

In 1854, Henry David Thoreau published his classic book, *Walden*. The text is a part personal declaration of independence, part social experiment, and part spiritual exploration. The book details Thoreau's experiences over the course of two years living in a cabin he builds near Walden Pond. By immersing himself in nature, Thoreau hoped to gain a more objective understanding of society through personal introspection. Simple living and self-sufficiency were Thoreau's goals. The book is a demonstration of how easy it can be to acquire the necessities of life. Throughout the book, Thoreau offers a scathing critique of society and the material trappings of his day. Listen to his frightening observation.

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. (Thoreau, 7)

There is a sort of quiet desperation that hovers over our day. It manifests itself in the growing anxiety epidemic, the rising levels of angst and worry, and the tyranny of success, achievement, and performance. It frequently goes ignored. We numb the desperation through the constant noise, games, and amusements of Netflix, social media, etc. We distract ourselves from its impact, allowing the quiet desperation to fester while we are subtly formed by the world around us. And while Thoreau's view is fairly cynical, I believe if we sit long enough and are ruthlessly honest, we all would recognize the deep ways in which our culture has formed us to neglect the quiet desperation within.

Two days a week I commute on Bart to Berkeley. Now for some this is miserable, but for someone who thoroughly enjoys people watching, this has been a fascinating experience! Two things, in particular, have become absolutely clear about our world to me.

First—Everyone is tired!

People are quite literally herded from train to train, where they rush to find a seat and nearly all of them close their eyes, desperately sipping their coffee.

Second—Everyone is addicted to distraction. (myself included)

I would guess 90% (of which I am more often than not included) immediately pull out our phones and spend the duration of the trip glued to their screen. We no longer have any capacity to sit with ourselves. And having been in pastoral ministry for well

over a decade, I can't help but see the formative power these daily rhythms have on us.

Through all of the busy, the noise, and the mental distraction, we suppress a deeper more quiet despair. We give ourselves over to the narrative of success, achievement, and busy. And that our worth, value, and identity are built on the cultural script of success.

But where does this "quiet desperation" come from?

Living According to Scripts

To be human is to live according to narratives and scripts that shape our world-view. This was central to Thoreau's experiment. He was seeking to disconnect from the script that had given shape to him and see what remained.

We are quietly cultivated to believe certain things about the world and the human experience. This script can be explicit or implicit. These scripts can be meta-narratives that give shape to entire cultures and social groups, or they can be simple mantras like, "My family always does this."

Our world, and particularly the Bay Area is a "formation machine." There is a very specific way to live that the Bay Area seeks to push us into. It has a moral/ethical vision (some of it good, some of it not so much), and it has a very narrow picture of what success and flourishing looks like. This script is played out, rehearsed, and reinforced through social media, billboards, commercials, and all cultural messaging. There is a formative story the world is telling that we must find ways to disrupt if we are to enter into the way of Jesus.

In the texts for this message, we are going to see the way in which Jesus seeks to disrupt the narratives we are participating in that have a formative power.

What does the story of our faith have to offer the world? Is our story the same sort of story? Are we hopeless and left desiring more? How does the Jesus story speak into this cultural moment of despair?

Open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 17.

Jesus Disrupts Your Faith

When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. "Lord, have mercy on my son." He said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him."

“You unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.” Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment.

Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” He replied, “Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” (Matthew 17:14–21)

Throughout his work, Matthew uses “the crowd” as a literary device to speak of those outside of Jesus’ followers. Matthew is going to use “the crowd” as a declaration against the disciples as “this generation.” Now, imagine for a moment this scene, place yourself in the crowd. Jesus comes down the mountain of transfiguration with his three disciples to a crowd. A man immediately comes up to Jesus, kneels before him, and addresses him as “Lord” with a prayerful cry for help. Now, this note about him kneeling demonstrates more than just his physical space, it is a posture that reflects one’s attitude.

What we see in this father is an attitude of hopelessness. He is desperate to find help for his son. The son’s condition is causing him to nearly die by falling into water or into a fire.

The focus of the story remains on the disciples and on their inability, despite Jesus giving them authority around chapter 10. The disciples are illustrated here as failing in faith. The father is now a model of Christian faith. Matthew has little interest in the exorcism of the boy, but tells the story as a backdrop to Jesus’ teaching on faith.

Jesus’ response to hearing the disciples were unable to heal the boy is scathing. He calls the disciples an “unbelieving and perverse generation.” The disciples have identified him and made the correct confession, but whether they will become the authentic community he seeks to build or will regress into “this generation” is the struggle portrayed in this scene. The insertion of the word “generation” most likely means that Jesus is addressing the disciples but that the disciples are exemplary of the entire nation of Israel/the People of God, this new community in which Jesus is forming.

This is a rare moment of deep emotional response from Jesus. Jesus is coming down from this literal “mountain-top” experience. He is immediately confronted with his own disciples letting him down and it evokes a rare moment of human emotion. He said, “How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?” The language is pulled from the lament in Psalm 13.

