

Back in October, we started exploring the idea that when we choose to follow Jesus, we become a part of a new culture - the Kingdom of God. And that new culture has a different set of values, a different way we are to live, than the suburban American culture we've grown up in. We spent a month talking about the new culture we're a part of, what it means to live as an Exile, as a stranger in a strange land.

Through this discussion of being Exiles, what we've really been discussing for the last couple of months is cultural change. And in this discussion, a guy named Andy Crouch points to a massive change in American culture in the last 50 years that most of us never even think about - Interstate Highways. Believe it or not, the Interstate is a great example of the changes our culture has experienced in the last 100 years.

Construction on the Interstate Highway system began in 1956, but the initial planned system wasn't completed until 20 years ago, in 1992. So try to imagine life 50 years ago, before the interstate. And 100 years ago before cars were everywhere.

Before the Interstate, traveling long distances by car wasn't nearly as convenient. And getting goods from other places took longer, was more expensive. For a lot of stuff, we just made do with what we could get locally.

The Interstate system has dramatically shrunk our country. It's technically possible to drive from one coast to the other - Boston, MA to Seattle, WA in 50 hours on *one road*. 3,000 miles on I-90. That would've been a whole different story before the Interstate, let alone before cars. Which means that before Interstates, most people lived right next to where they worked. And most people never moved very far from where they were born. But the Interstate changed all that. Now the average commute time is more than 45 minutes.

The Interstate changed how we travel. It changed how we buy and ship goods. And how we live. Not just as individuals, but as a culture.

It changed how we think of family. The Interstate made it easier than ever to move further away. In fact, the so-called breakdown of the nuclear family coincides with the rise of the Interstate system.

How many of us drive on an Interstate at least once a day? Most but certainly not all of us. How many of us use an interstate if we want to visit family or friends? And how many of us wear clothes or eat food that was delivered on a truck that used the interstate? That's all of us.

The Interstate dramatically changed our culture, how we even think about what our country and culture *is*.

As with all change, the Interstate system made some things impossible even as it introduced new possibilities. Before the Interstate, and especially before the automobile, people traveled mostly on horseback if they were going long distances. In every town, inns would have stables for travelers' horses.

Can you imagine what it was like when our country was first founded? Could you imagine telling George Washington and John Adams that if they took turns driving and had plenty of Red Bull, they could make it to the Pacific Ocean in a little over two days?

But that they wouldn't be able to stable their horses anywhere? Because it's just not really possible to travel long distances by horseback anymore. The interstate has made that impossible. And we laugh. We say, who would want to travel by horseback instead of car? But in 1903, when Henry Ford's lawyer was considering investing in Ford Motor Company, he was told,

“The horse is here to stay but the automobile is only a novelty, a fad.”

Whoops. Transportation changed. And with that change, some old, trusted cultural institutions died. But some new things that were previously totally impossible – like traveling long distances quickly, transporting lots of stuff cheaply, etc. – are now possible.

That's the way of change. All change brings new possibilities, but also brings loss. New roads open because old roads close.

And so when we become Exiles, when we choose to follow Jesus, we actually experience loss. The way we've lived before, the values we had - even if they weren't always the best, they gave us a sense of safety and security. They felt "normal" to us. And when we lose that, it's normal to grieve. So for the last month, we've been exploring the reactions we have to grief - denial that anything has changed. Anger at the loss we experience. A sense of bargaining, feeling that things aren't fair. And last week we looked at despair, that sense of hopelessness that comes after the denial and anger and indignation.

We found that the emotions we feel, the confusion and loss we're experiencing are actually happening at a cultural level. As a whole culture, we're grieving the loss of a way of life that's kept us safe and secure for the past 500 years or so. We lived in those places for quite a while - the last couple of months have been challenging and dark. We're looking at everything we're losing and mourning.

And through this discussion, we've been confessing that this process of grieving is *good*. That it's necessary. Because if we don't move through the grief, we get trapped in it. And we can't look forward to what's next. We really and truly believe that This is Not the End. That the road doesn't stop here. That God is making a new road for us. That something better is just over the horizon.

