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**We Don't Know What's Going to
Happen and That's Okay**

◦ SUBTITLE

Living in Holy Uncertainty

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● **EBOOK 1**

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We Don't Know What's Going to Happen and That's Okay
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Start

You just lost your job, the economy is in the worst slump since the Great Depression, and you have no idea how long it will take to get another.

You're a small business owner, and you just finished a remodel on a beautiful new storefront, but you have no idea how long it will be until you're able to open – if you're able to open at all.

You're an entrepreneur, and you have no clue if your dream will ever make it off the ground.

You're engaged, but instead of walking down the aisle at your idyllic venue of choice with hundreds of family and friends, your wedding is shaping up to involve matching masks and a link to Zoom.

You're a grandparent, and you have no idea how long it will be until you can plop your grandchild on your lap and make strawberry pancakes.

You work at a church, by definition a *gathering of people*, and you have no idea how long it will be until you can come back together again for worship.

That feeling in your body – that cocktail of fear and grief and confusion – is uncertainty. And uncertainty is more than the sum of its parts. It's not just *un-*certainty, or the *absence* of certainty; it's the *presence* of fear, an unnamed dread, a waiting for the other shoe to drop.

We in the West have a very low tolerance for uncertainty. Most of us grew up on a steady diet of charts and graphs and progress reports and projections.

People who grow up in poverty or in a war zone, or people who experience

trauma as a child or who are diagnosed with Leukemia as a teen – they are way ahead of us. They know how to make peace with uncertainty.

But most of us – especially those of us who grew up in the middle class, and/or majority culture, like myself – are used to *feeling* in control, used to planning for our future, used to a sense of forward motion year over year. Granted, control is an illusion, but the *feeling* of control sure is nice. When I feel in control, I don't have to live by faith.

And we all resist living by faith.

But any sense of control went out the window the day COVID-19 hit our city.

For me, it was Thursday, March 12. I was sitting in my office writing a teaching for that coming Sunday when the news alert hit: Governor Kate Brown of Oregon had put a ban on gatherings over two hundred and fifty people. By Sunday, it was down to twenty-five. Then it was down to *two*. Within days, the shelves of our favorite grocery store were almost bare. It was like living through an apocalyptic movie. Fear had gripped the heart of our entire nation, if not the world. None of us had experienced anything like this.

Now, months into the pandemic (and much more), the future is still up in the air.

There is just so much we don't know:

We don't know how many people have been infected with the novel coronavirus.

We don't know what percentage of people are asymptomatic and/or have antibodies – or if antibodies even matter.

We still don't know what the death rate is or the level of threat.

We don't know if the virus will mutate and peter out or keep raging like a fire.

We don't know what effect, if any, the different seasons will have on the virus.

We don't know when a vaccine will be ready – or how effective it will be.

We don't know if the economy will follow a U curve or a V, if we're heading into multi-year recession, or *depression*, or if everything will come roaring back with the vaccine.

We don't know what long-term effects this will have on the world. Is international travel over or just on pause? What about globalism? The handshake?

We don't know the long-term effects of social distancing. Will it bring us back together with a new post-Zoom value for embodiment, or drive us further into individualism and isolationism?

We don't know what effect the virus and the economic fallout and not being able to gather will have on the church. Will it make us stronger and more unified than ever? Or injure us? Make us easy prey for the enemy? Who will still be left standing when the storm is over?

And we don't know if this will last months – or years.

Now, there are a lot of very smart people out there telling us how things will go, and some of them will be right. The trick is, we don't know who.

Politicians have an angle, pundits want our attention, and the media is making millions off our fear. Granted, there are good politicians who are providing spiritual leadership in a time of crisis; there are highly intelligent experts who are giving us a rough estimate of what to expect; and journalism is a noble profession with thousands of women and men who have set a new standard for integrity.

But are they the majority?

From time immemorial, humans have dealt with fear by searching out fortunetellers, soothsayers, shamans, prophets, priests, people who claim to have seen a vision. Even if they proffer doom and gloom, at least we can prepare for the worst. Because (so the thinking goes, even if it's unconscious) if we can know the future, then we can *feel* in control and safe.

But even the best experts, with no agenda, just don't know how this will go. As one doctor said to me recently, "It's all just educated conjecture."

In psycho-spiritual language, it's a grasping for control.

