



MAKING THE MOST OF THE TIME | A TIME TO STAY PUT

May 3, 2020

It has now been six weeks since the governor issued a stay-at-home order for the state of New York and most people are starting to feel a little weary of all the isolation. The experts say that the physical distancing is working—and we may have to keep it up a while longer in order to prevent the spread of the virus. We understand that—and we are all willing to do our part in order to protect the health of ourselves and others. But the isolation is weighing on us.

Some of you may be doing alright under the circumstances. You may be eating well, getting some exercise, establishing new rhythms of worship and prayer. But many, many others are experiencing quarantine fatigue. You're desperate for some real human interaction. You're feeling a little hopeless and depressed. You are trying to do the best you can, but you're not sure how much more of this you can take. Parents with young children are definitely struggling.

I've been reflecting on the fact that during these several weeks following Easter, Jesus' disciples were in a similar kind of position to the one that we are in now. In the Gospel of Luke, for example, Jesus appears to his disciples and provides several convincing proofs that he really was alive. He tells them they have received a special commission to bear witness to the reality of who Jesus is and what he has accomplished for us. But they can't just hop on it and get to work. No, Jesus tells them they have to stay. Stay in the city until you receive the power of the Holy Spirit.

The longer this period of confinement continues, the more it tests our character and reveals our true nature. That's why I would like us to stop and ask ourselves: Who am I becoming during this time of social isolation? This period of confinement has the potential to make us or break us. If we have to stay put, what's the best way to make the most of the time?

My good friend, Doug Webster, who immediately preceded me as the pastor of Central, has written on the contrast between two approaches to prolonged periods of social isolation. I am indebted to Doug for the following comparison between the 2000 film *Castaway* starring Tom Hanks and the classic novel *Robinson Crusoe* written by Daniel Defoe. Tom Hanks interestingly was one of the first celebrities to reveal that he had contracted COVID-19. It was sort of fascinating for me to re-watch and re-read these works of art during quarantine. Both pieces of fiction present us with a man who crashes on to a deserted island - and both explore the human struggle to survive. But there is a stark contrast in terms of who these two men become as a result of their prolonged period of confinement.

Tom Hanks plays the role of Chuck Noland, an efficiency expert for FedEx who is obsessed with time. When we are first introduced, we hear him deliver this mantra to his fellow FedEx employees: "We live and we die by time, and we must not commit the sin of turning our back on time." Given Noland's preoccupation with work, he doesn't have enough time for his girlfriend, Kelly, his friends, or a normal life. He had planned to propose to Kelly on New Year's Eve, but he is called away to solve a problem in Malaysia in the middle of celebrating Christmas.

When Kelly drops him off at the airport, she gives him an antique pocket watch that had belonged to her grandfather with a picture of herself inside. He tells her that he will always keep it set to Memphis time in order to remind him to come home to her. For his part, Noland gives Kelly a small box containing the

engagement ring he had intended to give her a week later and tells her “I’ll be right back.” That, however, is one promise that he will not be able to keep.

The cargo plane to Malaysia goes down in a fierce storm over the Pacific and Noland is the sole survivor. He drifts to a small tropical island aboard one of the plane’s inflatable rafts and must eke out an existence for himself. At first, Noland thoughtfully cares for the FedEx packages that wash ashore, but eventually he realizes he needs to discover what they contain in order to find whatever might be useful for his survival. For some unknown reason, he only leaves one package with a pair of wings painted on it unopened.

We do not have much of a sense of what Noland is thinking because there is very little dialogue. Instead we have to make assumptions based on his actions. He discovers the corpse of one of the plane’s pilots whom he buries in the sand with no ceremony. He doesn’t say any last words or offer a prayer. He simply says: “So that’s it” and dusts off his hands. When he tries to make a fire by rubbing sticks together, he injures his hand. He picks up a nearby Wilson Sporting Goods Volleyball with his bloody hand and hurls it away from him. The bloodstained handprint on the volleyball looks a bit like a face. Noland adds some eyes and names it “Wilson,” and this volleyball becomes his only companion and conversation partner during his long stay on the island. Though no words are spoken, Noland often looks at the photo of Kelly and draws her image on the walls of his cave to express his love and longing. We are meant to understand that his love for Kelly is really the only thing that keeps him going during his long exile.

