



LENT

The Fullness of Time

Volume 1

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Preface

Time seems to slow down when we are waiting for something important to happen. While that slowing of time can be frustrating when we are living in eager anticipation, the slowing of time can be healthy when it makes us pause long enough to prepare ourselves for what awaits. Sometimes waiting is good. Sometimes waiting is even important.

Lent welcomes us into that important slowing of time, that holy waiting. Lent is the 40 days that carry us from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. It is a time of preparation for our encounter with Jesus on the cross and the powerful resurrection story of Easter morning.

Lent, in its earliest forms, was a fasting period where for 40 days only one meal a day was allowed. This period served to call the people out of the rhythms of their everyday lives and to focus on the way and walk of Jesus. As time went by, the deliberate fast gave way to a less physically rigorous season of reflection. With the Reformation, many Protestant traditions set the practice of Lent aside for many years, seeing it as too Catholic. For more radical Protestant traditions, like Baptists, the recovering of Lent has taken longer. It is our loss. As disciples of Jesus Christ, it is important that we slow down to remember the journey to the cross and the empty tomb. It is important that we take time to wait, to listen, and to prepare. The Lenten stories call us to a walk with Jesus and the great story of redemption.

This guide will invite you to slow down and take some time each day over this 40-day period to consider passages from Scripture and to hear a word from one among us on what these passages mean to them. This Lenten guide acts as the second year when our Young Adult Ministry brings a gift of Scripture and reflection to the whole of our church family. It is a great gift. I am grateful that many of our young adults were willing to share a part of their walk with Christ with us. Listen as they call us to Scripture. Listen, as they call us to step out of the rhythms of our everyday lives to focus on the way and walk of Jesus. Listen, as they invite us to slow down and wait with them.

Grace and Peace,



Introduction

This collection of devotions grew out of a simple belief: that writing and reading about faith is essential. These devotions come in all shapes and sizes, written by people of all types and stripes. You will find some voices quite mature and reflective while others are young, just beginning to learn the strength of their own voice. By making space for this work, you are marking space for young believers to further hone their faith and witness.

Nothing in these devotions seeks to prescribe but rather only to describe, to describe what it means to be a young adult of faith living and working at this moment in time. While each devotional comes from a young adult, we offer them to the broader First Baptist community as a gift. We hope they serve as a source of encouragement and engagement for you as you begin your own journey with God's word during this season of Lent.

Below are some notes regarding this guide's structure and recommended use.

Throughout our churches today, most of us are not familiar with the word *kerygma*. In New Testament Greek, the word literally means preaching. It's been used by modern believers as a way to distill and then speak about the entirety of Jesus' life and message. When we say the "kerygma of our faith" or the "kerygma of the gospel," it's an attempt to talk about the essence of the gospel.

For Lent this year, we're taking one of Jesus' central preaching moments—his first proclamation in the Gospel of Mark—and unpacking its contents over the season of Lent. While not the gospel in its entirety, we believe this initial proclamation captures crucial elements that stand central to Jesus' life, death, and saving work throughout history.

Introduction

Each day will suggest a reading from the Psalms and another from either the Old or New Testament. You will find an accompanying devotional reflecting on one or both passages. The devotion will conclude with a prayer for your use.

On Sundays, there will not be a devotion. Instead, you will find a more detailed reflection on a portion of our central passage, Mark 1:14-15. The six Sundays of Lent will be divided into three sections, each two weeks in length. The intervening devotions will reflect on the theme introduced on the previous Sunday. We encourage you to make reading this guide a daily activity during Lent. First, read the suggested Scriptures, then the devotions, and then finally spend a few minutes in reflection and prayer.

These devotions come from a diverse group of young adults, but they represent only a fraction of our church's young adult population. In the coming months, we hope to bring even more voices to the table as we work together to hear God speak in and through one another.

Thank you for sharing this journey with us. We count it a privilege and honor to share it with you.

Scott Claybrook and Josh Durham

February 2016

Mark 1:14-15

Later on, after John was arrested, Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God's Good News. "The time promised by God has been fulfilled!" he announced. "The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!"

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who helped make this project possible.*

About

This collection of devotions comes from Dwell, the young adult ministry at First Baptist Knoxville. The name Dwell is taken from Isaiah 58:12 where God speaks to His people about the sort of worship He desires. More than simply a right form of worship, God desires a right substance at the heart of our worship. We believe that God continues to speak and work in this world, a testament to His unending desire to renew and redeem all of creation – including us. This collection of devotions is an attempt to bear witness to God’s work in our lives as well as encourage others in their own journey of transformation.

First Baptist Knoxville is a vibrant downtown church located in the heart of Knoxville. We hold a deep commitment to seeing the kingdom of God come to the city of Knoxville and the cities of the world. We would love the chance to get to know your story as well as share our own.

For more information about First Baptist, please visit fbcknox.org or join us for worship on Sundays at 8:45 am or 11:00 am.

510 W. Main Street, Knoxville, TN 37902.



Wednesday, February 10, Day 1

Genesis 3:8-15, 17-19 | Psalm 103:1-14

“And the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’”

This is probably the most heartbreaking verse in all of Scripture. It’s the first question recorded in the Bible, and it’s the same one God has been asking ever since. Not only did God come to man, but he did so at man’s convenience, in the cool of the evening. And His consideration was not met with a childish, joyous rushing to reunite with Father. Instead, His children, His most special creations, stood hiding in shame.

