

INTRO & CONNECTION to SERIES

If you remember, we began this season recognizing the vitriolic nature of our faith. An up and down, in and out, cadence of belief and disillusionment, of conviction and doubt, of clarity and disorientation. A cry that is not unique to our time and place in the history of faith.

And so the question we asked is what do you long for? What deep desire drives your affections? What internal angst keeps you and I crying out to God our Father? What yearning love presses us forward in life today? Keeps us from abandoning faith or being so tossed by the circumstances of life that faith is unfruitful at the other?

If you have paid much attention in the Psalms over the last three weeks; you have noticed the answer our faith family has given is a mixture of several sentiments: security, justice, prosperity, hope, and even glory. What kept them, and keeps us answering God in the midst of whatever circumstance of life we find ourselves in at any particular moment, is longing for the world that God created and for God himself. A world of security, justice, prosperity and sure hope in a God who is good, gracious, great and glorious. A biosphere in which trust is our anchor. The very environment described for us in the Garden of Genesis and the Garden city of Revelation.

Yet, in the here-and-now, our life does not seem so Garden like. Rather, we experience much of our existence in something more akin to the Circus. The setting of our daily stories as parents, neighbors, spouses, roommates, employees, and even the church; is an effectively efficient entertaining display of lights, sounds, and movements in which we find ourselves repetitively rotating between spectator and performer. Exhausting our resources in the performance for work, family, garnering of likes/views and pursuit of fulfillment; then crashing down in the grandstands to veg-out on the show surrounding us. Waking tomorrow only to repeat.

The Circus life is momentarily and seasonally satisfying, but it is not sustaining.

Eventually we physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually burnout; and either attempt to start over in a new job, a new marriage, a new passion or take control by building up resources that keep us from feeling the emptiness created by the Circus rhythms.

So, how do we change the setting? How do we enter a different rhythm? How does life become more like a Garden than a Circus? How do we trust God in our everyday life?

FAITH PRACTICES. These disciplines are our historical and accessible ways of worshiping God in the ordinary rhythms and relationships of daily life together. These FAITH PRACTICES help us to **cultivate grace**: participate in fostering a crafted environment in the presence of God—the Garden.

In the setting of God's Story we find all that we both need and truly long for: peace, justice, comfort, purpose, joy, and direction regardless of what season might be upon us.

The concept of cultivation is necessary for us to take the appropriate responsibility in our faith; so that we might participate in God's Story:

...**without disillusionment**; expecting everything to be easy or having a naïve view of the world and God

...**without disconnection**; beginning to see God in everything and everything for and to God, and

...**without disorientation**; centering our reality on *relationally experienced trust*; the presence of God with us.

Our first two FAITH PRACTICES of **Prayer** (specifically the Psalms but really all of Scripture) and **Repentance** are meant to keep us oriented to the conditions of the Garden. That the Garden is not an environment which we have created through our imagination like a fantasy world nor through our efficient efforts like a well-built organization; but one in which...

...we are created for the purpose to participate in relationship with God and all he has created and controls.

As our vision is calibrated to see the Garden through the hazing veil of the Circus; we add FAITH PRACTICES which help us work the Garden; play our part in the presence and purposes of God our Father. **Listening** is the first of these practices.

Listening involves the attentive actions of both *hearing* and *seeing*; whether we are engaging with God through Scripture or one another through small talk.

Listening in the Spirit is the fundamental action for knowing and following Jesus.

We respond to the elements of the Garden, knowing only how to work with wisdom when we observe what is going on in and around us in relation to God who spoke to us and showed himself to us in Jesus (Jn. 1:1-18) . Who has given us his Spirit to guide, teach and sustain us (Jn. 13-16) as we like Jesus.

Through **Listening**, we begin to discern our work in the Garden and the season of life in the Garden. We become attentive to the details and learn that participation, cultivation, is rhythmic. As the Preacher of Ecclesiastes so aptly pointed out for us in Catherine's reading (3:1-8; 7:13-14)!

Yet, the constant motion of the Circus is not a life-giving but rather life-sucking rhythm. So how do we get into the rhythm of the Garden; recognizing and accepting rhythms and seasons not created by us but to which we can enter when we are aware of them?

Well, the answer brings us to our FAITH PRACTICE for today, **Stopping!**

WHAT IS STOPPING?

Stopping is physically and mentally being still and reflective. It is NOT turning off, zoning out or escaping.

Stopping is the act of ceasing striving for the purpose of taking note.

