

Welcome

It's been a little over four years since we moved into Rowlett. When we first moved to the area, we spent the first couple of years in Mesquite. Between our lease being up in Mesquite and our house being ready in Rowlett, we had a 6 week period where we were between homes. We packed all our stuff in storage and lived out of suitcases for those 6 weeks, crashing in our friends' spare bedroom.

Our friends were consummate hosts, and went above and beyond to make us feel at home. But that feeling of being *between* homes was almost worse than the packing and unpacking. Even though I honestly had everything I needed - and more! - I still felt unsettled, largely because I was *between*.

We don't like to be *between*, do we?

Today, it's been exactly nine months since we've been worshipping virtually as a congregation. So in honor of that occasion, I'd love to invite you to take a deep breath with me and on the count of three, let out a primal scream of rage. 1... 2... 3... RAGE!

Remember early in the pandemic when we all talked about things getting back to 'normal', and then all the pundits warned us that we needed to brace ourselves for the 'new normal'?

But the last few months, as schools have opened, shut down, half-opened, reopened, as restaurants get more and more creative, as work-from-home has become semi-permanent for many and our celebration of brave essential workers has faded, we've recognized:

We're a long way from any sort of normal. We're in this extended *between* space. A transition period that seems like it will never end.

One of the big reasons between spaces are so painful is because they're disorienting. We're creatures of habit, of routine. And being in transition means new routines. Or no routines. A lot of us just want to get to the new normal because at least then we can figure out what the new routines are going to be. We can start to *settle down*.

But we've got some time yet before that's going to be a reality. So I want to talk today about how we live in this between time and specifically how we can find rhythms and routines that help us continue to be a people of faith even in the midst of our disruption.

Message

It's November, and believe it or not, we have four weeks until Advent, the beginning of a new year for the Church. Catalyst always spends these last weeks remembering who we are and centering ourselves to do a new good work in this next year.

This year, we're calling our series Catalyst in the time of COVID because our experience of being in church together has changed so radically in this last year thanks to the global pandemic we're living

through. For the vast majority of this year, we've been worshiping virtually, seeing each other less frequently, able to do less ministry together. We've had to get creative.

So in light of all that, we're revisiting our core values one by one, asking what it looks like for us to be the church while we're socially distanced. We began with Friendship. We saw that God makes intentional movements toward us in relationship, and so - even though we're still in the midst of a pandemic - we can and should make intentional moves toward one another. Friendship takes intention. Last week, we returned to Diversity, celebrating how a diverse Church is God's vision for our whole world.

Today, we're exploring what Discipleship looks like during COVID. Over the last couple of years, we've worked to... ahem... distance ourselves from the assumption that discipleship is primarily about gaining more knowledge about God. Rather, discipleship is what happens when we make space in our lives for the Holy Spirit to shape us into the image of Jesus. This is something God does for us and with us as an act of grace - not something we earn or achieve.

Since God is Love, and since relationship is the heart of Jesus' good news, our journey of discipleship begins not in our minds, but in our spirits. We love not because we learn more, but because God loves us first.

But... wow... if there's one thing the pandemic has underscored, it's that we don't *always* feel a sense of God's love, God's presence with us. It's been exponentially harder, at least for me, worshipping virtually. Our virtual worship has always been a good stop-gap for a vacation or illness, but nine months in, we all know we're missing that bit of magic that happens when we're all together.

And I don't know about the rest of you, but when the pandemic hit and suddenly everything shifted, I lost a lot of my routines, including my spiritual routines. I spent the first several months in a weird funk where it was hard to work, I didn't want to get on another video call, and I couldn't even read more than a paragraph or two at a time.

It was a season that underscored for me how much rhythms and routines matter.

And here's the thing: this is something that's affirmed over and over in the Scriptures. So I'd like to take some time this morning to explore a little of what the Scriptures say about the rhythms and routines of our spiritual formation.

[Scripture Slide 1] Let's start... at the beginning. Turn with me to Genesis 1. The whole of Genesis 1 is a movement from chaos to order, as God lovingly invites the world into being. As each day passes, we witness a march from formless and empty to formed and filled. I want to call our attention specifically to the fourth day, which is when the light and dark created on the first day are filled with bodies. Pay attention to the *purpose* of the sun, moon and stars according to Genesis 1:

Then God said, “Let lights appear in the sky to separate the day from the night. Let them be signs to mark the seasons, days, and years. Let these lights in the sky shine down on the earth.” And that is what happened. God made two great lights—the larger one to govern the day, and the smaller one to govern the night. He also made the stars. God set these lights in the sky to light the earth, to govern the day and night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And evening passed and morning came, marking the fourth day. -- Genesis 1:14-19

They're signs to mark the seasons, days and years. God wants us to be able to discern the rhythm of the world, to mark days and weeks and seasons. For ancient Israel, of course this meant planting and harvest, marked by festivals of thanksgiving and worship. It meant the Sabbath day to mark out the week. And it meant daily prayers.

