

Finding the Meaning in the Long In Betweens

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Romans 5:1-8

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There are two kinds of movie trilogies. There are the ones that justify why you've waited for so long to see the next one, the kind that you wait for every tidbit of information to come out, whether it is leaks, or previews, or news. You know the ones that I am talking about: The Two Towers in the Lord of the Rings, Empire Strikes Back in Star Wars. These are the kinds of second movies that deliberately move the plot forward from the first movie, they immerse you in the world again, and make you long for the resolution of the third installment. The third movie wouldn't be possible without the second one, and the satisfaction would be shallow without the tension they create. In other words, they make you feel the fullness of the story!

Then there's the other kind. I'm looking at you, Jurassic Park, and Back to the Future. And especially at you, Cars 2 and Toy Story 2. These are the movies that don't do anything. They seem to be made just to cash in on the hype, and get you to waste money and time – you know. The kind that you watch, and then realize that those are hours you will never be able to get back.

In many ways, the time between the high holy days of Christmas and Easter are like those middle movies. It also reminds me of something that I shared with you all a while back, called the big story. Here's a brief recap:

Creation was made by God with the intention of goodness, and life. We call this created intent. And it is also where the universe is headed. Creation will once again be filled with the glory of God. In between, though, something happened that derailed the system that God created. In the second circle, humanity damaged creation's goodness by trying to define right and wrong for ourselves. When we started trying to run things according to our own desires, wills, and plans instead of God's, things began to die. But God loved his creation too much to leave it to death, so he inserted his fullness, his life, into creation so that we could know the healing presence of God through Jesus. This is the third circle. Jesus invades creation, coming to his own work, but unrecognized. He came to heal the brokenness, defeat the power of sin, and rescue creation from sin and death. Yet this doesn't simply bring us straight back to the original created intent. Christmas brought us Jesus. But we are stuck in the middle movie, the time between Christmas and Easter, the gap between Jesus' birth and his return. What happens in the in between time?

It is also kind of like the scripture reading from today, Romans 5:1-8

5 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

⁶You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Paul starts off with a very lofty picture. This chapter is full of lots of catch phrases that we love to throw around. We are justified by faith! We stand in grace! And we didn't do anything to get there, it just happened.

Verses 1 and 2 are like the high holy days of the year, Christmas and Easter. During these celebrations, we focus on beyond, on the big picture, the capital E Events that shape our world view. The incarnation of Jesus, that is, God Almighty in a tiny human baby. As the famous prayer says, Jesus Christ, lowly and meek, yet all powerful. And then his life, death, and resurrection. It's all here. The Christian belief is that because God sent his son Jesus to live a human life, die on the cross to defeat death and sin and rescue us from its power, and rise from the dead, we have hope. Hope that we too will not simply decay in the earth when we die, but that we will rise up just like Jesus did. This, friends, is God's glory. His glory is his massive, displacing, reality.

God's glory means that when He descends on the temple in the Old testament, no one else can fit inside, because it is full. The glory of God means that when Jesus came and touched unclean, untouchables, he didn't become unclean, they became clean. And when he touched the contagious, he didn't get sick, they became healthy. And the glory of God means that when Jesus met up with death, he didn't stay in the grave, death was no more. The glory of God is resurrection.

This is easter. This is the hope of the Christian. It isn't that we go to heaven when we die. It is that life expels death, and this fullness of life is what Jesus offers to those who will believe in him.

Sounds pretty good, right? Eternal life for those who believe! But what does that even mean?

When we talk about eternal life, we are most often thinking about the future. We are also often thinking about a really long time – infinite, in fact. However, as I recently read from our resident New Testament scholar Kyle Merkel, to limit our understanding of eternal life to some infinite span of time in the distant future would be to miss out on a huge part of the promise that Jesus offered us. This would be the mistake of turning our lives into a waiting game – just passing the time until we can get off this rock, leave it to doom and destruction, while we get on with the wedding celebration in heaven. It makes the time we wait meaningless.

Instead, I like how Kyle defined eternal life. He says that eternal life is rooted in having a relationship with the Father through Jesus, and that biblically, it is offered in the present tense.