The Issue of Control

Psychologists differentiate between grief and trauma. One difference is time: grief is in the past, but trauma is ongoing. But the main difference is intensity. And most psychologists categorize COVID-19 as trauma. And the hallmark feeling of trauma is *powerlessness*, feeling like you have no control over your pain. And when people feel powerless, they often grasp for control.

Here are a few common examples we see in the news every single day:

01. **Blaming:** If we can find a scapegoat to blame the trauma on – China or President Trump or liberal elites or the media – then we can feel in control.
02. **Magical thinking:** If we can believe a fantasy – "It's just the flu," "Take this pill and you're safe," or, "Faith over fear" – then, again, we can *feel* in control.
03. **Prediction:** If we can predict the future, then we can feel in control

of the future. We've all become armchair experts, even though true epidemiologists don't even agree.

04. **Alarmism:** If I had a dollar for every time I've heard somebody say, "The world will never be the same," I'd be a wealthy man. That could be true or not. After 9/11, people got back on airplanes. After the Spanish Flu, people came back to church buildings. In fact, it was followed by the highest church attendance in American history and the rise of the megachurch movement. *We just don't know.* But again, if we can see the future cataclysm, then we can feel safe when it comes.

And then there are the far more common examples of obsessive behavior in everyday life:

- Reading and/or watching the news ten times a day.
- Exercising and dieting to the nth degree.
- Cleaning and/or organizing your home constantly.
- Being tyrannical with your kids and/or uptight with your spouse.

The common denominator underneath all of these examples is a futile attempt to control something that is far beyond our control. We can't control a virus/a nation state/a global economy/natural disasters like fires/etc., so we attempt to emotionally compensate by grasping for something we *can* control.

But what if it's *okay* that we're not in control?

What if the uncertainty of life with the new coronavirus could be one of the best things to ever happen to our spiritual formation?

What if, when we tell the story of our life in old age, and people asked what it was that made us who we are, we answered, “Living through 2020”?

For a long time, my working theory has been that control is the issue underneath so many of the issues that block and hamper and derail our spiritual formation into people of love and joy and peace.

For sure, it's *the* growth edge for my personality type and personal spiritual journey, but with each passing year in my work as a pastor, I am further convinced that it's the issue for *most* followers of Jesus.

In the Christian tradition, there are three theological virtues – faith, hope, and love. “Theological” means having to do with God, and “virtues” mean they are not just feelings, but rather something we nurture, feed, grow, and exercise as a part of our apprenticeship to Jesus. We become the kinds of people who live with faith – a deep confidence in Jesus and his mental maps to reality. With hope – an expectation of coming good based on the person and promises of Jesus. And love – a compassionate commitment to delight in the soul of another and to will their good ahead of your own.

Control is incompatible with all three.

Faith: Controlling people do not live with a deep trust and steady confidence in God's goodness and involvement in their life. Rather, they are anxious and uptight and on edge. Anxiety, as human as it is, is a kind of temporary atheism, a suspension of faith in God.

Hope: Controlling people are not full of hope for God's future, but rather live in a vicious cycle of planning for *their* future, followed by disappointment when their plans go belly up. (Disappointment, by the way, is generally a sign of misplaced hope. It's an emotional signal from our body that's telling us our hope was set on the wrong object.)

Love: Above all, controlling people are not loving. They (and by “they,” I mean “I”) dominate and manipulate and bully other people to get them to behave the way I think they need to behave in order for me to feel okay, rather than love and accept and delight in people as they *are*, and honor the dignity of their free will.

This is *very* hard for me.

I am what you would call a recovering control freak (or maybe still a control freak?). If you’re familiar with Myers-Briggs, I’m a very high J. I’m a die-hard planner. I literally sit down the night before a day off and plan out my day hour by hour. I’m the consummate perfectionist. I don’t have full blown OCD, but to quote my doctor, I have “obsessive tendencies.” My house is *very* clean.

Is that all bad?

Not really. A modicum of discipline is a very good thing; but discipline (for personality types like mine) can actually hamper our growth into people of faith, hope, and love, because it can become a form of grasping for control – over our morning routine, our schedule, even our spiritual disciplines. And while that’s not all bad, it’s dangerous because it’s easy to then buy into the fantasy that we are in control of our *life* as a whole. Or even worse, in control of our relationship with God. When the reality is, we’re not.

Recently, a psychologist told me he estimated the average Western person has 15 percent of the control over their life they think they do.