Over the course of four years, Noland has lost 50 pounds, his long hair has been bleached by the sun. At one point he contemplates suicide, but his attempt fails. He discovers that in his powerless position on the island, he doesn’t even have the power to take his own life. He sinks lower and lower into hopelessness and despair. Eventually two walls of a portable toilet are brought in by the tide. Inspired by the wings on the unopened FedEx box, Noland uses the portable toilet as wings for a raft which he has built in order to sail off the island. He leaves the island with Wilson and the unopened FedEx box and surely would have died in the middle of the ocean if he had not been discovered by a passing cargo ship.

Upon his return to civilization, Noland learns that he had long been given up for dead. His family and friends held a funeral and Kelly married someone else and they have started a family together. Even though he has been rescued, Noland has lost Kelly all over again. While they may still love one another, there is no future for the two of them. He returns the pocket watch, and they part. In the final scene, Noland travels to a remote part of Texas to return the unopened FedEx box. The house at the address is empty so he leaves a note at the door saying that the package had saved his life. Afterwards, he stops at a four-way intersection and gets out a map. As the movie closes, we realize that Noland is just as lost and directionless as he was on the island and has no idea which way to turn. Noland survived, but nothing has really changed. Even though he has been able to return home, he is still a castaway.

There are many similarities between *Castaway* and *Robinson Crusoe* in terms of how a man overcomes the odds in order to find a way to survive on a deserted island, but these two works could not be more different from one another in terms of how these two men confront their protracted period of confinement on their respective islands. If *Castaway* is simply a survival story, then *Robinson Crusoe* is a spiritual autobiography.

Many consider *Robinson Crusoe* to be the first example of realistic fiction. In fact, many of the first readers thought this must be a true story rather than a novel. Some even thought the author had lifted the narrative from someone’s diary given how vividly it described not only the protagonist’s adventures but especially his interior life.

Now, it is an old book published in 1719, and like most books—it is a product of its time. There are a few

things in it to which we might object from the perspective of our own cultural vantage point. But let's not allow that to deter us from receiving its central message.

The story begins in England in 1651. Robinson Crusoe comes from a devout Christian family, but he has no interest in God. If he speaks of God at all, Crusoe refers to him in vague and general terms. He sets sail on his first sea voyage against his parents' wishes. His father warned him that if Crusoe ignored his counsel that God would never bless him. But he disregards his father's advice. Crusoe experiences a terrible storm on that first trip and prays that if God rescues him he will become a sincere Christian and return home. But as soon as the storm has passed, he shakes off his former promises and decides to keep sailing. In one night of drinking, he says, "I drowned all my repentance." After many more adventures, Crusoe, like Noland, is the sole survivor of a disaster and is eventually shipwrecked on a deserted island near the coast of Venezuela. At first, he goes through all the same motions as Noland. He makes a shelter for himself, finds food and fresh water, and secures provisions from his lost ship.

But then Crusoe does something that Noland never does. After nearly a year on the island, Crusoe begins to reflect on his life and how much time he had wasted. In the eight years since he had first left home he says: "I do not remember that I had, in all that time, one thought that so much as tended either to looking upwards toward God, or inwards toward a reflection upon my ways." He realizes that he has become hardened and unthinking.

On one occasion, he was so overwhelmed by these thoughts that he begins rummaging through an old chest looking for some tobacco to help soothe his distemper. He finds the tobacco, but he also finds a Bible. He opens the Bible casually and turns to Psalm 50, verse 15: "Call on me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver, and you will glorify me." From that point on he began to read the Bible seriously every morning and every night—not worrying about the number of chapters, but reading for as long as his thoughts would engage him. One day he comes to Acts 5, verse 31: "He is exalted a Prince and a Savior to give repentance and to give forgiveness." At this he threw down the book and asked that Jesus would give him repentance.

He says: "This was the first time that I could say, in the true sense of the words, that I prayed in all my life; for now I prayed with a sense of my condition, and with a true Scripture view of hope founded on the encouragement of the Word of God; and from this time, I may say, I began to have hope that God would hear me."

Now as he reflected on the words of Psalm 50 they began to mean something different to him. Previously the only deliverance he could think of was deliverance from his captivity because the island felt like a prison to him. But now the only deliverance he longed for was deliverance from the downdrag of sin and the prison of his own ego. He no longer thought anything about his solitary existence. That was nothing compared to the weight of his own sinfulness. He found deliverance from sin to "a much greater blessing than deliverance from affliction."