Notably absent is the lightning-quick warfare found elsewhere in the Old Testament. Rather, God asks four questions before passing any form of judgement. He doesn’t cleanse the garden with fire or immediately strike down His wayward children. Instead, God allows the world’s first sinners the opportunity to give the first confessions. Here we also find the first acts of mercy and grace, both the Scripture’s first allusion to Christ. Even in the pronouncement of judgement there is mercy: “[The ground] will grow thorns and thistles for you, but you will eat of its grains.” God’s perfect creation had scarcely been formed when He had to begin making provisions for humanity to live in an imperfect world.

And thank God that He did. In this Lenten season, know this: God the Father asks, “Where are you,” and it’s not so He can catch you in the act and smite you. It’s because He longs to be with you. And though we may not escape the consequences of disobedience, we know that there is a measure of mercy in the judgement of our Father: “The LORD is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him. For he knows how weak we are; he remembers we are only dust” (Psalm 103:13-14).

Prayer

Father, let all that we are praise your holy name. Forgive us if we hide from you in shame. We give thanks for the unfailing love that is slow to anger, remembers our weakness, and removes our sins. In your name.

Amen.

Thursday, February 11, Day 2

Genesis 4:3-8, 10-16, 25-26 | Psalm 51:1-12

What do we feel we deserve when we sin? How easy is it to think our punishment is too much to bear?

We may not murder as Cain did; but with sin ever “crouching at the door,” falling into a pattern of habitual sin is easy. Take a minute and reflect on where this spirit of defeat might be affecting you. Do you trust people more than God to help solve problems? Do you worry or have fear instead of resting in God’s will? Do you lose your Christianity in traffic? Repent and call upon the Lord for help. He has marked you as His own.

Cain and Abel’s story is a powerful one! Here we see God’s wrath and love all in one. He casts Cain into the wilderness, but marks him “lest any who found him should attack him.” Do we trust God to do the same for us? We know that when we sin and separate ourselves from God that He responds with discipline, but He also responds with love and mercy because we belong to Him. He will not forsake us, just as he did not forsake Cain.

In our society it’s easy to think Cain got what he deserved. We forget that God forgave him for killing his brother and protected him. Where do you need to forgive? Has anything taken root in your heart that is preventing you from letting go? Where do you need to respond in mercy and in love? Releasing those feelings will enable you to reflect and to enjoy the fullness of this season of repentance.

Prayer

God of mercy, dwell in my heart. Cast me not away, but draw me closer to you. Mark me as your own and walk with me moment by moment, that I may not be harmed. Cleanse me of my sin and help me to forgive others for their wrongdoings. Enable me to overcome temptation. Renew a right spirit within me. Amen.

Friday, February 12, Day 3

Genesis 6:5-8 | Psalm 93

How frustrated would you be if you were God in this situation? He loved humans so much. He gave them everything they could have ever want, and yet they still weren't satisfied. God regretted creating us... let that sink in for a minute. Does that make you think about all of the things you don't do that you should do, such as, thanking Him for all the blessings He's given you for the day and putting Him first above every single thing in the world?

I have struggled a lot with putting Him first recently. I've put my relationship with God on the back burner because I've been "too busy" for devotionals and "too busy" to pray and talk with Him; and because of not being intentional, my life has fallen apart. I used to be angry all the time and blame other people for my problems and say that they were the ones who needed to change; but in reality, I was the one that needed to change my ways. I was the one that needed to stop putting school and my social life over my relationship with God. In the past, my relationship with God was easy because I had a strong church life. But now that I am in college, things are different. I had to find my own small group and my own church to go to. I'm learning that a relationship with God requires intentionality in order to thrive. So take time this week to be intentional with your walk with God. Love Him with all of your heart, soul, and mind. We have so much to be thankful for!

Prayer

Father, we know that your heart aches over broken relationships. Wash away all barriers that stand between You and Your precious creation. Give us the desire to seek You with as much passion and diligence as You have sought us. Thank You for Your unfailing, unending love. In Jesus name. Amen.

Saturday, February 13, Day 4

Mark 1:1-15 | Psalm 52

When John appeared in the wilderness many people must have thought he was crazy, considering his eccentric clothing and organic diet of locust and honey. And yet, his clothes and diet were just external trappings marking him within the prophetic tradition of Elijah. What really mattered wasn't so much John but the one who would come after him, the one whose coming Isaiah had prophesied: the Christ. We too, should understand that our proclamation should always be about Jesus Christ, and not get so distracted with other things in life. We should pare down like John did.

But what John pointed to was much bigger than himself. That John is concerned with time, both God's time and ours, is shown by his statement that "After me comes the one more powerful than I" (Mark 1:15). Yes, Jesus would arrive after John, but he had also already been there before John. Before there was even the marking of time's relentless advancement, there was the Word through whom God made the universe.

Time would reveal its own cruel suffering soon enough for John, who was imprisoned for daring to speak truth to those in power. But he shouldn't have worried. Jesus announced, "The time has come" (Mark 1:15). The original Greek suggests something far richer than "come"—perhaps "fulfill," "to fill up," or "to complete." All time had, in some sense, been fulfilled with the incarnation of Jesus. The infinite touched the finite. If only we could remember that truth in our culture of being busy.

Prayer

*Father, we are always in fear of being out of time. Help us to calm down and see that you have redeemed all time. That you have fulfilled all time. That you stand outside of time. One day we'll meet you there.
Amen.*

Sunday, February 14

The Fullness of Time, Part 1

*Later on, after John was arrested, Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God's Good News. **"The time promised by God has been fulfilled!"** he announced. "The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!" (Mark 1:14-15).*

Time is a tricky thing. It is both theoretical and physical. The physicist Neil deGrasse-Tyson once described time this way: "There is no time without a place and no place without a time." This connection, between time and the physical world, is why we hear so much about "Space Time" in contemporary science. For us as believers, however, there is another layer of complexity. God, we must realize, exists both outside of time (He existed before time and space began) as well as inside of time (He lived, died, and rose again as Jesus of Nazareth). Thus, time functions as a key, but complex, element of God's Kingdom work.