Cue the litany of emotional reactions we see every day – the anxiety epidemic, depression, outrage culture, road rage, midlife crisis, workaholism, political fury, etc.

Turns out, it’s not just me: Control is the base problem for many of us.

So is there another way to deal with the uncertainty of life *besides* grasping for control? And to come out the other side of COVID-19 with a new reservoir of faith and hope and love to draw on?

Yes.

And the best paradigm I can think of in Scripture is the story of Israel in the desert.

God, Israel, and the Desert

Listen to the beginning of the story:

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, “If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.” So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle (Exodus 13:17-18).

Notice that God does not take Israel from Egypt to Canaan by the direct route. Instead, he takes them out into the desert. The main road, called the Via Maris, went straight north through Philistine territory. But God takes them southeast along the Suez Canal – *literally in the wrong direction* – out to the desert of Mt. Sinai.

He did this simply because they were not ready to reach their destination. They *thought* they were ready – “The Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle” – but they were not. So God takes them into the desert for two things – testing and teaching.

In the Exodus narrative, there are Ten Commandments and then ten *tests* for Israel to see if she's ready for a new life in Canaan. Everyone but Joshua and Caleb fail all ten tests. They aren't ready.

Which is why next comes the Torah, a Hebrew word meaning "teaching," to show Israel the way forward. This same Torah now comes to us as the first five books of Scripture, a forever memorial to Israel's time in the desert.

But it took time for the testing and teaching to take effect on Israel's formation. Scholars argue the direct route north was an eleven-day journey by foot. But God takes them into the desert for (depending on how you do the math) about two years. It *ends up* being forty years due to Israel's choice to follow Joshua over the Jordan River, but in a hypothetical scenario where that never happened, God still had them make an eleven-day journey over two years.

Could it be that the journey is more important than the destination? That *who we are* is more important than *where we are*?

Keep reading:

After leaving Sukkoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people (Exodus 13:20-22).

Next, notice that God does not give Israel a map and a schedule; instead, he gives them his Presence as a guide.

As part of my work as a writer and teacher, I get to travel around the world and speak. Because much of my work is about the intersection of

post-Christian culture and practicing the way of Jesus, I end up in some very special places, including Reykjavik, Iceland; Cape Town, South Africa; and Auckland, New Zealand. Any time I travel to somewhere new, I schedule in a day or two to see the sights, walk the city, drive outside the city limits, and study the culture. Most of the time, locals make a few recommendations where to visit, and my son (my constant traveling companion) and I pull them up on our phones' maps app and follow the prompts. We plan out our day based on the algorithm predicted travel time, and we get as much in as we have time for.

But sometimes a guide will accompany us, someone from the church or event we visit will offer to take us around the city or on a long drive. This is a categorically different experience. When they pick us up, we generally have little to no idea where we are going, what the journey is like, or how long we will be gone. They just tell us what time to be ready by.

It's a relationship of trust. If I can bring myself to *trust* this wisdom and leadership, then I can relax, enjoy their company, and spend the day listening to their wisdom and knowledge of history, culture, geography, etc. It's riveting.

To play out the metaphor, God is a guide, not a map. He doesn't hand out step-by-step directions and a schedule and leave us to go off on our own. He's *with* his people, out in front, a step ahead.

One more thought from the story:

The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you

have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”

Then the Lord said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days.”...

Then Moses told Aaron, “Say to the entire Israelite community, ‘Come before the Lord, for he has heard your grumbling.’”

While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the Lord appearing in the cloud.

The Lord said to Moses, “I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, ‘At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.’”

That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What is it?” [Or *manna* in Hebrew] For they did not know what it was (Exodus 16:1-5, 9-15)

God does not give them a farm or a grocery store or a supply chain; he provides *manna*, what Jesus later called “daily bread.” Just enough for one day at a time.

There were three invitations from God to Israel in the desert:

01. To camp around his presence and trust him to lead and guide them through the desert to Canaan.
02. To let his testing and teaching form them into people who were ready for the next chapter in their story.
03. To live gratefully one day at a time on manna.

But what happened?

They did *not* trust and follow him. Instead, they refused to cross the Jordan because there were giants in the land.

They did not let his testing and teaching form them. Instead, they were a “stiff necked” people, meaning, they were stubborn. The opposite of open and pliable in God’s hand.

And they did not live gratefully. They grumbled over and over again.