Though Crusoe was still captive on the island, he had found an inner freedom in Jesus and that was what made all the difference. In the end, Crusoe remains on the island for 28 years, but rather than simply trying to avoid death, Crusoe is able to make a life for himself even in his isolation. Even in the midst of intense hardship, he is able to experience true joy and real contentment.

Now do you see the difference? Both of these works of art provide us with a different perspective on the human condition. The message of *Castaway* is that human life is a struggle for survival. If we are going to make it in this world, then we have to rely on our own tenacity, grit, and ingenuity. Love, especially romantic love, may be a great motivator to keep breathing, but even the best of relationships may not be enough to make it through the storm. We need something more enduring even than human love or else we will never

be able to escape the constant threat of loneliness and despair.

The message of *Robinson Crusoe* is that life is a struggle of a different kind. The greatest threat to our well-being does not lie out there but in here. The real challenge is not how we will subdue the forces of nature—whether in the form of a raging sea or a tiny microbe. No, the real challenge is how we can subdue the defect within human nature that prevents us from finding our deepest delight in God alone.

The problem is that we are powerless against this deeper threat. There is nothing we can do to free ourselves from the tentacles of our own sin. We need to be rescued. Apart from Jesus, our case is hopeless. But if we would only ask for help—Jesus by his sheer grace—will do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He can set us free so that we can find a life of abundance even in the midst of affliction and suffering.

So how will you approach your period of confinement—like Chuck Noland or Robinson Crusoe? Will you merely struggle to survive until this period of social isolation is lifted—and yet remain just as directionless when it is all over? Or will you discover the deeper freedom that Jesus offers that renders your outward circumstances of very little concern.

The question is: How can we be **free** even if we have to **stay put**? Jesus answers that question for us in our Scripture passage today which is taken from chapter 15 of the Gospel of John. Here Jesus provides us with the **who**, the **what**, and the **why**. He tells us **who** we are, **what** we need to do, and **why**.

First, the **who**. Here Jesus uses one of his most enduring images in Scripture to tell us who we are in relationship to him. Jesus tells us that he is the true vine and we are the branches. In the Old Testament, the image of a vine was used repeatedly to refer to Israel. So when Jesus says that he is “the true vine” this can only mean that he is the real Israel. He is the one upon whom all of the promises of God are resting—and his followers truly belong to the people of God so long as they remain “in” Jesus.

The image of a vine and branches speaks to the importance of **connection**. We probably understand that even more than we normally do because of our present circumstances. We have a deep sense that we human beings were made for connection. There is a reason why solitary confinement is considered a severe punishment. We long for human contact. But Jesus is telling us that as much as we were made for connection with fellow human beings, ultimately we were made for connection with God. That is the only way for us to truly thrive and flourish.

Think about Jesus’ image. If a branch decides to “go it alone” and tries to live without the vine it will quickly discover its mistake. The branch will wither up and die. And then the only thing it is good for is kindling a fire. The only way for a branch to grow healthy and strong is if it remains connected to the vine. But even so, pruning may be necessary.

Now I am no gardener. Despite valiant efforts, I’ve never been able to keep a plant alive for more than a few weeks so—trust me—you don’t ever want to ask me to take care of your plants. I mean well, but I just can’t do it. But thankfully God the Father is the great vinedresser. He is an expert. And like a true gardener, God knows that vines need to be pruned so that they do not get in their own way and block their own sunlight. They need to be cut back so that they focus the nutrients contained within themselves in order to produce high quality grapes rather than stunting their own growth.

The problem is pruning is not painless. At first sight, it might seem hurtful and counterproductive, but it is necessary. And knowing that can actually be extremely encouraging. Many of us right now may feel like we are experiencing a diminishment to our lives. We are living through a hurtful cutting back. And yet if we

know God can use any and all circumstances to mold and shape us - we can look at these trying circumstances in hope. We can view this as a time of pruning!

Interestingly, the somewhat unusual word Jesus uses for “prune” in verse 2 is very similar to the word he uses for “clean” in verse 3. There is a connection between pruning and the state of being clean before God. Jesus seems to be saying that the disciples have already been “pruned” through the word that Jesus has spoken to them, but they can expect more pruning to come so that they can bear even more fruit.

