

Everyday Sunday
Part 1: Start Your Days With God
Rev. Dr. Chris Alexander
Countryside Community Church
July 29, 2018

Scripture: I Kings 19:3-16

I. Discovering your Style

Ok - I'd like you all to participate with me in a little exercise this morning to begin our new worship series. If you would, I'd like you to sit up a little in your pews, put your feet flat on the floor, close your eyes, and take a deep breathe in... and let it out. Let's take another deep breath in... and let it out. Now I'd like you to picture in your mind's eye, yourself, sitting in your favorite pew in church during worship... can you see yourself? Can you see yourself paying attention and participating in meditation practices that you wouldn't normally engage in at any other time during the week or with any other group of people? Can you feel yourself being pushed or "called" into places you may not necessarily go on your own?" How's your breathing? Is it deeper? Are you taking longer breaths and relaxing into your exhales? Can you feel your lungs filling up and pushing out, and then letting go again? Are you paying particular attention to yourself right now? Then you are, right this very minute, participating in your "present." You are, in fact, focused, and drawn in to a place where listening is actually possible! Take a snap shot of this place in your mind. The more you go here, the easier it is to get back here.

Ok – You can open your eyes now. Did you experience that kind of ultimate focus on a particular task? Did you experience that single-mindedness you get when you are honestly engaged and paying attention? How did that feel? Because you were asked to visualize something, you had to clear your mind of other things in order to see it, right? Was that hard for you to do? Not really, right? We all do that every day in the tasks we are responsible for in our living, no matter what jobs or social situations we find ourselves in. There are times when we have to set everything else that is going on in our minds, aside, and focus, for just a little while, on one particular task. For parents who have a child demanding our attention, there is that moment where we look down and into the eyes of our child to actually hear what it is they are asking of us. Parenting often takes single-mindedness, that immediate concern and focus that pushes everything else going on in our lives aside in order to meet the needs of our children.

At work, there are times when I sit down at my desk and think, ok, I need to focus and tackle this project... then once I've begun, I find myself caught up in it and there is a certain "flow" that kind of lifts me into another place and carries me along within what I

am presently concerned with. Does this sound familiar to you all? Have you ever experienced this in your own work? For me this is most certainly true whenever I sit down to write something, like this sermon for instance, or an article that I promised to write for a professional journal, or a grant request in order to accomplish a beloved project or ministry. Once I am focused and actually paying attention, the thoughts just sort of “flow” in an open conversation on the page, and before I know it I’m well into the task demanding my attention. This doesn’t happen every time, of course. There are times when I can’t seem to focus and my attention keeps being drawn away from my task, but it happens enough that I have learned how to recognize the “flow” when I’m in it, and I happily relax, lean in, and move along with it. Then the next time I sit down to write, I take a deep breath and just start in, knowing that if I just “show up” and take that first step, eventually I will get caught up in the very present nature of the task at hand.

Writing is not necessarily in my wheelhouse, so for me it takes concentration and particular attention to accomplish something. But I have found throughout my life as a pastor, that the more I actually practice writing, the easier it becomes for me. I’m never going to be a novelist, or even an often-published preacher, but I am better at writing those things that can be put out there into the community to get people thinking and experiencing life in a little different way. And in this, I find myself actually enjoying that part of my ministry – well, at least not dreading it quite so much.

This is what “practice” is all about. Doing something, or behaving in such a way, often enough, that it becomes comfortable for you, a “new normal” for you. And this is the point of this new series, taking something that a person does in their everyday, ordinary, lives and bringing it into focus... paying particular attention to it... and being present with it in the moment, so that the more you do it the easier it becomes until it is just something that you do.

In worship on Sunday mornings we intentionally come together in community and focus specifically on our relationships with one another and with God. Many times, you will find yourself participating in meditations like we just did, even when this is not something you would ever consider doing on your own, in your office, your kitchen, or in your classroom. Yet, you will take the time to do them here. And hopefully, through this intentionality of paying attention and listening for God, you actually gain a sense of focus and purpose that helps carry you into your lives throughout the week. I’m assuming that it is this sense of focus and purpose that keeps you coming back to worship from week to week, helping support you in the lives you lead as you go back out through these doors each week.