We can learn so much from Israel’s sojourn in the desert, as it was a time of transition from Egypt to Canaan and, like all transitions, a time of great uncertainty.

COVID-19 is a kind of involuntary desert. There’s a stripping away right now of all the “peace and prosperity” we’re used to – many of us are left bare and exposed to our anxiety and attachments.

We’re all living through the transition from a pre- to post-COVID world. It’s a time of great uncertainty, not just with the virus, but with the economy, politics, and the future of democracy itself no longer being an assumption.

But transitions like the one we’re living through can be extraordinary times for growth. Developmental psychologists call transitions “liminal spaces,” where you are *between* one safe place and another, in the dangerous crossing.

Pastor Pete Scazzero calls transitions “the confusing in-between.” My fellow pastor Bethany Allan calls them “the neutral zone.”

Whatever you call the current situation, most experts argue that “the confusing in-between” almost always takes longer than we expect and is harder than we want.

But all the experts agree: the confusing in-between, with all its uncertainty, is where God does some of his best work.

I’m thinking of 2020-21 as our year in the desert, in the confusing in-between. I would far rather take the direct route north in eleven days! Instead, here we are, waiting on God to pastor us through the barren landscape of our time.

I believe God extends the same three invitations to us now as he did to Israel then:

01. To camp around God’s presence and trust him to lead and guide us through COVID-19 and our season of socio-political unrest.

Put another way, to ground ourselves in God and his peace. Or in Jesus’ language, “to abide.” To “make our home in.” To come to rest in God and let God come to rest in us. We do this through a rule of life and practices like morning prayer, Scripture reading, and sabbath, which are means to the end of living in what A.W. Tozer called “constant conscious communion.” What a trellis is to a vine, a rule is to our abiding in God.

As we make our home in God, we wait on his direction. Experts on transitions see liminal space as a rite of passage – say, from boyhood to manhood in a traditional culture – and argue that we need a guide to navigate from one stage to the next.

The beautiful, but terrifying, reality of free will is that we all get to choose our guide – be it God, our news outlet of choice, a political party, or just the anxious voice in our head. The invitation of God is to choose his Spirit as our guide and his people, the church, as our traveling companions.

02. To let God form us into people who are ready for whatever is next.

To open our inner hearts to the surgical, healing work of the Spirit; to cooperate with his work in our soul, not close off, or resist his will, or anesthetize the pain of change, but to let God cut deep, and make us whole.

03. To live gratefully one day at a time.

At the risk of over-spiritualizing it, to live on manna. Meaning, to live off a prophetic word from God, or a promise from Scripture, or a sense of assurance in our inner landscape. And at a more tangible level, to live off his literal provision over our life – food for *that* day, a roof over our head for *that* night.

It's funny how often we vow to give God our future! Often with a wave of emotion and sense of heroic aplomb, but the future is easy to give God for the simple fact that *we don't have it*.

All we have is today – with all it's good and all its trouble.

We must fight off the urge to grumble, and instead, give thanks for our daily bread. Literal and figurative.

In the language of the serenity prayer, “Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardship as a pathway to peace.”

And the *only* way to do this is through what the mystics have long called “holy uncertainty.”

Holy Uncertainty

Holy uncertainty is the capacity to live with a very loose grip – or no grip at all – on our plans and, more important, on the *outcomes* of our plans, because our security is rooted in a relational connection to God, not in a false sense of control.

Apprentices of Jesus who develop his capacity for holy uncertainty still make plans, but they are free – at an emotional level – from the need for those plans to come to pass. They don't need to know what will happen, or not happen, or how long it will all take, because they are happy in God.

The mystics argue holy uncertainty is one of the reasons God takes so many through what St. John of the Cross called “the dark night of the soul” – a desert-like season of dry, arid spirituality where there's a stripping down of our emotional enjoyment of God himself, not in cruelty, but in love. The dark night is designed by our Guide to to set us free from our fear-based need for control.

In the dark night, we realize that we're not in control of our relationship with God; God is.

We come to accept that Christian spirituality is not a formula for happiness or a self-improvement project or a religion (in the negative sense of that word); it's a relationship of rescue. And we're not in charge of that relationship or our rescue.

Scholars point out that two-thirds of the psalms are lament, a kind of prayerful protest against God over evil. Most of them resolve at the end of the lament, but many don't resolve. They don't end on a happy note.