Here in Mark 1:15, we see Jesus highly conscious of the role time plays in God's work. He begins his proclamation with time: "The time promised by God has been fulfilled!" In the ancient world, people spoke of time in two ways: *Chronos* time and *Kairos* time. *Chronos* time refers to the orderly sequence of events—it's where we get our word *chronology* from—and includes things like keeping time and calendaring dates. *Kairos* time is the movement of epochs, the signaling of new eras and possibilities. This concept of time is similar to how we speak of life before or after the digital age, or how parents speak of life before or after kids. Here in Mark 1:15, Jesus says, "The *Kairos* promised by God has been fulfilled."

In Jesus, we have both the message and the messenger. He is both proclaiming God's new era and bringing it into being. In Christ, time has been fulfilled. This is a deep, powerful spiritual truth.

Sunday, February 14

In Christ, we find a new era, a new epoch. As the people of God, we live in a new time. All that we are and may hope to be has changed. How we order our lives, structure our values, spend our resources, and find our joy has changed. This reality serves as a cornerstone of our gospel. When we share the good news, we share the hope of a new era. No longer are people required to live in the *old* era of the world, a way of life defined by self-sufficiency, success, and pride. Instead, Christ continues to invite people into a *new* era grounded in the Kingdom of God—an era defined by self-giving, mercy, and grace.

Creation began with God and humanity in relationship. Ever since sin ruptured that relationship, God has gone about the work of restoring it. Lent reminds us to take time to reflect on this reality; we have been separated from God, yet we have hope. In and through Christ, we find that the time has been fulfilled. This is our hope, our joy, our *kerygma*.

In the days ahead, you'll find reflections on God's redemptive work throughout history. While God ushered in a new era in and through Christ, we have been invited to participate in that work as bearers, proclaimers of the message. May you find strength and passion for that work in the days ahead.

Prayer

Lord, we give thanks for your work, for your patience, and for your persistence. You have been pursuing us throughout time and throughout the world. May we find joy in this realization, and may we find the courage to speak of your redemptive work to those we encounter. Amen.

Monday, February 15, Day 5

Genesis 11:27-30, 12:1-4a | Psalm 113

We make promises all the time without even thinking about it. You might promise your spouse you will run an errand, your child that you will play a game with them, your employer that you will get a certain assignment done by a deadline. Sometimes we don't stop to think about the effect our promises have on others. It creates a dependent relationship which bonds us together. That can be unnerving, and frankly, sometimes it seems easier not to promise anything at all than to have someone rely on us in that way.

Today's passage from Genesis represents the most famous promise in the Bible, one that set the stage for everything to follow and that culminated in the coming of God on Earth. It is awesome that God would make such a promise to Abraham and even more amazing that Abraham, a regular person just like you and me, was not afraid to answer it. Of course, the unfolding of God's promise would be accompanied by tests of Abraham's faith. As we will see tomorrow, Abraham responded with faith. Can we do the same? Our faith is likely to be tested by our ability to make and keep promises with our brothers and sisters, while we rely on them to do the same.

Prayer

Lord above, help us to live on every holy word that proceeds from Your lips. For Your Word is life indeed! When we have eaten it, we will be satisfied. We praise You for Your bountiful provision. We praise Your Holy Name.

Tuesday, February 16, Day 6

Genesis 22:1-2, 6-8 | Psalm 87:3-7

God's promise to Abraham did not come without a powerful test of Abraham's faith. This famous story has much greater impact on me now that I myself am a father. I could not imagine being asked to sacrifice the thing in this world that is most valuable to me; I am certain I would have failed this test.

We are fortunate that, unlike Christians in some parts of the world, we are not asked to risk our own safety or that of our loved ones to practice our religious beliefs. But if we are truly living out our faith in the world, it inevitably will be tested. In the midst of those trials, we can gather strength from the knowledge that God knows our pain. For while Abraham's answer to Isaac – "God himself will provide the lamb for the...offering" – was fulfilled immediately by the ram caught in the thicket, the ultimate fulfillment of this statement was the Lamb of God. God was not asking Abraham to do anything He was not willing to do Himself. Our daily trials of faith pale by comparison! May we have the courage to trust God's provision, even in the most trying of times.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Abraham was willing to sacrifice his only son to show his love for you. You did sacrifice your only son to show your love for us. Let us rejoice then when our faith is tried. When we are asked to step up as Christians, let us be bolstered by your example, make no excuses, and reply simply as Abraham did: "Here I am."

Wednesday, February 17, Day 7

Genesis 50:19-21 | Psalm 40:1-3

But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them (Genesis 50:19-21).

Don't you just love stories? I remember as a kid sitting on the floor of the library for story time. Now, I love sitting with friends over coffee and hearing life stories, and particularly how God showed up in surprising ways along the journey. Our scriptures are filled with these stories, of times when God surprisingly appears! In the above passage from Joseph's lips, I love the assurance, "...don't be afraid. I will provide...." We read over and over and over about God's provision.

As you tell stories this week over coffee, around the dinner table, or in the halls at work, make sure to watch for God peeking around corners. You may catch a glimpse of Him in bright shining eyes glimmering with laughter or in heavy tears rolling down a face. You may hear his voice in raucous laughter or in the whisper of a cool breeze.