So today we look ahead. Because the grieving process doesn't end in despair. Eventually, we come to **Acceptance (possibly illustrate the movement through the grieving process?)**.

When we talk about Acceptance, we're not talking about sitting on our hands, glumly sighing, Ho-hum, I guess life goes on. Acceptance is the moment in the grieving process when we acknowledge that what we've lost doesn't finally define us. That we are *more* than what we've lost. That there's a full, rich, vibrant life on the *other side* of our life. One that might not even be possible had we not experienced the loss.

It's what we hear God encourage the Exiles in Isaiah 43:14-21. Here the prophet is speaking to those very people who have experienced the total loss of their culture. Who've witnessed everything stripped away. They've been forcibly deported to Babylon, a foreign country. And here's what God says to them:

This is what the LORD says-- your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "For your sakes I will send an army against Babylon, forcing the Babylonians to flee in those ships they are so proud of.

It's interesting to me that the first thing God does is remind them (and us) that God knows what our situation is. God says, I know you've lost your way. I know you're in Babylon. And I'm going to do something about it.

That's good news... God knows where we are. God knows that we're struggling - as a culture, as families, as individuals. God knows the anger we feel, the sense of injustice. The despair.

God understands that everything's changing, that nothing's the way it used to be. God understands, and God is going to do something about it. What?

I am the LORD, your Holy One, Israel's Creator and King. I am the LORD, who opened a way through the waters, making a dry path through the sea. I called forth the mighty army of Egypt with all its chariots and horses. I drew them beneath the waves, and they drowned, their lives snuffed out like a smoldering candlewick.

God reminds the Exiles of their own story. God says, Don't you remember that I am your creator? I made this whole world out of nothing! And I am the God who saved you from Egypt. When your ancestors were slaves in Egypt, when they couldn't see a way out, when they thought escape was impossible, I parted the Red Sea and made a dry path for them to cross it. I made a road where there wasn't one before. And when Egypt pursued them, I destroyed the armies that threatened them. Remember that?

Remember when they thought it was hopeless and I came through? Remember when they felt overwhelmed and I saved them? Remember when I made the impossible possible?

Do you remember that?

Which makes what God says next hilarious:

But forget all that-- it is nothing compared to what I am going to do.

Forget it? But you just told us to remember!

For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness. I will create rivers in the dry wasteland. The wild animals in the fields will thank me, the jackals and owls, too, for giving them water in the desert. Yes, I will make rivers in the dry wasteland so my chosen people can be refreshed. I have made Israel for myself, and they will someday honor me before the whole world. -- Isaiah 43:14-21 (NLT)

God says, Baby, you ain't seen nothing yet! All the ways I've worked in the past? *Nothing* compared to what I've got up my sleeve next. What I'm about to do is going to Blow. Your. Mind.

Don't you see it? I'm making a *new* road. A way where there wasn't a way before. I'm still in the business of making the impossible possible.

That's the difference between us and God. We are creatures of habit. We get used to stuff. We feel comfortable where we were. It seems like we're always pining for the past. But God is always looking forward, always doing something new, something better than what came before.

And when we look back instead of forward, we can actually *miss* what God is going to do next.

Here's what God told another Exilic prophet, Jeremiah: "**This is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel on that day,**" says the LORD. **"I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. And they will not need to teach their neighbors, nor will they need to teach their relatives, saying, 'You should know the LORD.' For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will know me already,"** says the LORD. -- Jeremiah 31:33-34 (NLT)

See, the first time around, God freed Israel from Egypt and then made a covenant with them that God wrote out on stone (the 10 Commandments - **let's do the Charleton Heston pic here. Nice and iconic.**). And now, the Exiles were looking for a new Exodus. A new Moses to come lead them back to the Promised Land and build them a new Temple. To put stuff back the way it was before. To get back to the Good Ole days. And eventually, they did rebuild the Temple. They tried to go back to where they were before.