How long, Lord? Will you forget my forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

**How long will my enemy triumph over me?
(Psalm 13:1–2)**

Jesus’ immediate healing of the boy is a clear fact of his kingdom proliferating. It highlights the reality that Jesus is the one with power. It is Jesus, not the disciples, who are able to establish the Kingdom, and it is Jesus who is accompanying the church throughout history. The disciples should have been able to heal and do this work in the power of Jesus, as both they and Jesus recognize, but they could not.

But certainly we are left with the question why? Why couldn’t the disciples do this? After the exorcism, the disciples come to Jesus in private and ask, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” Jesus explains it is because they have so little faith. It appears the authority Jesus gave the disciples to cast out demons in chapter 10 was not enough. But rather, there must also be some level or degree of faith. Matthew doesn’t offer any explanation as to how the disciples’ faith failed. But Mark’s account of the same event offers a little insight. Mark’s account adds, **“This kind can come out only by prayer”** (Mark 9:29). The implication is the disciples had not properly prayed and consequently, they had leaned into their own ability and power. Jesus contrasts their lack of faith with a metaphor, which states if you have faith as small as a mustard seed you could move mountains.

However, faith is not a measurable commodity but a relationship. What achieves results through prayer is not a superior quantity of faith but the unlimited power of God on which faith, any faith, can draw. The disciples had failed to bring any faith at all to bear on this situation. They had turned inward and focused on their own aims.

Jesus’ Disruption of Faith

For Jesus, his harsh rebuke of the inability of the disciples to place their faith in an active connection with God is a disruption to their faith. Faith means the willingness to go where God leads, not the power to avert all unpleasant circumstances. The invitation is to allow our faith to be rooted in Jesus, which is beyond our own personal obligations. For the disciples, this happened slowly and subtly. They were formed into people whose longings had drifted from the narrative of Jesus. There was a quiet desperation in the disciples and they sought to solve it on their own time and through their own means. But Jesus entered the scene to disrupt this misplaced faith.

Jesus Disrupts Your Expectations

When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life.” And the disciples were filled with grief. (verses 22–23)

Jesus and Matthew now juxtapose his discussion about the faith of a mustard seed with a recalibrating of what the impossible may look like for the people of God. This part of the narrative

opens with Jesus taking the disciples out of the crowd and into Galilee. Although a seemingly benign narrative remark, for Matthew, he is using it to signify Jesus gathering the new community out of the “faithless and perverse generation.”

There is a subtle wordplay here in the Greek, *“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men...”* It is a telling and paradoxical contrast. The Son of Man is Jesus’ favorite title for himself and represents Jesus’ future glory and authority over the whole cosmos and he contrasts that with the “hands of men.” Notice how strange is the disciples’ reaction. Jesus has just declared his death and resurrection.

For the disciples, Jesus was to be the fulfillment of the entire story of Israel, the promised Messiah. They had certain expectations and hopes. And their hope was when the Messiah arrived, he would usher in the Kingdom of God, and that Kingdom would be the next World Super Power. They had hoped for a militaristic Messiah, who would use force to overcome the oppression, but instead, Jesus said he was going to be betrayed and he would die at the hands of those who arrested him. In essence, Jesus gave the disciples the opposite of what they were anticipating and longing for.

The way of Jesus is not some sort of coercive power grab. It is not found through strength and power. Instead, it is about life coming from death. And the kingdom of God is not some rewrite of the kingdom of this world, merely with a “Jesus-flair” to it. But instead is a system that is wholly subverting the way of violence and “power-over” in the world. To do so, Jesus is offering a wholly alternative means of how the world works.

Jesus’ Disrupts our Expectation

For many of us, we have encountered the same sort of disappointment in our expectations. We believe we can simply add Jesus to whatever pursuit we have, but Jesus is here to offer an entirely alternative means that requires us to lay down our expectations. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the disruption of our own vision of what it means to follow Jesus in our day and age. And in the same sense, and in what we will see in the last section, is Jesus disrupts the quiet despair by meeting us in our pain. The cross and resurrection is the bold declaration that tomorrow doesn’t have to be like today, and God is still active and moving in this world and in your pain. It isn’t the promise to have the pain removed, but it is the promise of his presence and solidarity in the pain.

Jesus Disrupts Injustice, Oppression, and Hope

After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma temple tax came to Peter and asked, “Doesn’t your teacher pay the temple tax?”

“Yes, he does,” he replied.

When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. “What do you think, Simon?” he

asked. “From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own children or from others?”

“From others,” Peter answered.

“Then the children are exempt,” Jesus said to him. “But so that we may not cause offense, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.” (verses 24–27)

Economic and Cultural Context

A little background for this particular section will aid in our understanding of the magnitude of what Jesus does here. The economy of the Roman Empire was built on deep disparities in wealth distribution. The rich were exceedingly rich while the poor were exceedingly poor. Most scholars would suggest 90% of the people lived at or below the poverty line, living hand to mouth.