Perhaps as a practice this Lenten season, take a few moments to reflect and write about what God has done in your life. Perhaps use the Psalm above as a model for reflecting on your own life: When did God lift you from the mire? Where did God set your feet that felt solid and safe? What songs has God laid on your heart at just the right moments?

Prayer

*God of beauty and God of grace
slow my steps that I may see You and hear Your voice. God who was,
who is, and who is to come, provide my heart a song to sing. Amen.*

Thursday, February 18, Day 8

Exodus 3:7, 10, 13-15 | Psalm 55:4-8, 16

I'm impatient. As I read the vitriol in our public discourse and witness the violence in our streets, I am ready for the fullness of time to come and the Kingdom of God to arrive. Waiting in the tension of the "already but not yet" is miserable; and it can be tempting, when looking at the difficult state of the world around us, to want to run off and hide away. I can identify with the psalmist who says, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away ... far from the tempest and storm." I'm reminded of young Jenny in Forrest Gump praying, "Lord, make me a bird that I can fly far, far away from here."

Yet God calls us to something more than cloistering ourselves. We have a role to play in bringing the Kingdom of God to Earth! As God said to Moses, he now says to you, "I have seen the misery of my people ... now, go. I am sending you"

If you're like me, that command is at once exciting and terrifying! Perhaps you stammer like Moses, "Who am I that you would send me?" Yet, you are part of the church, literally "the called out ones." One of my favorite hymns is Break Out, O Church of God, which reminds us of what we are called to do:

*Go forth, O Church of God.
Go forth with mighty shout.
Walk on the street called poverty.
With weeping hands reach out.*

Prayer

God, remind us we are the called out ones. When we are overcome by the brokenness of the world around us, help us not retreat, but call us ever forward to faithfully proclaim your love and your coming Kingdom. As we wait, help us work. Amen.

Friday, February 19, Day 9

Numbers 11:26-29 | Psalm 104:24, 27-31

“And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters”
(Genesis 1:2).

In the Old Testament the words “breath,” “spirit,” and “wind” are often interchangeable. Some translations of Genesis read, “The breath of God moved over the waters.” Likewise, it can be said that God breathed either the “breath of life” or the “spirit of life” into Adam. From the beginning of time, the existence of the natural world was intimately linked to the breath of God. That was the plan all along. But somewhere along the way, things changed.

In Numbers 11 the Israelites are once again grumbling, and in a display of power God sends a wind—the Spirit, the Breath of God—to rest upon the elders that they might prophesy with the same power as Moses. Joshua objects for fear of Moses’ authority. It was natural for him to see Moses as the intercessor between God and the Israelites. He couldn’t fathom the Spirit of God resting upon a group of ordinary people, but that’s what ordinary bodies were made for—to be filled with the very Breath of God, the Spirit of the God of Life!

From the start of creation, humanity has been infused with life. Perhaps that is one way of understanding what it means to be human. But throughout the Scriptures, including here in Numbers 11, we see God time and again sending His Spirit, His breath, to His people.

There’s a good deal of mystery when it comes to the breath of God. But I believe God desires to have His Breath, the Spirit of True Life, woven throughout his entire creation. I believe we were made for it. I believe He sends it to us, even now.

Prayer

Father, Creator when you give us your breath, when you send your Spirit, Life is created, and you renew the face of the earth. Breathe your Life into us and make us new, for your honor and glory. Amen.

Saturday, February 20, Day 10

Deuteronomy 24:19-22 | Psalm 146

That last verse, Deuteronomy 24:22, threw me off for a while. What did Israel's past slavery have to do with feeding foreigners, orphans, and widows? As I thought about this group of people, I questioned why widows and orphans were lumped in with foreigners. From the moment God called Israel "My People" everyone else became "Not God's People," and the Israelites had a habit of holding that over people's heads. Widows and orphans were second class citizens, to be sure, but to be equated with the unclean and unchosen? With slaves? Then, I realized what they all had in common. They were all under the power of the people they lived among.

Women had few legal rights, and widows were often viewed as cursed. Children had virtually no rights, and many viewed an orphan's plight as a sign of God's punishment. All of these people were at the mercy of their communities. And then, there were the foreigners, ritually unclean by virtue of their mere existence. Most of them would've been lowly hired hands or servants if not slaves. Nearly every aspect of their lives would have been filtered through the laws and customs of a theocracy that had no desire to treat them as equals.

So, back to that last verse. God was saying to them, "Remember when you lived among people that had power over you? Do better." There are times in our lives when we find ourselves in positions of power and authority over others. The question is who has authority over us: The Prince of this world or the King of Heaven? Do we press our advantage, even if it is acceptable through the law, or do we remember that we were once powerless? God suggests here that our capacity as leaders, as people of power, stands closely connected to remembering our own limitations.

Prayer:

God you are a God of infinite power, and we are a people of weakness. Yet you choose to lavish your strength, grace, and even power upon us.

Help us not take that for granted and to wield it with wisdom and kindness. Amen.

Sunday, February 21

The Fullness of Time, Part 2

*Later on, after John was arrested, Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God's Good News. **"The time promised by God has been fulfilled!"** he announced. "The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!" (Mark 1:14-15)*

In the movie *Lincoln*, the audience follows President Lincoln as he races to pass the 13th amendment, abolishing slavery, before the end of the Civil War. The movie highlights the treacherous political currents of the time and Lincoln's unbelievable genius in navigating them to ultimate effect. One of the unique dynamics of the time was that political leaders, not to mention regular citizens, felt passing the amendment to be both impossible and impractical. Some thought it too progressive a measure, something the country could not withstand. Still others thought it was not enough, believing that freed slaves deserved expansive rights and restitution not granted in the amendment.