When we **Stop**, we are gaining perspective. Self-perspective, God's perspective and contextual perspective. When we take time to be still,

“Things will rise from the depths. As we stop, we will encounter what has been outside of our range of vision, beneath our consciousness, perhaps [hinted at] only intuitively.”¹

Busied by the endless movement, bored with the unsatisfactory consumption of nutrient starved provisions of the Circus; our lives remain shallow.

The depth—by which I mean the richness and abundance—of God's person and purpose (Story) and our humanity cannot be entered. Instinctively within us, regardless of a person's faith or lack-there-of, there is sense of something more and something other. The lack of room for rhythms (seasons) of depth is why the Circus is insufficient for producing a flourishing life.

The irony is that the Circus attempts to satisfy the very longing it keeps us from attaining by its constant motion.

And so, we attempt to create depth through knowledge, self-sacrifice, success, big vision, security, religion, grasping on to youthfulness, and the pursuit of our desires. And, like the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, we inevitably discover that “all is vanity and striving after wind” (Eccl. 1:14, 17; 2:1, 11, 15-17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7-8; 5:7, 10; 6:2,9; 8:10; 11:12; 12:12).

Nutrient rich, life producing depth is not self-created, rather it is experienced in attentive ceasing!

We simply need to discipline to enter into the season which God has placed us. To enter not into the rhythm of his created, crafted, and cared for Garden. When we do:

¹ Susan Phillips, *The Cultivated Life*. 79.

The truths we cognitively affirm of God's person and purpose become relational realities we experience, says the Psalmist:

"Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" (Ps. 46:10, ESV)

The fashioned essence of our humanity, distorted and shriveled by sin is rediscovered as holy and full in presence of Jesus says the apostle Paul:

"From now on...we regard no one according to the flesh...if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation." (2 Cor. 5:16-17, ESV)

The context of our growing up is seen with soberness; absent of both cynicism and naiveté says the Preacher:

"It's best to stay in touch with both sides of an issue. A person who fears God deals responsibly with all of reality, not just a piece of it." (Eccl. 7:18, The Message)

Stopping is required for us to enter into the relationship and realities of the Garden. To gain the perspective needed to grow deep and thus strong and full of nutrition in the rhythms of depth. The perspective that will allow us to find purpose in every season of life.

"On a good day, enjoy yourself; on a bad day, examine your conscience. God arranges for both kinds of days. So that we won't take anything for granted." (Eccl. 7:14, The Message)

When we **Stop**, we can TRUST!

'I have never had clarity; what I have always had is *trust*. So I will pray that you *trust* God.' (Mother Teresa)

And in trusting we rest, and fruit is borne from our resting (Jn. 15:1-17). When we **Stop**,

"Then the fields of our lives that we steadfastly plow, plant and reap can lie open to the elements [of Grace]. What is under the surface can emerge..."²

So then, how do we practice **Stopping**?

² Phillips, 82.

HOW THEN DO WE STOP?

I have to confess, **Stopping** is the most difficult FAITH PRACTICE for me! My personality is bent to find both identity and satisfaction in work, in the producing of something. **Stopping**, while necessary for fruitful production, seems completely counter cultural to everything in me!

Stopping is not as easy as it sounds! After all,

the rhythm we are have been acculturated to, is the perpetual alternating between the valorizing of work/busyness responded to with a catered menu for vegging-out.

A rhythm that can be difficult to break out of *without* simply rejecting work or become controlled by spirit-less discipline.

Again, **Stopping** is not simply turning off or zoning-out; it is ceasing striving to take note. Doing so allows us to enter into the depths of God's person and purposes, into the imaging glory of our humanity with soberness, hope and joy in the context of our daily lives.

So, how do we practice **Stopping**? I believe there are four ways:

1. The first is through **Rhythmic Rest**. These are planned times to move outside of our everyday rhythms and roles. The primary rhythm or rest being that of the **Sabbath** which we will talk about in more detail in a couple of weeks. But, there are two other important *planned times* outside the ordinary rhythms of your day that can be **Stopping**.

The first is **Retreat**: a time away to be alone with God, or with a group of people seeking the Lord. Not so much for simply learning more information, like a conference, but a time away to engage with God quietly even if done so collectively. It is often in these retreats that we have the **SPACE** needed to heal, to forgive, and to reorganize our priorities in our daily rhythms.