But look at what God told Jeremiah! It's going to be NEW. Different! Not written on stone, but written on hearts! Forget all that stuff I've already done! I'm doing something NEW! We have the luxury of hindsight to know what that new thing was - God became one of us in the person of Jesus.

But do you think the Exiles had *any* idea that God was going to become *human*? No way. That wasn't on their radar. In all the dozens of flavors of Messianic expectations, I promise you NOBODY saw *that* coming. If you would've suggested it, they would've said That's Impossible! God can't become human.

So, of course, that's exactly what God did. And Jesus was superior to the Temple. He exceeded the old Temple system in every way. He was a better priest and a more perfect sacrifice. And once he came and died and rose again, everything was different.

But that's still not even as good as it gets! What if I told you that we are in a position to do more and better stuff than Jesus?

Some of you are hiding from the lightning bolt that's about to strike and the rest of you are grabbing for stones, I know. But Jesus himself said it! In John 14:12, here's what he said to his disciples: **"I tell you the truth, anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father."** -- John 14:12 (NLT)

We hear Jesus' words and think, "Greater than Jesus? No way. Impossible." But that's exactly what Jesus promised us. Imagine that! Jesus understood that his time here on Earth was limited.

That after he left, we who remain here - his Church - would be empowered by the Holy Spirit. And that means we are going to do even more than Jesus did! That's mind-blowing.

But that pattern reveals a truth that the Scriptures teach: **God is taking history somewhere**. This is God's story, and God has a plan. It's a good plan. That means that what's ahead of us always has the potential to be greater than what's behind us. It means that no matter what bad happens, what tragedies occur, that God is working right now to redeem them, to bring beauty out of chaos.

We don't get that, because our tendency is to idealize the past. To remember the Good Ole Days. And to think that what worked before, what made us feel comfortable. Most of us really don't like change. It's scary. It's unpredictable. And real change always means the death of something that made us feel safe or comfortable (if only because we'd gotten used to it).

So it is with the new things God is doing. When Jesus came, the Temple became obsolete. Obviously now we don't have Jesus walking among us. Things change. God makes new roads.

That means we don't have to sit around and pine for the past. Yes, culture has changed and is still changing. That change is what we've been talking about for the last month. The Economy is tanking. All politicians do is fight anymore. Church isn't the center of the culture. And that means we have to totally reimagine how we do Church. How we live lives as Exiles in this strange land. We have to be on the lookout for a new road. For God's new way.

It was a big deal for my parents' generation that Prayer was taken out of schools. They looked at the loss of Public, Sanctioned and Teacher-led prayer and thought, It's impossible that our kids will be faithful to God, that our schools will stay safe.

But it's possible that God wants to do something new with our children and our schools. I didn't really notice that I'd lost anything; I didn't feel it like my parents did. In fact, I prayed in school all the time (especially before tests). My friends and I prayed together and studied the Bible. (It might surprise you, but I never asked permission to do it; I just did it). I didn't feel the loss my parents did of an "official" prayer time.

In fact, I wonder if that wasn't a good thing. I wonder if I had had a teacher to pray for me, to tell me what the Bible said, if I'd have done it on my own. Knowing myself as well as I do, I sort of doubt it.

Is it possible that the loss of prayer in school could be a good thing for the coming generations? Because they will have a personal faith, a faith they own and take responsibility for, in a way that wouldn't have been possible a generation ago?

That's at least part of this new thing God is doing among us. As our culture becomes less Christian, we're forced to own our own faith. To step up and follow Jesus on purpose instead of just because that's what you do. It's very different from what's come before. But it doesn't have to be bad.

We are to live out his Gospel out there, in our everyday lives. At our jobs, in our homes, in our schools. We are to live lives that point to the Gospel in the midst of people who are angry, who are raging against injustice, who are despairing. We are the people who stand among the despairing and point ahead to what seems impossible. And we say, Look! God is making all things new! Including our wars and fighting. Including our broken political system. Including our economy. Including our unemployment. Including our broken families. Including our despair and isolation. All these things that you don't think it's possible to fix, everywhere life is so dark you can't imagine light could come, we stand up and say Hope is on the way! Stay strong. Be steadfast! God's not finished with us. God hasn't abandoned us. Behold! God is doing a new thing! It's springing up all around you! Don't get so caught up in pining for the past that you miss it!