In a particularly important conversation with a political adviser, Lincoln makes a powerful observation. "Time," he says, "is a great thickener of things." Lincoln is suggesting that time is an active agent in the world. Time creates the space and place in which people grow, sentiment changes, and a country is transformed. Time, he argues, thickens things—time will move us toward where we need to be.

The more I've reflected on this idea, the more I find it has in common with God's work in the Kingdom. Often as Christians, we are tempted to live between moments. We live from one encounter with God to another, from call to call and moment to moment. The times in between these moments become fillers, empty spaces between the 'important' moments of life. But here in Mark 1, we see Jesus acknowledge something altogether different. In the Kingdom of God, time is an active agent.

Sunday, February 21

As Jesus begins to preach, saying, “The time promised by God has been fulfilled,” he tells us the good news of the future God has promised is coming to fullness. But this reality does not mean God hasn’t been working in the world before this moment. Quite the opposite! Rather, in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, we see God’s work coming to fruition. Jesus is the completion of God’s redemptive work, but God has been working within creation and humanity before this moment. Time has been “thickening” the redemptive work of God in the world.

This week you will find a collection of devotions that continue to reflect on the role time plays in God’s Kingdom work. At its core, Jesus’ message confronts us with the reality that God’s time is far different from our own. We live in the midst of God’s larger story of the salvation and redemption of the cosmos. Lent serves as an opportunity for us to take stock of our place in God’s story and God’s place in ours.

Prayer

God, we give thanks for your persistence in pursuing your creation throughout the ages. Reveal yourself to us now. Help us to find our place in your story, in this moment in time, and help us to bear the good news of your work in the world. Amen.

Monday, February 22, Day 11

Isaiah 11:1-5 | Psalm 98

A stump. The remainder of a strong and intricate life destroyed and left to decay. But, as is often the case, nature echoes the heart of its Creator. Amidst the decay sprouts a tiny green shoot. New life emerges from death! Creation triumphs over destruction!

It isn't a sudden, loud victory. It's slow, quiet, and almost unnoticeable. That shoot will take years to become a tree, to bear fruit, and to be the kind of life that was intended. A shoot doesn't appear to be a victory. Only time makes it a visible triumph.

Sometimes I forget about the time. We go through the story of that "shoot from Jesse's line" so quickly. He's a baby in a manger in December and then, five months later, we're mourning the cross and celebrating the resurrection. I forget it was longer. I forget it was slower. I forget about the 12,050-ish days that turned to weeks and then to months and years.

I often wonder at the blindness of the people He lived among. How did they miss Him? And yet, often, I am so busy looking for a flag-in-the-dirt kind of conquering change in my life that I miss the tiny green shoot. I miss Him. I find myself expecting the spectacular to always be big and victory to be sudden rather than attending to the small, slow, daily growth a relationship with Him brings.

Just as a small green shoot grows slowly into life so He grew each day ever closer to the cross, the grave, and the resurrection. Every moment brought about victory. Every moment was new life. He grew, within the bounds of time, to triumph. Because of His moments—because of all those days—our days matter.

Prayer

Thank you for Your quiet steady Presence in our days. For being with us in our moments. Help us to see You there. Amen.

Tuesday, February 23, Day 12

Isaiah 56:1-8 | Psalm 87:3-7

Waiting is hard and unnatural, especially in our culture today. We are obsessed with instant gratification. If our cell phones take longer than 6 seconds to load a website, we grow impatient and angry; however, the Lord calls us to wait. To wait?! In Isaiah 56, the Lord tells us that His salvation is coming soon. He doesn't give an exact date or show us a detailed progress plan for the next year. He just says soon.

I have a lot of experience with waiting. I wait for Christmas break. I wait in terrible rush-hour traffic on I-40. I wait at the doctor's office. Despite my daily practice, I am not very good at waiting. I grow impatient. I yell at the guy who cuts me off in traffic. I wish away my time now and look on to the months ahead. When I wait passively, I become impatient. But the Lord is not asking us to wait passively. We are asked to wait while keeping justice, doing righteousness, and keeping the Sabbath.

Just as we are not asked to wait passively, we are also not supposed to take in the gospel passively. The gospel is full of action, and we should respond with action. Isaiah 56 also makes it incredibly apparent that the gospel is not only for the rich and the deserving. The gospel is for all of us—especially the undeserving and the poor. To the Lord, there are no outsiders. There is no one that does not belong. Those who choose what delights the Lord, who love the Lord, who keep the Sabbath will be given joy. They will be welcome just like the "insiders." We are called not to accept this truth passively but actively. We are called to proclaim this truth of the Lord's kingdom. We are called to belong and show others how beautiful it is to belong to the Lord. The Lord calls us into the tension of these moments. Although we are called to wait, it is not a passive sort of waiting but an active one.

Prayer

Lord, please help me to wait for you with expectation. Help me to not wait passively, but instead responding to you with action that furthers your Kingdom and makes outsiders into insiders, just as you do in your Kingdom. We love you, Lord. Please teach us to love you more. Amen.

Wednesday, February 24, Day 13

Jeremiah 30:12-14, 17-22 | Psalm 130

We come to the Lord in many different ways from many different backgrounds. Some of us grew up in the church; others may have grown up in the juvenile detention system or in an endless list of other backgrounds; but we are all brothers and sisters in Christ the Father. Before some people come to the Lord they may feel like they have an incurable past, that their wounds run too deep, and that nothing could heal them. These are the type of people that Jesus dwelled among: the poor, the outcasts, the sick, and the wounded. God's love and mercy are endless!