The psalms we read in the dark night are the ones that don't resolve. They don't end with, *Things were really bad, but it all worked out*. They end with, *God, things are really bad, and I don't see your hand at work, but I trust you*.

If we can get *there*, if we can make peace with the inevitable uncertainty of life, then we can live with serenity right in the middle of the desert. Or the political turmoil and chaos.

It's interesting that if we keep reading Exodus 16, after the manna story comes the introduction of sabbath. It's a way of saying that if we can live one day at a time, in grateful trust, we can not only survive the desert of uncertainty, but we can actually *thrive* in it, with entire days of delight and joy.

All that to say: we have an incredible opportunity with COVID-19.

It's said that the WW2 generation was the most relaxed and happy generation in American history. (Happiness levels peaked in America in the decade after the war.)

Experts also claim that Millennials and Gen Z – who grew up with more security than any generation in American history – are the most anxious generation of all time.

As Shakespeare put it in *Macbeth*, Security “is mortals’ chiefest enemy.”

And while our suffering pales in comparison to living through WW2, still there's still an opportunity here that most generations don't get until later in life.

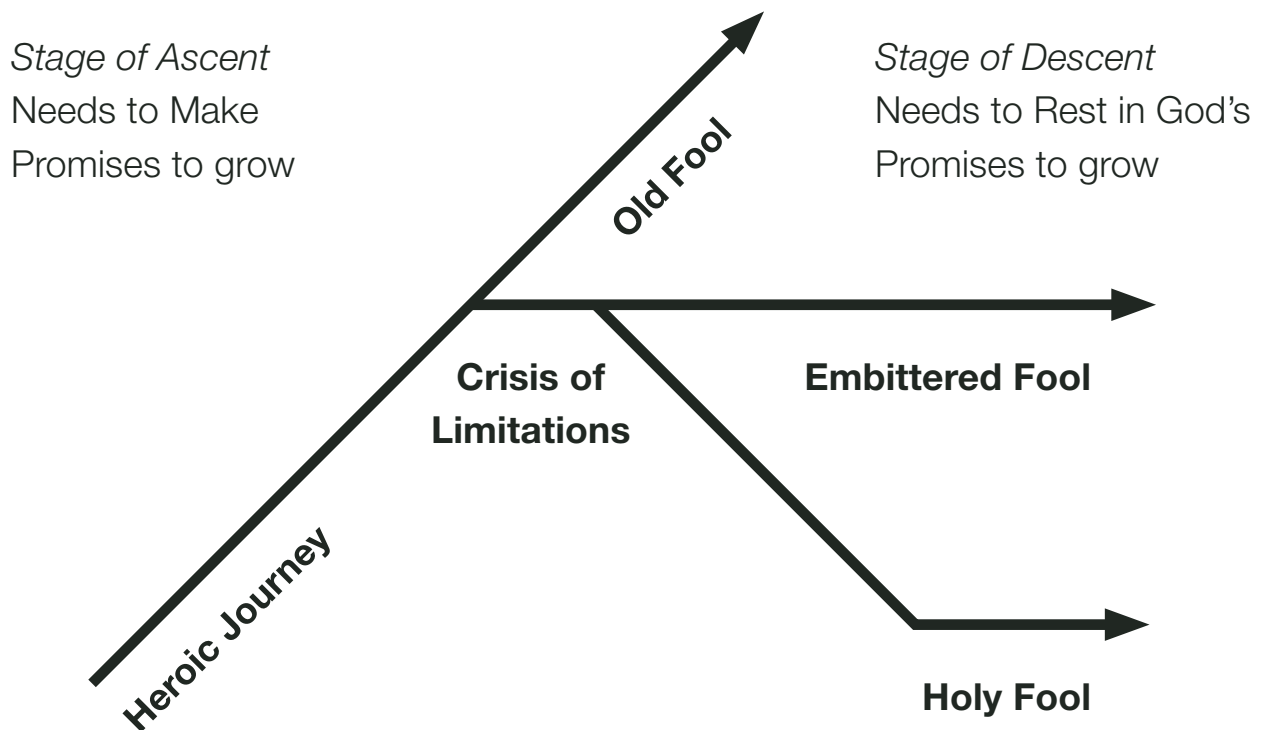
While some people get to holy uncertainty at a younger age, due to war or poverty or a trauma like cancer, most of us don't even receive an invitation until the second half of life, when we have to face the reality of an aging body or our mortality. The reality of the mistakes of our past or the fact that some

things are broken beyond repair. The reality that life is not always an upward climb to greater levels of success.

