

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**Excursion #3: Centering**  
***“Excursions in Joy”***  
**Philippians 4:4-9**  
**November 22, 2015**

Well, we’ve sung about it. We’ve been talking about it for three weeks now. We’ve been listening to Paul’s words to the Philippians about it:

“Make my joy complete.”

“Join in my joy.”

“Rejoice in the Lord. I’ll say it again, rejoice!” Paul says.

And yet it’s still hard for us to do, isn’t it? especially in light of what’s been happening in our world over the last week or so:

Terrorist attacks in Lebanon, Paris, and Mali.

The refugee crisis being politicized.

Fear spiking.

All this talk of joy can sound out of place pretty easily. It’s why we have a tendency not to trust joy. You know the feeling when you’re having a *great* week. Work is going well. Your family is healthy. The stock market is up. There’s no major crisis....and suddenly you stop and think: **“Oh man, this is bad. This is really bad. Something horrible must be about to happen!”**

A lot of us live life waiting for the other shoe to drop. I used to do this all the time. I’d imagine some of the worst tragedies that could come my way, so that if something bad did happen, I could handle it. I’d be ready for it. In fact, I remember my mom once saying, **“Chris, you’re a negative vampire. You just suck the energy right out of me.”**

Well, be that as it may, at least I was prepared. **“Rejoice. I will say it again rejoice”?** Sure, that’s a nice idea, Paul. But I’m not going to be caught off guard. I’m telling you, all you Pollyanna’s out there are just setting yourself up for some heartbreak. Some would have called it pessimism. I called it realism. (Pessimists always do.)

An awful lot us do this. I say “awful lot” because the truth of the matter is, it’s an awful way to live and it doesn’t work. I can tell you from my own experience and there’s a lot of research out there to back me up.

One man in his early 60’s tell his own story about this. He said, **“I used to think the best way to go through life was to expect the worst. That way, if it happened, you were prepared, and if it didn’t happen, you were pleasantly surprised. Then I was in a car accident and my wife was killed. Needless to say, expecting the worst didn’t prepare me at all. And worse... I still grieve for all of those wonderful moments we**

**shared and that I didn't fully enjoy. My commitment to her is to fully enjoy every moment now. I just wish she was here, now that I know how to do that."**<sup>1</sup>

He found out the hard way what the spiritual tradition has been trying to teach us, what the scriptures teach us:

Joy isn't a farce. Joy is something you can cultivate.

Joy is there for you to embrace.

**"Rejoice in the Lord, again I will say rejoice," Paul writes. "Be anxious for nothing, but with thanksgiving offer your prayers... and the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds..."**

In other words, rehearsing tragedy, doesn't work.

If you want to guard your hearts and minds... try gratitude. Not anxiety.

**Choosing fear, choosing perpetual disappointment, is a waste of your one-and-only wild-and-beautiful life.**

Not only that, it belittles what others have lost. You might remember I mentioned Brene Brown last week. She says that in her countless research and interviews, when she asked people who had survived tragedy how we can cultivate and show more compassion for people who are suffering. The answer, she said, was always the same:

**"Don't shrink away from the joy of your child because I've lost mine. Don't take what you have for granted—celebrate it. Don't apologize for what you have. Be grateful for it and share your gratitude with others. Are your parents healthy? Be thrilled. Let them know how much they mean to you. [Because] when you honor what you have, you're honoring what I've lost."**<sup>2</sup>

**Choosing fear, choosing perpetual disappointment, is a waste of your one and only wild and beautiful life... and it belittles what others have lost.**

And so, Paul writes, **"Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, pure, lovely, if anything is excellent or worthy of praise... think on these things, practice these things..."**

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Suzanne Stabile is an Enneagram expert and a spiritual guide. You've probably heard me quote her once or twice along the way. She is also a student of Richard Rohr and become an important voice in the Protestant world for soul work.

She says that most of us live our lives, caught up in moving from one episode to another. We get caught up in the latest drama,

drama in our family,  
drama at work,

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 120-121.

<sup>2</sup> Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 125.

drama on TV.

When one resolves we're sucked into the next one. Her word for that is **"episodic meaning."**

And according to Stabile, we can't really help it, without serious soul work. It just happens. The undeveloped soul automatically reacts to the next episode that comes across the screen of our life... the next problem, the next crisis. We just react and get caught up in it.

How that looks, can be different depending on your personality. For some, it has us trying to fix everything and everyone. Trying to make everything right... how it's "supposed to be." For others, it can look like trying protect ourselves for the next danger, the next threat, the next stranger around the corner. For some, it has a lot to do with trying to fit into whatever group you're with... or want to be with. Maybe for you, it's chasing the next adventure that's out there. Or it's trying to control all the outcomes.

All of it is episodic meaning. The meaningfulness of our day, our week is defined by whatever episode we're in at the time...

because it's always determining  
how you spend your energy,  
what you do with your day,  
what you do with your time.

Another phrase she uses to describe this is **"the world of constant cares."** We live from one episode to the next.

And the ironic thing is, we can often see it working in someone else, but we don't see it in ourselves... even as it consumes us. She's in her 60's and as she reflects on her own life, she says, **"How I wish I could get back all of the time and energy that has been consumed by 'the world of constant cares,' by episodic meaning."**

She's spent a lot of energy trying to help this person or fix that person. But here's the thing: the only way to live a compassionate, transformative life in the world, is to do the soul work necessary, to not be driven by every crisis, every episode that comes across the screen of your life.