This is Not the End.

Our lives should point towards the new, good thing that God is doing. We should look like Hope, like Light to everyone around us. And this Advent season, we have a special, exciting way to bring Hope to a dying world:

The continent of Africa seems like a hopeless place. Corruption runs rampant even in the highest levels of Governments. AIDS is everywhere. Crippling poverty. A couple of weeks ago, you got to hear from Jon and Ashley Barchus, members of our church family, who left us a couple of years ago to move to Benin in West Africa. They left to help at the Abre de Vie orphanage there. Since then, they've become the orphanage directors, and they're now responsible for 30 children.

We listened as Ashley told us that they need a dorm for the kids. Right now, all 30 of the kids stay in 2 rooms – separated boys and girls. They're sleeping on floors, in tiny beds. They have almost no place to study for their schooling. She told us that they have no more room at the orphanage, that now when they get calls from the city, they have to turn kids away. Right now, it's impossible for Jon and Ashley to do more for their kids, and for the other kids of their community. Right now, they are trapped.

But God wants to do a new thing in Benin. God wants to bring hope, to do the impossible there. And we get to be part of it.

Ashley told us that they have a dream, a goal to build a dorm to house not only their 30 kids, but to have plenty of room to give more kids who've been abandoned a home. The dorm will cost \$45,000 US. And in the last two weeks, you've given her \$2,500. Then, last week, one of you approached Pastor Keven with an idea. You asked, "Couldn't our church give up our Christmas gifts? Couldn't we take the money we normally spend on Christmas gifts and instead give it to Ashley and Jon so they could build their dorm?"

As a staff we were excited by that idea. Because we *could* give up our gifts this year. Especially if it means giving the kids at Arbore de Vie a home. We realized that we don't *need* more stuff this year. We live very comfortably. We enjoy the love and support of our friends and family. And quite frankly, the idea that we could give these 30 kids a home – a real home, not just a floor to sleep on – was exciting. Thrilling.

It sounds pretty radical, doesn't it? To give up Christmas gifts? To take the money our families would normally spend on gifts and use it to build a home?

So we decided to ask you. We're going to make the full, huge announcement next week, and this will be the goal of our Advent season. We want to raise XXXXX to give the children of Arbre de Vie a home this Christmas. \$45,000 will get the building up, but another XXXXX will furnish it, make it 100% ready to live in.

I know we can do that. It sounds crazy. But we can bring hope to Benin. We can make the impossible possible. Through our sacrifice, we can transform the lives of those kids in Benin.

Don't worry. Over the next month, we're going to be talking about this A LOT more. But we know that this Friday is when most of us are doing a lot of our Christmas shopping. So we want to challenge you to go home and have this conversation with your families. Will you consider standing together as a family, courageously with our whole Beaver Creek Nazarene family, to build a home in Benin?

When we told Ashley what we wanted to do, she said, I thought this was impossible. The cost of the dorm is 5x our annual budget for the orphanage. So I just felt like it wouldn't ever happen. The God we worship, the God who gathered us here is the God of the impossible. Let this home be a sign of hope. Let it stand as a declaration to the world that with God nothing is impossible. Brothers and sisters, God is doing a new thing among us. Let's not pine for the past, because our grief can trap us. It can blind us to the new thing that is even now springing up around us.

This is Not the End. God is making a new way for us... an interstate into the future. And even if we don't know what it looks like, we know it will be very good. Because our God is very good. And our God loves us.

<prayer>

Prayer of Examine

When in the past week have you been looking backward instead of forward?

When in the past week have you been excited about what's ahead of you?

When in the coming week will you face anger, bitterness or despair?

What can you do this week to point towards hope in the New Thing that God is doing?