

“Life in the Overlap”

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Pentecost Sunday — May 23, 2021

Back when we were in college, Sarah and I took a trip to visit some friends in the northeast, and since we were only going to be a short train ride away, we decided to take a day to visit New York City. Neither of us had ever been to New York before, so we were really excited about the prospect of checking this destination off of our bucket lists. We did thorough research in advance to figure out how many and which important sights we could see during our one day visit to the city. We went in with a pretty ambitious itinerary for the day — which, early-on, went completely out the window. Immediately upon our arrival by train that morning, we spent about an hour snapping pictures in Grand Central Station. We couldn't help it; we were in awe. After that, we made our way to Times Square. There we admired wonders of human civilization such as the M&M Store and Toys-R-Us. We watched a man who called himself “The Naked Cowboy” play guitar in the middle of the street, rode in a taxi cab **literally** just to say we did, and sipped hot chocolate at an establishment made famous in a romantic comedy (Sarah assured me this stop was worth our time).

Before we knew it, the day had gotten away from us. Evening had come — it was getting late and we realized that our trip was coming to an end. We only had time for *one last stop* if we wanted to make our late-departing train. I wonder what you would have chosen to see, if you had time for only one final activity in a city filled with all manner of attractions? Maybe you would have found a museum to check out, taken a stroll through Central Park, or gotten yourself a New York slice. As for me — there was really only one thing that 21-year-old Casey Bushman was thinking about in that moment. And because Sarah has always so graciously tolerated my irrational love of baseball, we hopped onto a subway and headed for the Bronx. I wanted to see Yankee Stadium.

I said “irrational” — there actually was a particular reason for my insistence on visiting Yankee Stadium at this exact moment. That's because it wasn't just “Yankee Stadium” at that time — it was actually *Yankee Stadiums*, plural. It was the offseason of 2008-09, and the Yankees had just finished their final season in the “old” ballpark, that glorious temple of sport where Babe Ruth had been smashing home runs throughout the 20's and 30's.

And there, *right beside* it, the new “Yankee Stadium” was being constructed, and was at that point nearly complete. They were side-by-side, literally within a stone’s throw of each other. The old ballpark would soon be demolished to make way for parking and amenities, but for just a while longer these two stood together. We got off the Subway and just stood in between these two towering structures, beholding this bizarre juxtaposition: 100 year-old, historic old ballpark, and pristine, state-of-the-art new ballpark. Two eras, old and new: one replacing the other, overlapping one another for a brief moment.

If the Day of Pentecost communicated anything to the first generation of Christians, it was that *the future had arrived*. The Hebrew Scriptures foretold these bizarre events that unfolded on that day in Jerusalem. Little children grew up hearing this story of when the sun would turn to darkness and the moon to blood, and God’s Spirit would be poured out on all flesh. Unlikely prophets manifesting strange gifts, fire from above burning with supernatural intensity — it was all happening, right before their eyes. The much-anticipated “Day of the Lord” had arrived. It was time to gather the nations in to the holy city to bow down and pledge their allegiance to the one true God of Israel. It was time for God’s Spirit to once again hover over creation and establish a permanent dwelling place among God’s people. It was time for the Eternal Judge to make all things right, for the swords to be beaten into plowshares and for the lion to lay down with the lamb. This was the beginning of God’s future.

And yet, if you keep reading on through the Acts of the Apostles, not everything that happens to these Pentecost participants is perfectly aligned with that prophetic vision. Great suffering befalls the apostles and the early believers in the chapters to come. There are arrests, imprisonments, stonings, beatings, angry mobs, shipwrecks, and martyrdoms. There is hunger, thirst, loneliness, depression, disappointment, conflict, and broken relationships. These early Christians were learning that the *new* world may have arrived in an impressive display of power, sure — but the *old* world was still very much alive and kicking. The world that was to come had broken into the world that was passing away, and the two found themselves in a curious juxtaposition — side-by-side. Two eras, old and new: one replacing the other, yet overlapping for a brief moment.

As Christians today we are very much still living in this moment of the overlap between what is to come and what is passing away. We still find ourselves in this odd juxtaposition, this “moment” which has lasted two thousand years and counting. The new has come alongside the old but has not yet fully replaced it. We witness this all around us, all the time: signs of life and hope alongside the most devastating sorrow and suffering. At times it feels like heaven in all its splendor has come down to earth, and everything seems right and good in the world. At other times it feels like earth has been dropped into the very depths of hell.

Given this context, what is a faithful Christian called to do? How do we orient our lives in a way that makes sense of both the hope and despair that we witness daily? The answer is, and has been for the last two thousand years, this: we are to live our lives holding *both* of these realities before us. We refuse to look away from either one. Each of them belongs in our collective gaze.

This is harder than it might seem, because Christians are really, really good at going full-steam in one direction and not so good at holding things in delicate balance. We have the tendency to veer off the path in either direction on this one — in either direction. On the one hand, we may go overboard with the hopeful future and deny the present suffering. We become annoyingly-cheery people who seem to have no awareness of the pain and hardship around us. Our positivity, though well-intentioned, comes across as empty and insincere. Others attribute our relentlessly-hopeful outlook on life not to our strong faith but to our privilege.... or perhaps to some deep psychological issue. A terror hidden inside of us just won't let us look squarely into the face of suffering and evil. We avoid it at all costs, we medicate that pain with whatever's in arm's reach — and in doing so, we lose our credibility to speak good news to a hurting world.

On the other hand, we may veer into the ditch of utter despair. We can't see the life of the world to come at all; we only see the life of the world that is — and it.. STINKS. Everywhere we look, we ONLY see brokenness and sorrow and injustice. We doom-scroll through the depressing headlines; we don't know how to stop. And the weight of the earth's collective suffering crushes the hope within us. How we can we know and

love and serve God if we have completely lost sight of all that is good and beautiful and true?

The only remaining option, the approach that takes us right down the center of this narrow path, is to carry our pain with honesty, and live in solidarity with those who suffer, all while clinging to the hope of God's future. That is the Christian life in a nutshell. That is how you live in the overlap between old and new.

We have a real challenge before us, friends, but the good news is that we are not alone — being a part of this Spirit-infused community called church can help us navigate this path more faithfully. Each year, as we worship together, we are formed as people who know the vital place of both mourning in sorrow and rejoicing in hope. Each year, during Lent, we enter into Christ's brokenness and pain, which empowers us to deal with our own brokenness and pain, and creates space for us to stand with those whose lives seem to be nothing but brokenness and pain. Each year, when Easter comes, we celebrate Christ's victory over death, we wonder anew at our future in his coming kingdom, and we practice looking for the seeds of resurrection hope all around us. We do this year after year after year, and we do it together, as a big extended-family of the faithful, with whom at any given moment we have the opportunity to weep together or rejoice together, as we invest in relationships and share life with one another week in and week out. God's Spirit is at work in this world, in all these ways and more, shaping us to be the kind of people who are ready to *receive* heaven in *all* its fullness.

For now, on this day of Pentecost, we celebrate that heaven has opened up and poured out promises of a new world to come. It is no longer just a story or a wish or a what-if; it is reality. God's dream breaking into what seemed like a never-ending nightmare. May the Holy Spirit give us the strength and wisdom and courage to live faithfully during the overlap. Amen.