

“Living in the Meantime”

2 Corinthians 5:6-9, 18-21

What do Prince Harry, Elon Musk, T.S Eliot, Ashley Judd, Matthew McConaughey, Emma Watson, and Hugh Jackman have in common?

They all took a gap year, or a year off to study abroad. (A gap year is an interim period typically between high school and the first year of college). It is now mid-June. High school seniors got their diplomas within the past three weeks. And many of them are now on “gap.”

There’s even an organization — the Gap Year Association — to help students who want to take a gap year. The association emphasizes that a gap year is not a year off, but a year on.

This is a critical insight for our discussion of today’s reading from 2 Corinthians. During a gap year, students are “living in the meantime,” that is, between the end of high school and the beginning of college. It can be *important time*, *valuable time*, or *time frittered away, sometimes for years*.

Our two oldest children, Rachel, and Nathan, didn’t take a gap year, going straight from high school to college. Rachel continued on, earning her master’s degree as did I. Our youngest child, Micah, did 8 gap years, before deciding college wasn’t for him and getting a full-time job and getting married in August. His gap years have finally come to an end!

In a sense, gap year kids are living in the meantime. They’re living between the past and their future. They’re in a twilight zone which they know will not last forever, which is fortunate because, like the twilight zone, some weird stuff often happens. Sometimes the weird stuff is what others simply call “growing”.

The apostle Paul has an interesting take on this thing we call life. For him, his life was a “gap life.” That is, it was life in parentheses, life in the meantime before the kingdom of heaven. It was life before life. He writes, “While we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord ... we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him” (vv. 6, 8-9).

Paul is living in the meantime. What does “meantime” mean?

Meantime is a period of time between *now* and *then*.

You’re at the airport early. You’ve checked in, paid all the extra fees, cleared security and now you’re putting your clothes back on. This is the “now” part. Your flight doesn’t leave for another 90 minutes. That’s the “then” part. So, between the *now* and the *then*, you decide to get a bite to eat at a little café and check your email. Perhaps you have a little work to do. You might read a book. You’re living in the meantime.

Paul was, too. His flight was not scheduled to leave quite yet. In fact, he didn’t know when he would be pushing back from the gate. In his letter to the Philippians, he says that he’s packed and ready, but he suspects a delay: “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. *I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.* Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.” (Philippians 1:21-26).

Notice his comment about being “pressed between the two.” He knew that he was living in the *now*, even though he preferred the *then*. For him, it was a choice not his to make, between life or death.

For us, living in the meantime does not involve this choice, one would hope. Often, we feel that we’re on a treadmill. Or perhaps we have a sense in the pit of our stomachs, or in some profound place in our heart, that we’re becalmed on a sea of uncertainty. We’re stuck. The winds aren’t blowing; we’re going nowhere, or at least that’s how it feels.

The apostle didn’t feel this way. In prison, he was doing time, but it wasn’t a bad time. And even when he wasn’t in prison, life was no bed of roses. He was beaten, abused, shipwrecked and more. Living in the meantime for him meant living in some mean times.

But he *did not regard his gap life to be an empty life*. Quite the contrary: he thought of down time as up time with the Lord and to go back to that insight that *a gap year is not a year off, but a year on*. Every year of his Christian life was a “year on” for the apostle Paul. And it can be for us, as well.

Unless we don’t have a mission.

No doubt there are some high school students who will fritter away a gap year, using it as an excuse to be lazy. Most, however, have a plan.

The apostle Paul did. He was quite clear about the mission of his gap life, or of his “living in the meantime.” In the meantime, while awaiting his death or the return of Jesus Christ, he definitely had work to do. And there were people who needed him to fulfill his mission.

To learn more about his sense of purpose, we need to move to verses 18-21. There we learn that Paul sees his mission as that of an ambassador working in the area of reconciliation. He “entreats,” according to verse 20. He explicitly calls himself an “ambassador” (v. 20). And his message is reconciliation. His mission while living in the meantime is to urge people to be reconciled to God.