There's a field of Christian research called "stage theory," which is basically a fusion of developmental psychology and Christian spirituality. One common framework in stage theory is the idea of first and second half of life. As a general rule, the second half of life is less linear, less about upward mobility, less about grasping for control, and more about surrender, about character over career, about the inner journey of the soul back to God.

Morris Dirks, a spiritual director and writer, uses this diagram to explain the spiritual journey in the second half, which I find very helpful:

Spirituality and the Two Halves of Life



When we're young, we have this sense of upward mobility and forward motion. We think that the sky is the limit. But then, at some point, we all hit a crisis of limitation. We're fired from a job we love, or our career stalls out, or we go through a divorce, or a problem with a child, or the death of a loved one – any number of things.

When that happens, there are three trajectories:

01. **Some people become “the old fool.”** They keep living in the fantasy of upward mobility. In the '80s, it was the stereotype of the wannabe Magnum P.I. dude with chest hair, a gold medallion, and a convertible Porsche. Today, it's the stereotype is of an abrupt divorce and running off to marry someone younger or new.
02. **Far more people become “the embittered fool.”** They just settle. Watch Netflix. Drink. Plateau. Criticize the people who actually try to keep going up the mountain. Become cynical.
03. **But a precious few become “the holy fool.”** They accept the invitation to go on the inward journey; they discover – or rediscover – what life is all about. As Jesus put it in Eugene Peterson's translation of Matthew 11, they “live freely and lightly.”

I say that because right now, our entire generation is receiving the invitation to go on the inner journey *now*.

As a nineteen-year-old college student who's had to move home and live with your parents ...

As a twentysomething couple who is cooped up and dealing with the reality of your marriage ...

As a thirtysomething business owner who is watching it all crumble ...

As a forty-year-old pastor who is cooped up with your family, realizing there are ways of being in your relational soul that are injurious, and if they don't change very soon, will cause permanent damage to a family ...

We're all receiving an invitation to go on the inner journey. To step off the mountain and into the valley.

Much of the growth into maturity is about receiving invitations with grace. As Ronald Rolheiser put it in *Sacred Fire*, his book on the second half of life:

“We mature by meeting life, just as God and nature designed it, and accepting there the invitations that beckon us ever deeper into the heart of life itself.”

This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to accept the invitations of Jesus into holy uncertainty, and in the desert of COVID-19, to let God form us into people of faith and hope and love.

What's ahead for America? For the world?

I don't know.

Nobody does.

And as much as it cuts against the grain of my personality, I'm becoming okay with that.

It's often said that if you get cancer, the best doctors are not the ones who are the smartest or the most proficient at predictions; the best doctors are the ones who say, *There are a few different ways it could go ... And I don't know what will happen, but I'm with you.*

The same could be said for the rest of us.

Some of the most liberating, honest, kind words we can say to each other in

this season are, *I don't know. But God is with us, and we're together, in holy uncertainty. And that's okay.*

Holy Uncertainty and Planning

To clarify: Holy uncertainty doesn't mean we don't plan for the future. It just means we make our plans, but we let go of outcomes at an emotional level. We strategize and do our best, but we make peace with the fact that we're not in control of what happens, and that's okay.

Currently, I find planning to be an exercise in comedy. I have no clue what the coming year will look like. As a pastor, I *have* to plan – at least attempt to plan – for various possible scenarios. What do we do if we can't gather for a year? Two years? What if we can only meet in groups of 50? 100? 200? What if we enter an economic depression? Part of my job is to have a rough plan for each possibility. But this isn't an attempt at control; it's just an attempt to live and lead in a way that is responsive, but not reactive.

As Eisenhower said after WW2, "In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable."

Planning is a great way to prepare myself for the uncertainty of the future, so I respond, not react. But when I finish my scenario planning, all I can do is close the Evernote file, chuckle, and go have dinner with my family. I have no idea if any of it will even happen.

As James put it:

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life?

You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.”
(James 4v13-15 NIV)

So make your plans. Diagram it all out. Get your life ready.

But then set your plans down. Have a good laugh. Detach from outcomes.

Tether yourself instead to God’s presence and peace.

Breath.

And take it one day at a time.

◉ THANKS FOR READING

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