God's love and mercy heal and restore the soul. No sins are too severe or too numerous for God's love and mercy to cover. God has restored all kinds of sinners. He has restored cities full of sinners. Through repenting and sacrificing your life to Christ, the slate is wiped clean and no score is kept. When there is dependence on Christ, hope is restored.

When people who feel that there is no hope or that they are beyond healing or restoration hear the gospel for the first time, they can cry out to the Lord. Burdens can be cast upon the Lord. The healing and restoration can begin. A relationship with the Lord has begun, and it's time to serve. Through this relationship there is waiting. We wait for the Lord to show, tell, or call us to the service of furthering his kingdom. But even in the waiting, we know God is not done with us. Thanks be to God!

Prayer

*God meet me today. I need your mercy. I need your healing. Help me to wait with patience and peace. Thank you for never giving up on me!
Amen.*

Thursday, February 25, Day 14

Jeremiah 33:19-21a | Psalms 111:1-4, 9-10

With each passing year, time seems to move at a faster pace. The days, weeks, and months all fly by, but I often feel as though I'm working to cram in more and more activity into less and less time. It's quite the conundrum.

Yet, reflecting on Psalm 111 as a hallelujah chorus, reminds me that the best way to spend my time is by worshipping my Savior, thanking him for everything He has done for me, and for every detail of my life He has put into place.

Likewise, in Jeremiah 33:20-21, God reminds us that we are as bound to Him as the day is to the night. What a sacred friend we have! No matter what we are doing, He never leaves our side. As we rush from meetings to volunteer activities to family dinners to whatever comes next, He is there with us – our constant companion! In these sweet moments, time seems to slow down and peace rushes over me. I'm praying you feel that same peace today and as you continue to journey through this season of Lent. And I pray that even in the difficult seasons of life, where good days are replaced with trying ones, you take heart from knowing God is with you now too.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for the reminder that you never leave our side just as the day never leaves the light. We praise you for your glorious deeds and your righteousness that endures forever. We pray that you will bring us the beginning of wisdom through our reverence and worship of you. Amen.

Friday, February 26, Day 15

Lamentations 3:25-33 | Psalm 27

Waiting. What a horrible experience. If I'm perfectly honest, I absolutely hate to wait. As a child, waiting was about getting through the day-to-day and onto the special. I had to wait for a favorite TV show, a birthday party, a trip to Disney World. But as I've grown older, waiting has taken a more serious turn. Now I find myself waiting for test results, financial news, or for the latest upheaval in my family or career. I hate waiting, because it leaves me to my own anxiety.

Waiting, the writer of Lamentations tells us, requires discipline: "The Lord is good to those who depend on him ... so it is good to wait quietly for salvation from the Lord." Waiting doesn't come easily, even to us as believers. It requires discipline. It's something that is learned and developed over years of living and working alongside the Lord.

The writer of Lamentations reminds us that our hope in the Lord does not mean those difficult seasons of waiting vanish. We still have biopsies that look scary. We still wait to see if we'll be caught up in the latest round of layoffs or if that prodigal child will finally come home. The difference comes in how we wait. Our hope is that in the midst of pain, fear, sickness, and even death – our Lord still comes. God's time—God's pace—moves differently from our own, yet God still moves.

"Yet I am confident I will see the Lord's goodness while I am here in the land of the living. We wait patiently for the Lord. Be brave and courageous. Yes, wait patiently for the Lord" (Psalm 27:13-14).

As you walk this journey of Lent, may you be brave and courageous. Wait quietly for the Lord's salvation. I am confident in the Lord's goodness; I pray you may be also.

Prayer

Lord, we face trying times and difficult situations. Help us to develop patience. Help us to grow in the discipline of waiting. May we find you, and hope in you, in the midst of our waiting. Help us to be brave and courageous both now and forever more. Amen.

Saturday, February 27, Day 16

Deuteronomy 9:1-6 | Psalms 106

One of the most cherished achievements of my childhood was being a state champion Royal Ambassador Pinewood Derby Racer. But if I am being totally honest with myself, I cannot in good conscience take credit for my victories. While I did line up the car on the track, I didn't make the actual car. My dad cut the car's shape out of a block of wood, drilled the holes for the wheels, and attached the lead weights to the back. I did paint and gloss it; but I messed up really badly and had to cover my mistakes with decals. In the end, even though I won, all the credit should have gone to my dad.

In the same way, the author of Deuteronomy wanted his readers to know that even though the Israelites crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land, it was God who went before them in the wilderness, and God was behind them trampling Pharaoh's armies. God was faithful to the promise He made with Abraham, and that is the only reason the Israelites even made it to that point in God's big story.

God has been faithful to us. Our job is to recognize that all good things come from above and that God's power and majesty, not our own, sustains until Christ's return.

Prayer

Father God, may we be receptive to the miracles you have already performed in our lives. May your grace rush over us like a roaring river, and may your love blanket us like fresh snowfall. Deliver us into your promise as you have done before and will continue to do. Amen.

Sunday, February 28

The Kingdom of God at Hand, Part 1

Later on, after John was arrested, Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God's Good News. "The time promised by God has been fulfilled!" he announced. "**The Kingdom of God is near!** Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!" (Mark 1:14-15)

Throughout the history of the Church, the Kingdom of God has waxed and waned in its theological importance. In recent years, many believers have "rediscovered" the importance of Kingdom-thinking and Kingdom-living, a Christ-centered vision that resonates deeply with Christians around the globe. But for most of us here in America, the idea is difficult to grasp at times. We do not live in a monarchy; in fact, our republic was founded as a rejection of monarchy. So how do we make sense of God's *Kingdom*?