This is a much better definition of eternal life, more faithful to the biblical meaning. Eternal life is not a quantity, it is a quality. It is being connected to only source of life, being filled with so much of that fullness of life, glory of God, that we actually begin to see the effects of the Kingdom of God around us. Right now.

Why, then, do we not see God's kingdom around us? Especially now? We've just come through a Christmas season unlike any other that those alive have known. But it isn't unique to us. We've known plagues and disease before, isolation and broken economies. Human history is full of stories of pain, suffering and oppression. Why do we continue to see these problems if eternal life begins now?

This is verses 3-5. Creation suffers in tragic brokenness, and we too continue to experience the effects of sin and death. We do not yet see the fullness of life that the bible describes, except in brief, fleeting glimpses. As we have looked at for the last month of Advent, we see glimpses of hope, of peace, of joy and love. But our hope is that God's glory will one day be so present that everything that is un-hope, un-peaceful, un-joyful, and un-loving, will be utterly destroyed. Until then, we wait. We wait in the in-between, in the second movie. It is up to us if it is just a money grabbing, time wasting placeholder, or if it serves a purpose, to deal with the tension that is left after Jesus ascended, and to move us meaningfully along the storyline until Jesus returns.

This is what brings meaning and purpose to the fourth circle, to the in between time of waiting that we find ourselves living in day to day.

And this is what verses 6-8 talk about – Jesus lived the example of what we can do to make this in between time profitable from a kingdom perspective. Jesus came to earth to serve, even at the cost of his own life. And if we are going to make this

season between his birth and his return meaningful, we need to accept that we are sent together to heal.

I want to suggest four practical examples of how we can fill not only our own time with meaning, but also to be the sent people of God to those around us.

Hope: Hope is the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. It is the anticipation that what causes us fear, anxiety, stress, pain, or discouragement will be removed, and we will be relieved. Empty platitudes and meaningless gestures like social media protests do not give hope to people. But we can share hope in Jesus' name. We know this! We know, because, just like Paul says in verses 3-5, we have all experienced hard times, and have needed hope. Spend time getting to know someone who is alone. Give food to someone who is hungry. Help with rent, or babysitting, or good questions. These things give practical hope to those around us. Look for these opportunities!

Joy: We learned last week that there is a profound difference between joy and happiness. Happiness is externally dependent; in other words, it depends on what is happening to a person. Joy is internally dependent. It depends on the person's outlook on life. I learned another difference. Happiness is future oriented, which always means that it can let us down – if we don't get what we are anticipating, we don't get happiness. Joy is very much in the moment. Joy is that feeling of tranquility and contentment, along with a desire to share it with others.

And here is the key: for us to share joy with others, we need to be with others.

I know, this one's tough in a pandemic restriction life. But the restrictions do not mean we cannot be together – we just have to be creative about it. Write an old-school letter. Send a card in the mail. Give someone a playlist of songs that remind you of them. Read the same book as each other and chat about it. Zoom or facetime with others. We've had a few really cool, new parties over zoom for Christmas. And, when the time comes, do not get so stuck in your pandemic routine that you do not get together once you can. We have space in our lives since we can't be doing a lot of things; when this is over, keep space in your life for unrushed time together with others. This causes joy to flourish.

Peace: In his report, *Hemorrhaging Faith*, James Penner said that the number one desire of young people was to have an unshockable friend. Someone who would not leave them, or turn them away, even if they knew everything. Friends, this is who Jesus is to those of us who believe. And this is who you are called to be to others. You don't have to approve, or condone, neither do you have to condemn and judge. You merely have to stay. Giving this gift of security to someone in the midst of chaos may mean the difference between the growth of overcoming, and despair of defeat.

Love: You may have noticed that many sermons come down to love. That is where Paul arrives at: the love that gives itself completely in the service of the other. Friends, it is the love of God poured into us that gives us hope, and it is the same love of God that moves us to share hope, joy and peace with those around us. It is that love that fills our efforts, and makes them more than we could. We can't go

together to heal the brokenness of the world around us without Jesus. It simply won't work. But with Jesus, we can not only endure this in between time, we can thrive, and help others to thrive as well.

Life in the in between times is full of meaning, because we are sent together with Jesus to help others catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God, full of real life. Jesus asks us to go with him, sharing hope, peace, joy, and love, in his name.