For some, that might sound like turning a cold and callous heart to the world around you, but that's not it at all. It doesn't mean you stop caring about the life of the world. In fact, I'd say it's just the opposite. ***When we're living by episodic meaning, we cannot love the world in a way that is truly transforming.***

What the world really needs...  
what your family really needs...  
what the broken fractured, hurting world really needs...  
is whole-transformed people...  
who can love from a place of wholeness...  
who can engage from a place of wholeness and peace,

not from a place of fear and anxiety,  
not a place of exhaustion and obligation...  
not from a place of frantic care.

The world needs whole people, who live from a place of deep abiding joy. **When we're living by episodic meaning, we cannot love the world in a way that is truly transforming.** And sometimes, in our frantic care, we do more damage than good.

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There's this story from the gospel of Mark where Jesus has been teaching about the **Kingdom of God** next to the seashore all day. He's told parable after parable, and when the evening finally comes he tells the disciples, **"Let's get in a boat and cross the to the other side."**

So, they all get in, and as the sun goes down, Jesus falls asleep. That night a great storm arose in the sea. And waves began to crash over the side of the boat. Things get more and more dicey and the disciples are baling out the boat and fighting the wind and the waves, but they're fighting a losing battle. And suddenly one of them looks around and asks, **"Where's Jesus? Why isn't he here helping?"**

And so they go looking for him and find him in the stern of the boat, still **"sleeping on a cushion,"** the text says. He's there all cozy while they have been fighting this storm. They are fighting for their lives. They're fighting to save everyone, and he's just sleeping away. And they ask him, **"Jesus, don't you care? Don't you care that we're perishing?"**

You can hear their righteous indignation, can you?

**"Don't you care about this storm?"**

**"Don't you care that this boat is going to sink?"**

**"People are going to die, don't you care, Jesus?"**

**"People are suffering, don't you care?"**

**"It's dangerous out here in the dark. Shouldn't you be doing something about that? Don't you care?"**

Jesus rubs the sleep out of his eyes. Looks out over the side of the boat, and spoke peace to the storm. Then he looked at them and said, **"Why are you fretting? Have you still no faith?"**

The disciples are caught up in the latest storm blowing across their world, and they are there trying to bail out the waters as fast as it's coming in, and it's not working and they are angry that Jesus isn't caught up in it too.

But Jesus, doesn't live tossed about by every storm that comes his way. He's not caught up in episodic meaning. It looks like he doesn't care. But he's the only one calm enough, centered enough, aware enough to bring real and lasting peace to the storm.

**“Whatever is true and noble and lovely and excellent, reflect on these things, practice these things... be centered in these things,”** scripture says, **“And the God of peace will be with you.”** Being centered allows you to live from a place of deep abiding peace and joy, so that you can love the world in a way that’s transforming.

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That’s what the world desperately needs. That’s been especially obvious this week. You know, it wasn’t all too long ago that the world saw a picture of a dead little boy, washed up on the shore... a refugee needing a home, fleeing with his family.

And the world cried out, **“We have to help these refugees. We have to give them a home. We have to welcome them! We have to do more!”** And of course they were absolutely right.

And then in the last week, a new storm came blowing in...New terrorist attacks. New headlines... a new episode to be caught up in. And the rhetoric changed. **“We have to close the borders. We can’t allow any more refugees in, especially if they’re Muslim. It isn’t safe. The storm is raging and the boat is going to sink if we let them in.**

**I’m sorry, I’d like to help, but you can’t come into my state.**

**It’s too risky.**

**I’d like to help, but I’ve got to bail out my own boat.**

You see how that’s episodic meaning? We’re just tugged by the next thing that comes across the screen and it keeps us from loving the world in a way that is truly transformative. It’s just one example in the public scale. We do this in our private lives and in different ways all the time.

But we don’t have to. We’re invited into a deeper way of being... a place of deep abiding joy that isn’t determined by the world of constant cares.

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This is our third excursion in Joy. We started with **Standing**, went through **Falling**... and now we’ve moved into one of the hardest excursions in joy, and that is in **Centering**.

I say it’s the hardest, because it takes some real effort on our part. It’s not just a choice you make one day. Being centered in what is true isn’t just a change of focus. It takes practice.

**...real tangible practices:**

...like meditation and prayer and silence,  
to learn how to let go of everything that wants to  
tug on your thoughts and emotions  
...practices like weekly worship and scripture reading  
where you are re-centered in your deepest truth.

...like art, music, and poetry...  
that break into the deepest places within us.

It's hard work at times, but it moves us into the place of deep and abiding joy... a joy that can change the world.

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So, Dayspring, may we be a church that isn't just chasing another headline... and simply throwing a few dollars at the next crisis ... because the needs will always be endless... and we will end up empty and angry that the person next to us in the pew, or the person down the street from us in our neighborhood isn't bailing out the water too.

Instead, may we be a church that is learning to be centered in something deeper... a church that is doing the soul work needed to speak real and lasting peace to the storm.

May we be a church **Standing**, rooted, in the Love of Christ.  
emptying ourselves, **Falling** into the mystery of the Love of Christ.  
**Centering** ourselves in the love of Christ....

May we be a church that is cultivating deep and abiding joy,  
...joy that will heal the soul, and transform our world.

Amen.

Reflection:

*Centering Prayer is ...the opening of mind and heart, body and emotions—our whole being—to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond words, thoughts, and emotions.*

~Thomas Keating *Open Mind, Open Heart*.