Those hearing Jesus' words that day and those early readers of Mark would have understood Him quite clearly. They lived, worked, and died under Roman rule. Jesus' proclamation of God's Kingdom drawing near was a political statement, a direct confrontation with the powers of the day. It was an undeniable claim that the norms, expectations, and even culture would be challenged and changed. Jesus both proclaims the change and brings it about; he is the messenger and the message.

As we hear Jesus' words today, the same can be said. The Kingdom of God drawing near means that our norms, expectations, and culture are subject to change. The Kingdom becomes our first place of identity and belonging. It informs our politics, values, aspirations, and ethics. Becoming our place of community, it transcends national, ethnic, linguistic, and gender boundaries. We are, first and foremost, citizens of the Kingdom.

Sunday, February 28

God's time being fulfilled signals our move into the Kingdom of God. In the Kingdom, we find hope of reconciliation with God and one another. But as we will see, the work of the Kingdom is ongoing. Christ began that work of reconciliation and redemption and will come again to complete it. In the meantime, we are invited to become partners and participants in this redemptive work. As Paul says, we are "fellow workers with Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:9).

Lent provides an opportunity for us to pause and reflect on our place in the Kingdom. Over the coming weeks, you will encounter devotions that explore God's Kingdom work and our role in it. Kingdom work is not for the timid or apathetic but rather for the passionate and self-less. As we work towards reconciliation and redemption, pointing others to the source of that hope, we are transformed by God as well.

May we have the courage to embrace our Kingdom-call
and Kingdom-identity.

Prayer

Lord, help us to find our belonging in you and your Kingdom. May we continue to look for opportunities to love the unloved, offer hope to the hopeless, and make room for the strangers in our midst. Above all, help us to point the way back to you and your Kingdom in all we do and say.

Amen.

Monday, February 29, Day 17

Isaiah 9:6-7 | Psalm 132:10-12, 17

We all deal with worry and anxiety as we strive to get by in our world.

Jesus is the promised hope for the world. In the midst of spiritual darkness, Jesus brings light. Isaiah describes the birth of Jesus, a son who is to be given to us, who will have divine power and everlasting authority, whose reign will never end. This child is given the greatest of names: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Each name offers insight into the coming king's expected characteristics. He is to be more than a just a powerful king or a peaceful ruler; he is to be the divine savior of all people.

Isaiah proclaims that the coming of Jesus fulfills the covenant made between David and the Lord in verse 7. In Psalm 132:11-12, David is promised that one of his descendants will be placed on the throne. Jesus is the expected descendant of David who is to take the throne, restore peace, and rule over God's people forever.

Both Isaiah and David were unable to experience the fulfillment of the divine covenant through Jesus Christ. While they were not able to witness the birth of Jesus, they were faithful in preparing the way for the coming Messiah. Though we may not be alive to witness Jesus' return, we must be faithful and obedient, in the present, anticipating what is to come.

Jesus came to draw all men to Himself that there would no longer be a distinction between Jew and Gentile, slaves or free, but by grace, through faith, we may all be called sons and daughters of God

As we continue to wait in faithful anticipation, as did the prophets of old, may we be the salt of the earth and the lighthouse in the storm that draws all men into God's presence.

Prayer

May I be obedient to you today. May we as a church seek to bring all of the spiritually lost to you today. May I be, live, and proclaim the gospel as I wait for you. Amen.

Tuesday, March 1 , Day 18

Matthew 6:31-34 | Psalm 37

Fear is a funny thing. It's not just about what is happening in this moment; it's often the uncertainty of what could happen in the next. Our favorite heroes and heroines of epic stories have to "fight the fear" before they can fight their enemies. They combat their fears by realizing the greater power that calls to them beyond their own limitations to leave fear behind for the sake of justice. They see that their fears don't dictate the fight; their action to fight stirs hope. (I now give you permission to go watch your favorite superhero movie!)

I laugh that I was assigned this passage, and I weep in the gratitude that the Lord is teaching me that fear and worry do not have a place to rule when I am reminded of my inheritance. Psalm 37 talks of those who will inherit the land. They find their hope in the Lord, are meek, blameless, and seek and do what is right. When we remember who we are in Christ, hope cannot help but rise from our hearts and be our song. So in our fear and worry, may we remember these truths and let this be our prayer:

Prayer

*We are children of the King. We are joint heirs with Christ, sharing in His inheritance with Him. We are blameless because of Jesus. We have been rescued, and we are complete in Christ. We are the light in the darkness and the salt of the earth. We can approach God with boldness, freedom, and confidence. We cannot be separated from His love. We can do all things through Christ who gives us strength. Fear and worry don't have a place when the word of the Lord takes up its space. Lord, help us make a place for your word to dwell within us.
Amen.*

Wednesday, March 2, Day 19

Luke 10:38-42 | Psalm 50:1, 5, 12-15

At the end of the year, I receive unused vacation days in the form of a check, a benefit that becomes more attractive with a baby on the way. So, when my wife asked if I was taking off work to go to the first ultrasound, I asked if she *needed* me there. To my bewilderment, she became rather upset. An argument followed in which neither of us made sense to the other.

She wanted me to want to be there for the sake of being there. *Being* there? How could forfeiting an entire day's pay to sit in a doctor's office for an hour be more beneficial to our growing family than working, earning? Although I tried explaining the important role money plays in paying bills and buying diapers, her mood did *not* improve. She wasn't getting it. I was "being" a good husband and father. Working. Providing. Doing! Really, what good is just *being* there?

