pocus, okay. This is actually backed by cognitive neuroscience. In fact, if you're here this weekend at any of our locations and you don't know what you think about God, you don't know what you think about the Bible, you sure don't know what you think about church, this is backed by science. So maybe we can just start here. Dr Caroline Leaf has been studying the brain since the early eighties and she has done so much research on the brain and the mind and how they work together. And she has said this, she says, God has designed us to be able to bring all thoughts into captivity to the Messiah. In the frontal lobe of the brain just above our eyebrows, we have the capacity to objectively observe are thinking with a view to captivating rogue thoughts. In effect, we're able to direct our attention to stop the negative impact and rewire healthy circuits into our brains. She goes on to say, we're not victims of our genes, our past or our circumstances.

Our thinking switches genes on and off, therefore, controlling which proteins are expressed. Simply put, our thinking determines the physical landscape of our brains and therefore who we become. Whatever we love the most directs our attention. Now, if you're like me, I had to read that about three or four times to start understanding what she's saying. What she's saying is our thinking really does change our reality. Our focus changes who we become. Our focus changes the way we relate to God, the way we relate to others in the way we view our circumstances.

Rejoice, pray, focus, these are things that Paul says we should do continually. And what I want to do in closing this weekend is introduce you to a spiritual discipline that incorporates all three of those and it's called the Ignation Examine, developed as it would be by a man by the name of Ignatius Loyola, it's in his writings on the spiritual exercises. And what he proposes is that the end of every day, you take some time to just reflect on your day. You can do this in about five minutes. We've got a slide that gives the five steps and it incorporates these ideas of rejoice, pray, and focus, and so I want to walk through them very quickly. I would encourage you, again, snap a picture, write these down because this is something that I believe will detox our spiritual lives.

First, we recognize and recognize means just becoming aware of God's presence. It's not about inviting God's presence in because he's already there. It's about us recognizing that his presence is with us. It's about us coming to a place and just stopping and saying, Holy Spirit; I know that you're here. I recognize your presence, would you still my heart and my mind so that I can experience you and I can connect with you.

And then you go onto the second step, which is rejoice. It's about reviewing your day with gratitude, reflecting back over your day and thanking God for the way that he showed up in small ways, the small blessings, maybe blessings that have always been there, but you had never acknowledged them. This is where my gratitude journal comes into play. I try to just acknowledge three things every day. I'm grateful for. Some days those are very significant things. Some days it's for God, thank you that I had two bottles of shout scrub in my bathroom. I'm not kidding.

Third, review the day. Go back over the course of your day and take note of the moments that you felt closest to God and when you felt furthest from him, take note of the times that you felt like if you're crushing it and it's crushing, you. Take note of the times when you felt like me and the fruit of the spirit was really active in my life. Take note of the moments where you turned worry into a prayer prompt. Just review the day. When did you feel close to God? When did you feel far from God?

Step four is repent. Find one moment in the day that you realize ahh God; I did not walk maybe like a follower of Jesus could have walked through that. And just ask Jesus to bring healing, to bring forgiveness and to bring wisdom for how to navigate it differently when you encounter that situation again

And then finally, number five is recalibrate. It's about looking forward to the next day and already asking God's presence into those spaces. It's looking at your calendar and saying, okay,

I've got this meeting, I have this conversation, I have this connection, I'm going to have this decision and just asking that God would be present in the midst of that.

So, recognize, rejoice, review, repent and recalibrate, and what I want to encourage you to do or challenge you to do is try doing this everyday for the next week and I think that will begin to rewire our brain, rewire our practices, rewire our hearts to be consistently rejoicing, consistently praying, consistently our thoughts on the things of God. In fact, in just a moment, our band is going to come up at all of our locations and lead us in a time of reflection, a time of a closing, and if you want to use that time to work through these steps, you can do that as well.

Alright, let me pray for us. God, thank you so much for your grace, for your peace, for your faithfulness. God, I thank you that we fall into your kindness. God, thank you that you don't lord over us like a task master demanding joy. That joy is just in the palm of your hand and as we fall into your arms we experience it. God, I pray specifically for those this weekend who are experiencing anxiety that has become crippling and controlling Holy Spirit, I pray for your healing. I pray that you would break chains in their lives. I pray that they would have the courage to let someone in this weekend. God, I pray for all of us, that you would make us people who rejoice always, who pray without ceasing and focus on the things of you. May your character change the way we live. May we rest in our chaos when we understand your character. In Jesus' name, amen.