For God's people, from the beginning, the rhythms of nature aligned with the rhythms of faith. We ordered our years with seasons - and we still do that here at Catalyst. We follow the Church calendar. So we're just a couple of weeks from beginning the season of Advent, which is a season to prepare and wait. It's followed by Christmas - a season to celebrate. Then comes Epiphany, which is a season to share. Lent is our season of repentance and introspection. And of course Easter thru Pentecost is the time we celebrate the new life we have in Jesus.

Do you always feel like celebrating? No, of course you don't. Neither do I. Do you always need to grieve? Nope, and actually we're programmed by our culture *not* to grieve, to avoid grief. That 's why the Church's *seasons* are important. They help us touch on the experiences and rhythms of life. Some of us don't like to be introspective. We need Lent. Others of us don't want to look outward. We need Epiphany. Some of us find it hard to hope. We need Advent.

In the same way, Sabbath is meant to order our weeks. We need to remember we were created for life, not for productivity. So God built in a day every week where God invites us to put down our productivity and be human together.

God's people have always found it's good even to order our *days*. Morning and evening prayers have a long tradition among God's people.

[Scripture Slide 2] Turn with me to Joshua 1. Joshua opens after Moses has died and Joshua is preparing to lead God's people into the Promised Land. Right off the bat, we get God addressing Joshua, giving him guidance as he steps into an impossible role - filling Moses' shoes! As we read this bit, note how God instructs Joshua to order his day:

Be strong and courageous, for you are the one who will lead these people to possess all the land I swore to their ancestors I would give them. Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the instructions Moses gave you. Do not deviate from them, turning either to the right or to the left. Then you will be successful in everything you do. Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in

all you do. This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.” -- Joshua 1:6-9

The book of Instruction God refers to is what we would call the Torah, the first five books of Scripture. We can extend this to all of Scripture, as Christian tradition has done. And do you notice what Joshua is supposed to do with Scripture?

Meditate on it day and night. That's a poetic way of saying "all the time". We would say 24/7 today. Of course there's some hyperbole there. We have to sleep, eat and all sorts of other things. God doesn't mean there we are to live with our noses buried in our Bibles.

No, the way we've interpreted these sorts of instructions for thousands of years has been that we *order our day* with spiritual practices like prayer, meditation and reading Scripture. Spending the morning and evening in prayer are a powerful way to bookend our days with God, to begin and end our day spending time in the loving gaze of our creator and lord.

These rhythms and routines are more and more important. Consider how natural boundaries have eroded away over the last years. Once upon a time, we were largely limited to working by the sun. Our work days were tied to the natural rhythm of the rising and setting of the sun. Electricity changed that, enabling us to create artificial day in our streets, offices and homes.

Speaking of offices, there was a time when the vast majority of us kept our work at work, in the office. Computers began to change that, and smartphones cemented it. Now it's not uncommon for us to receive work-related emails and texts, and for the expectation to be that we're *always available*, which is another way of saying 'always working'.

And of course in the post-pandemic reality, more and more of us don't even have a separate home and office. Now our living space *is* our work space.

Do you notice a pattern? An eroding of the separation between what we do and who we are?

Electricity, internet, zoom - none of these is inherently bad. But they do mess with boundaries that used to make it *easy* for us to order our worlds. That's harder and harder, which is why it's more important for us now than ever to order our days, to submit them to God rather than our work. We should begin not by scrolling through facebook or checking our inboxes, but with prayer and scripture.

We should end not with screen-saturated eyes, but with prayers offered up to God. Again, not because there's necessarily anything inherently evil about smartphones, work emails or social media. But because we were created to thrive within a well-ordered life, and those things creep in and crowd out what matters most.

As God instructed Joshua, so God instructs us: to thrive is to keep those things in their proper places, and we do that by tending first and foremost to our relationship with our creator.

So I want to invite you, as we move toward reflection, to consider the state of your pandemic reality. I have to confess to you that mine still feels like so much of a mess. I still face many days when I'm listless, when it's hard to accomplish anything, even the things that *have* to get done.

In those times, I remember the words of Dr. Phil, one of our counselors here at Catalyst. Early in the pandemic, he did a webinar for us where I asked him how we can thrive in this time. And his biggest piece of advice was exactly what we're talking about here: since so many of the structures we're used to are gone, we have to create some artificial ones.

And that's okay. Especially when it comes to spiritual formation, it's good to order our days, to take control of our schedules and be *wise* with where we invest our time.

God invites us into a rhythm of formation, a routine of making space for the Spirit to shape us.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Our weekly rhythm of receiving Jesus' meal together!

1. What has ordered my days in the last week?
2. How can I order this week with prayer?
3. What other rhythms is God inviting me into?

Assignment + Blessing

Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. But they delight in the law of the LORD, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do. -- Psalm 1:1-3