We sat in silence in the waiting room. We walked to the ultrasound room without even looking at each other. Like a good husband, I sat next to the table within arm's reach, but not bothering to reach for her. The technician fought with the machine for a few minutes and then struggled to capture a readable image. Such a waste of time and money.

And then, there she was. My daughter. Her heartbeat. I reached for my wife's hand and cried with her, happy just to *be* there. And to think, I almost traded that experience for something as fleeting as money. But then I had something that could never be taken away.

Lent offers ample opportunities to *do* something. Fast, donate, write a devotional. But almost anything you can do can be undone. Does the LORD *need* your efforts, your works, more than he desires your presence? Is there anything you can *do* for God that brings him greater glory than simply delighting in *His* presence?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, gather your people to you. We know it is not our efforts that earn us a place in your presence. Teach us the value of being over busyness. Fill us with the joy of your presence in our lives. In your name, Amen.

Thursday, March 3, Day 20

Matthew 19:16, 21-26 | Psalm 119:9-19

I read the title “Rich Young Man” and feel as though I can relate to two of those three pieces. I’m definitely not rich, but I’m young and male, so I’ve got that going for me. Then I start to read this Scripture, and sadly, he and I are more similar than I would hope. This young man just wants to have eternal life, and he wants it to be easy. He wants it to be some simple task or donation he can do in exchange for the rewards God has promised. So often I try to turn following Christ into a simple checklist, asking myself each day if I measure up to what I think Christ wants me to do.

As this young man is trying to measure up to what Christ wants for him, Christ instead calls him to follow and to live an uncomfortable life. He explains it in terms of wealth and possessions, because Christ knows that this man serves two masters. The hard question of this Scripture isn’t how does a rich man get into heaven; rather, it asks us, how do we as believers know that we can be saved? How do we know that we can make it to eternal life with the Messiah?

The words that are life changing for me are found in verse 26: “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” God has overcome and given us the way to join him; by preparing for the cross, we can be prepared for heaven. His overcoming of the grave allows us to know that with Him all things can be done. A rich man tied to his possessions doesn’t leave room for God to do amazing things. When we are tied to our possessions, we are still tied to what we can accomplish. As believers, we are a people called to trust that all things are possible with God. This Lenten season, I’m praying that I can remember His call that all things are possible through Him and get away from this life of checklists.

Prayer

God help me to hold loosely to both my success and failures. Help me to take what I have achieved and use it for you, always making space for what you want to do in and through me. Amen.

Friday, March 4, Day 21

Isaiah 9:6-7 | Psalm 132:10-12, 17

Few of us keep carved idols of wood or stone around our homes anymore. Times have changed, and so have our idols. An idol, as you know, is anything that claims the center of our lives and attention – the rightful place of God. All too often our idols are sneaky things, like power, influence, and comfort. There are countless things, causes, and people claiming they can offer these things to us. These “gods” of our time tempt us to embrace their kingdom ethic. Their kingdoms seek to consolidate power and wealth to the few so they may dominate and oppress the many.

We must remember the Kingdom of God is different. The Kingdom of God is an upside-down Kingdom where the high are brought low and the low are lifted up. If we truly believe the Kingdom of God is at hand, it will call us away from our idols, away from the promises of the “gods” of this world, and toward a different Kingdom ethic. We will defend the weak and uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. In the upside-down Kingdom of God, we do not seek power, influence, and comfort. We seek justice. In fact we read today that those who live the Kingdom ethic are, in the end, shocked to know they were housing, clothing, and visiting the true King all along. May you, following the example of Christ, set aside the idols of this world, and seek justice instead.

Prayer

Christ, help us embody the justice of your kingdom. Help us speak out against the “gods,” the powers that be in this world, and declare there is a new Kingdom at hand. And let us, too, be amazed that in seeking and serving the least, we entertained you, King Jesus, unaware. Amen.

Saturday, March 5, Day 22

Mark 9:38-41 | Psalm 133

Harmony is such a fleeting ideal. If we truly pause and reflect upon it, harmony seems both entirely impossible and entirely desirable. Peace, suggests a deep quiet, a total cessation of activity and energy. Harmony, on the other hand, is far more complex. It is the perfect blending of active, energetic, and unique people. Harmony grounds itself in presence; peace grounds itself in absence.

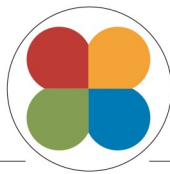
*How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony!
Harmony is as refreshing as the dew from Hermon that falls on the mountains of Zion. And there the Lord has pronounced His blessing, even life everlasting (Psalm 133:1, 3).*

On the mountains of Zion, literally the mountains of God's Kingdom, harmony falls like refreshing dew. In Mark's gospel we see Jesus embody harmony. There John sees another believer using Jesus' name to cast out a demon, and he immediately drifts to the old habit of religious division. Just like the Jewish people of his day divided themselves into the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes, so too was John ready to divide the followers of Jesus into 'true believers' and 'imposters.' but Jesus shows a different way. In the Kingdom of God, harmony becomes the goal: "Anyone who is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40).

As citizens of the Kingdom, our great challenge and joy is the pursuit of harmony. Rather than the Kingdom becoming a place of constraint, it stands as a place of great breadth, depth, and freedom. Lent becomes an opportunity for us to reflect on our heart's path. Are we living as believers who always expect others to conform to our beliefs, rites, and symbols? Or do we leave open the possibility of learning, growing, and changing in light of other followers of Christ?

Prayer

God, we give thanks for your heart of harmony. Help us to know the difference between beliefs that are nonnegotiable and those that offer us freedom to learn and think and discuss. May we be people that cultivate harmony above all else, and may we do it with your help. Amen.



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