The second might surprise some of us (including myself!): **Vacation**. Now, most of our vacations are not **Stopping**! We either completely check-out from all responsibilities and relationships, or we run from one entertaining experience to the next. Regardless which we chose, we return home only to "need another vacation" within a week or two! So, we are not being *restored*, no depth is achieved. But, if you organize a vacation for time to be *both* still and quite in the Lord (planning room to cease striving and take note) as well as play; these can actually be life giving, *refreshing* and necessary components for longevity and persevering in joy filled faith!

2. The second is through **Physical Pondering**. Rhythmic rest requires planning, and while Physical Pondering is no less disciplined, it can be more spontaneous.

Why **Stopping** is necessary and one of the most historically and widely exercised FAITH PRACTICES, because **Stopping** allows us to connect as we gain perspective. Connect to God, to ourselves and to the world in which we breathe and eat. *Physical Pondering is simply a way of describing how we enter into the present-ness of this space.*

Whether we simply take a few moments in our cubicle or on a bench at lunch to be mindful of who and what is going on in our space (a discipline we will discuss in more detail next week) or we take a walk at the arboretum; we **Stop** our work to reflect on God around us, God in everything and giving everything life. We no longer are simply consumers or producers but participants in a bursting Story! Walks around your neighborhood, moments on the back porch as the kids play, a quiet 20 minutes in a busy restaurant; can all be opportunities to **Stop** if we do so with the mindset to ponder!

3. The third means of **Stopping** is through **Daily Disconnection**. Technology is not evil. Let's be clear about that, but let me also be honest that it is not always helpful either. We live at a time in history in which we are always able to connect for the alternating purposes of productivity and entertainment. We are bombarded with endless information for both work and leisure; opportunities to engage and opportunities to on-look.

Wisdom is recognizing the limitations of such connectedness and practice Daily Disconnection. A time without phone or watch, t.v. or computer, email or YouTube, texting or Facebook/Instagram. A time without new or distracting information. A time that will allow us to pay attention to our hearts and the heart of God.

This probably means beginning to engage with God in the physical, written Word and not just the mobile Word! Disconnecting from technology / information / entertainment allows you to not just reconnect with God but also with one another: your roommate, spouse, and kids. Without disconnection you will never be able to enter into the depths that Christ beckons us into. Thus learning to do so daily is a key discipline in growing up.

4. The final means of Stopping is what I am calling **Carefree Celebration**. Scripture is full of feasts and celebrations! A large part of the collective life of our faith family is **Stopping** to celebrate God and God's graces. And it was not just significant days, but the celebration of friendship as well (something we'll look more into in few weeks).

It's important to note both that celebration is a regular rhythm of the Garden as well as being carefree! Many of us celebrate but somehow find a way to make it laborious and arduous, much like Martha! There are definitely things to do in any celebration, party, and get-together; but to make such events a practice of **Stopping**, means to take note of why they are significant, of how they demonstrate the abundance of God's grace and are a foreshadowing of the joyous feast with Jesus and one another!

When we recognize the depth of celebration, we can enjoy them with freedom to neither simply entertain/host or simply consume; but be together in a way in which we enjoy mutual responsibility in proper relation to God! Thus, we can be refreshed in God's grace not just in the hospitality of others or the affirmation of attendees.

PRACTICING STOPPING

Enough talking about **Stopping**, let's practice **Stopping** this afternoon! Again, **Stopping** is the act of ceasing striving in order to take note. So let's begin where all true Stopping begins, in prayer.

Praying to God the Father in the Spirit to allow our bodies and minds to be still and to recognize him and his grace even as we ponder our own souls this afternoon.

Now, let's gain some perspective. Take some time to answer the following questions, be sure to write down your thoughts! The first set of questions get at our rhythms. The second at our souls health in respect to those rhythms.

1. What does regular "Stopping" practically look like for you?
 2. What keeps you from Stopping?
 3. How does your weekly schedule impact your relationship with God and with others?
 4. Think about your week ahead, when and how can you practice Stopping?
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1. When I have taken time to Stop in the past, what fruit was produced?
 2. When you are still and quite, what is exposed? What fears, unbelief, joy, hope, longing?
 3. Where do you recognize God's presence and working in your life today?
 4. Who are you are going to share these insights with today?

INVITATION TO STOP

We conclude our time together as we always do, receiving what Jesus offers us in order that we might live—his broken body and shed blood for our sins. We **Stop** to reflect and receive.

You know, Jesus gives us this beautiful invitation to enter into the rhythms of the Garden, to **Stop**, in Matthew 11:28-30,

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

(The Message)

May our time of Communion this afternoon be an embracing of this invitation; to enter into the unforced rhythms of grace, living freely and lightly in the sustaining work of Jesus on our behalf!