Obviously, he believes that people are unaware that God no longer has an issue with them. We have been reconciled to God, through Jesus Christ, “that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (v. 19).

This is good news for people who are ignorant of this. So, Paul’s mission is to tell them: “Hey, God has no beef with you! Why not be reconciled? Reach out. God’s ready to receive you as one of his own children.”

So, Paul works as an ambassador for the kingdom of God. His work is to get people to turn their faces to God and have a fresh start. “So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (v. 17).

This was *his* mission; it might not be yours. But when you’re living in the meantime, when you’re going through an interlude because of sickness, a layoff, an economic downturn, or a failed relationship just what *is* your mission? What’s the plan?

We can’t possibly think that God’s plan, God’s will, or God’s purpose for us is aimlessness, confusion, and despair, can we?

Is there a secret to successful living when we're caught between parentheses, in no man's land, in a spiritual demilitarized zone?

Yes, and Paul mentions it in our reading for today. It's buried in the early verses of the passage. It's easy to miss, but it's there.

The Bible's advice about living successfully in the meantime was a major theme for the apostle Paul. It was a tune he played continually, and it dominates his writings.

In our text, he reveals the mystery in verses 6 and 7: "So we are always confident."

Why?

"For we walk by faith, not by sight."

As Cooper and Zoey Robinson are baptized this morning into the Christian faith, their parents, family, and this congregation are promising to be examples for them of "walking by faith." Parents Marcus and Sarah are in that "in between time" between having no children and having three teenagers. Savor and enjoy your "in between time" for we walk by faith.

For the apostle Paul, *it is always about faith*. He isn't saying we should fake it until we make it. Rather, he simply urges us to recall our core values and begin to live by them. He's convinced that when we do this, our purpose and mission will reveal itself.

For an illustration of this, let's turn from faith to football, and football's greatest ever ambassador and apostle, the person after whom the Super Bowl trophy is named: Vince Lombardi. A trophy that we hope will be Cleveland's a year from now.

In his best-selling biography of Lombardi, David Maraniss pinpoints the moment the Green Bay Packers began to march to greatness. It began the summer of 1961. The Packers had lost the 1960 championship game against the Philadelphia Eagles when they squandered a fourth-quarter lead.

Lombardi opened camp. He knew the players were brooding about that loss. They wanted to sharpen their skills. They wanted to take their game to the next level. They were living in the meantime, that time between their humiliating defeat and the moment, still in the future, when they would hoist the trophy. They were so close, they felt it. To a man, everyone believed this.

Except Lombardi.

When the players came into camp that summer, he regarded each of them as a blank or clean slate. He was going to start over with these kids. Maraniss writes: “He took nothing for granted. He began a tradition of starting from scratch, assuming that the players were blank slates who carried over no knowledge from the year before ... He began with the most elemental statement of all. ‘Gentlemen,’ he said, holding a pigskin in his right hand, ‘this is a football.’”

He took the team back to the fundamentals. He taught them how to block and tackle. And under Lombardi’s tutelage, they never lost another playoff game. They beat the New York Giants 37-0 that year, and they won five championships in seven years, and three in a row during one stretch. And he never coached a team with a losing record.

“Fundamentals first,” said coach Lombardi.

“Faith first,” says the apostle Paul, because faith is the fundamental secret or key. Paul holds up faith like Lombardi held a football: “Friends in Christ, this is faith. Walk by it. Hold on to it. Don’t drop it or let it slip from your grasp like the “fumble”. Cling tightly to it. Defend it from all attacks. Believe in it. Carry it, and it will carry you to victory!”

Most high school students who take a gap year do so voluntarily. But life doesn’t always work that way, does it? Sometimes, we have no choice. A gap life is thrust upon us. Something happens, Sarah and Marcus know what happened, and suddenly we are living between two points: what was, and what we hope will be. Meanwhile, we’ve got to figure this out.

Paul walked by faith, and so can we. Paul was an ambassador for Jesus Christ, and his mission was to reconcile people to God. The fundamental truth to which we must cling is that God does have a purpose for us, and God is working out that purpose right now one day at a time.

May the peace of God . . .

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