Notice that it is primarily the Word of Jesus—the gospel—that cuts and cleans his followers—not just our suffering. It is Jesus himself - and not our bad experiences all by themselves - that prune and purify us. The Word of Jesus cuts us to the heart. The gospel reveals to us the reality of who we are and our desperate need for a savior. But when we hear the Word of Jesus—with his death and resurrection at the center—it cuts us back in order to make us whole. When we receive the gospel for ourselves, we can rest assured that we have been cleansed in an ultimate sense and our relationship with God is secure. But God will continue to use the word of gospel to cut away lesser loves and loyalties. He will cut out competing goals and ambitions and train us to fix our hearts and minds on Jesus above all else.

If that is who we are, then **what** are we supposed to do? Jesus describes our condition in stark terms. He is the vine. We are the branches. A branch cannot survive if it is not connected to the vine. Likewise, we can do nothing apart from him. We can do nothing—nothing that will truly last—apart from him. So what are we supposed to do? We are supposed to abide in Jesus. We are supposed to remain in him. In other words, we are supposed to stay put.

That’s why I chose this Scripture passage for today. We’ve been told to stay home at least until May 15. In a different way, Jesus is telling us to stay put and to stick with him. Our Stay-at-Home orders may feel like a kind of captivity or imprisonment, but staying put in Jesus is the way to true freedom and true flourishing.

The word Jesus uses that is translated as “Abide” is related to the English word “Abode.” In other words, Jesus is inviting us to make or home in him. In fact, he is promising that if we do—then almost everything else will take care of itself.

That was the difference between Robinson Crusoe and Chuck Noland. Both endured a long period of solitary confinement, but only Crusoe made his home in Jesus and therefore he was never alone—not even on a deserted island.

One morning he was feeling depressed and sad, and he opened up his Bible and read Hebrews 13: “I will never, never leave you, nor forsake you.” And immediately he sensed that those words were directed to him. If God will never leave us, then what does it matter if all the world forsakes us. On the other hand, if we had all the world, but lost God, it would never be worth the cost. As a result, he realized that he could be “more happy in [that] forsaken, solitary condition” than anywhere else in the world, and he actually gave thanks to God for bringing him to the island. He might have lost contact with the rest of the world, but he gained a connection with Jesus and that was better by far.

So how do we **stay put** in Jesus? How do we make our home in him? Jesus gives us several ideas to work with in this passage. We root ourselves in Jesus by listening to his word as it is read and preached, by talking to him in prayer, and by responding to his commands. When we allow the word of Jesus to cut and cleanse us, when we make our requests known to him, and when we demonstrate our love for him by doing what he says then we can be sure that we have made our home in Jesus. That’s how we know we have placed him at the center. He has become the basis of our life and our identity.

One final point. **Why** should we do it? Because apart from him we can do nothing. This is the only way that we will thrive as human beings. This is the only way that we will bear fruit and flourish in the way that God intends. This is the only way to experience joy. Jesus wants our joy to be full and it can only be found ultimately in him. If we stay put in Jesus, then no matter where we are or what hardships we encounter, we know that we are always home and in him we know that we will thrive rather than wither—no matter what challenges we face.

So let me return to the question with which I began. How are you using your period of confinement? Is this going to make you or break you? Who are you becoming? Will you remain directionless after this is all over? OR will you possibly even thank God for your social isolation because through it you have learned to stay put in Jesus?

I know this is hard. I know this is requiring more sacrifice than we were prepared to give—but look at Jesus. He too went through a period of pruning. Even though he was God’s perfect Son and had done absolutely nothing wrong, he experienced diminishment and loss. He was abandoned by his friends. He was cut down by his enemies. He was even cut off from the Father. From the cross, he cries, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But he did it all for you. He bore your sins as your substitute. He was forsaken in your place so that he can promise that he will never, never leave you or forsake you.

On that lonely hill, Jesus was hung on a tree that had been stripped of all its branches. But that pruning gave way to an empty tomb and new life three days later. The tree that Jesus planted on calvary now has shoots growing all over the world and nothing can ever stop it. As for Jesus, so for his followers. Something comparably amazing and life-giving awaits all those who stay put in Jesus—on the other side of their own periods of pruning.

Father, we pray that you would help us to abide, to stay put, to stick with Jesus so that we might experience the greatest of all deliverances—the deliverance from sin and death—and learn to find true joy and contentment in him no matter what the outward circumstances of our life might be. We ask this in Jesus’ name and for his sake. Amen.