So, if this is something you seek on Sunday mornings from this community, what is keeping us from seeking this very thing again on Monday morning or Thursday afternoon? Was this practice of breathing and calling up a vision in your mind's eye, something that can only be done on Sunday mornings to help center us and draw us back into a sense of focus and purpose? Not really. We can breathe pretty much anywhere, right? It's not the breathing that is the key... it's the intentionality of focusing on the breathing that is the thing that actually centers us and brings our minds and our hearts back into focus and allows us to step into that "flow." This intentionality is the thing we actually need help practicing. My hope is that this sermon series will give us the opportunity to do just that, practice intentionality, and have fun while doing it.

For the next five weeks, we will concentrate on five spiritual practices that you can do throughout your weekly schedules that help you be intentional about recognizing that God is with you throughout your day. Our Muslim Brothers and Sisters do this by participating in a call to prayer five times a day. And many of our Jewish Brothers and Sisters practice prayer three times a day. This type of intentional attention of listening for God like Elijah in our scripture is not without precedent, even in our day.

For some this intentionality will be a continuation of what you are already doing, but for others, it will be more of a challenge, but I promise it will not be an overwhelming exercise that takes you completely out of your comfort zone. My goal in this series is to help you step into what comes most naturally for you and help you to recognize that the things you already do on a regular basis are actually great opportunities for you to intentionally recognize God, who is actively participating in your life right alongside you, every day.

Hopefully, these practices will be fun for you, and give you permission to enter those places where you experience joy, because that is what a spiritual practice is all about. It's not about sitting in a prayer pose for an extended period of time until you start to see visions (though if you can actually do this, go for it!). A spiritual practice certainly includes prayer, but is not exclusive to it. A spiritual practice is whatever you do that intentionally opens you up to what the Spirit is already doing in your life. It is whatever allows you to intentionally recognize and acknowledge the God that is always present with you. There are no rules for *how* you do this, only a loving invitation from God *that you do it*.

When we were talking through this series at worship planning team last week, Don Sarton said it this way: "Everyone has their own style of intentional practice that they are comfortable with, or a certain rhythm that feels right to them – the idea is to help

people recognize what works for them and help them intentionally engage in that practice regularly.

Let's get started, then, shall we?

II. Listening for God

Though prayer is not the only way to participate in spiritual practices, it is certainly one of the primary ways to enter into an ongoing conversation with God. Elijah was praying while hiding out in the cave, waiting for God to tell him what to do next. But in his praying, Elijah had to include listening, as well as talking, in order to actually hear God's voice.

Drawing from a sermon series from Bruce Van Blair (a UCC pastor who served here at Countryside for a while and continues to be a terrific friend of our community), we will begin this series with practicing a "prayer of guidance" to begin our days. This type of prayer helps us step into an intentionality of listening as well as talking. Starting each morning with such a prayer allows us to speak our desire and willingness for the Holy Spirit to enter our day and give us guidance in our choices and decisions. In praying, we are actually acknowledging God's presence with us in our lives, and being more fully aware of this presence. Being aware of God's presence, we have a companion throughout the day that deliberates with us, affects how we greet our neighbors, and holds us accountable for how we behave in our business dealings, and in our relationships.

When we start our day in conversation with God we have the opportunity to rehearse our schedules and agendas and invite God into our living. Through prayer you are inviting God to lead you in ways that help you align your attitudes and motives with God's hopes and desires for you, and you are asking God to go with you, making clear the opportunities that are available to you throughout the day, to live most fully into who you are created and called to be.

Bruce reminds us that this type of "guidance prayer" first thing in the morning is different from other prayers in that *"Other kinds of prayer are mostly talking; this kind of prayer is mostly listening... Other kinds of prayer order God around; this kind of prayer invites God to order our lives, insofar as we are able to understand and keep ourselves from running away."*

So, here's our invitation to participate in being more intentional about our relationships with God and to each other through spiritual practice: Make a list of things to talk to God about in your morning prayer: (people to pray for, things you are grateful for, etc....) and then add a prayer for an open heart to recognize guidance throughout your day as you review your day's schedule. Spend time in prayer with God first thing each morning throughout the week, talking with God through these prayers. And then, spend equal time in "listening prayer" (or "being still") with God, giving God a chance to get a word in... Lean in to the expectation that God

actually wants to participate with you in your day so you are actually able to hear that still small voice that is whispering to you all the time, leading the way to an abundant and joy-filled life.

Every day can be an intentional seeking of God's presence within us; we need not limit ourselves to participating with God on Sunday mornings. Let's take the next five weeks together, being intentional all week long, and see how our everyday living might be lifted by opportunities to experience God who promises to be with us, always.

Amen.