The picture we have of the ancient economic world is that the vast majority of the population was living with the daily concern of obtaining the minimum amount of food, shelter, and clothing to survive. Their lives were dominated by the sheer struggle for survival. This poor class was a class to which Jesus belonged. He was homeless, poor, and not sure where his next meal would come from.

Matthew is writing his gospel to a particular audience that scholars believe was in Antioch somewhere around 80 AD. His listeners, by this time, certainly would have felt the pain of Rome’s might by the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. They had felt the deep sting of Roman oppression. They were living as an occupied people under arguably the most powerful empire the world has seen to date. Matthew’s readers were deeply familiar with the pain of oppression.

Throughout Antioch and the Roman Empire, images of propaganda were employed to assert Roman power over the poor. Coins, in particular, were used and inscribed with the Emperor. Often images were constructed throughout the city and particularly on coins to symbolize Rome’s powerful victories. For the Jews, the images that were unavoidable and served as humiliating reminders of the cost of not submitting to Rome. In short, the Empire was holding an oppressive boot to the neck of the Jews and was emphasizing Rome’s total control through economic oppression, overwhelming taxation, and military might.

Now, let’s jump back to the text. Jesus and his disciples arrive in Capernaum, and Peter is confronted by the collectors of the two-drachma temple tax. The tax mentioned here was a burden for any family, it had punitive and propaganda value. Its payment reminded the Jews of Roman political, economic, and religious sovereignty. After Rome destroyed the temple in 70AD. The Emperor continued to enforce the temple tax for the sake

of Rome. Its reassertion under Roman rule was to promote their superiority and power over conquered people.

The very presence of these collectors asking Peter if Jesus pays the tax tells us something. If they were simply interested in Jesus' tax history, they could have checked their records. The scene is not about actions, it is about the regular outworking of Jesus. Do you subscribe to the Roman system of oppression? And Jesus is about to confront the Empire, but with a bit of a slant.

Peter enters the room and Jesus initiates the conversation, *"What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes?"* Jesus refers to the kings of the earth. This particular text has strong ties to Psalm 2, which speaks of the Kings of the Earth and their limited and ultimate destruction while God lives on. But let's be careful not to allegorize our reading of this exchange. What Jesus is doing here is not drawing a corollary between himself and the kings of the earth, because that is problematic.

Jesus does not rule anything like the kings of the earth. That is what we learned in the section above. Jesus, as King, does not oppress, but lays his life down and is obedient to death. I believe Jesus is naming the injustice and daily reality of the situation. Kings don't make their family fund the imperial power, but instead, force it on others—the poor and the lowly.

In an honor-shame society, Jesus is keenly aware that to not pay the tax would be a deep offense, which would scandalize the kings of the earth. So instead, Jesus tells Peter to go cast his line and pull up the first fish he finds, for in it will be the tax owed by Peter and Jesus. What in the world is going on here? Is Jesus just pulling some sort of party trick to impress others? Why such a strange means to pay the tax? The fish is our clue. Three other times we see fish appear in Matthew's gospel.

Matthew 7:10—Jesus is teaching on the goodness and provision of God as our father says, "Or if he asks for a fish will give him a snake?"

Matthew 14:13–21—Jesus takes minimal means and feeds the 5,000. It is a picture of God's abundance.

Matthew 15:32–39—Jesus does a similar miracle and feeds the 4,000, which is another picture of God's abundance.

By placing this story here, Matthew is emphasizing the abundance of God and God's sovereignty. Matthew is demonstrating the very essence of this world, every facet; all of earth is subject to the authority and power of God. He is sovereign above all! God ensures the sovereignty over the fish. God ensures the sovereignty over the tax. Rome imposes the tax to assert its supremacy and to subjugate, humiliate, and punish. But the story here of Jesus providing the fish, shows the tax to be subject to God's power and sovereignty. Rome may hold power for a time, but all of life is subject to God's authority.

Jesus disrupts this entire system of injustice. He disrupts the belief Rome has the final say. For the disciples, paying the tax then became, not an act that made Rome supreme, but an act that affirms God as the true king of the earth, who is supreme over all things! Paying the tax became a subversive act that disrupted injustice, oppression, and hope in the empire.

It is the firm hope God is ultimately in control, and whatever oppressive forces we encounter today do not have the final word. Death does not hold. Jesus is our ultimate hope. This text is the reminder—our "quiet desperation" does not go unheard—Jesus has an answer for desperation.

So what does this mean for our everyday? How do we create space for Jesus to disrupt us in the monotony of our everyday?

Augustine has this great quote where he talks about hope.

Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are.
—Augustine

Anger at the way things are.

I think the first step toward us finding healing is this is slowing down. Our world moves at such a pace we are unable to allow ourselves to see the cultural scripts that have given shape to who we are becoming. For some of us, our faith needs a re-adjustment. Like the disciples, we have drifted in connecting our faith in relationship to God and we need to express some righteous anger toward ourselves. For others, you experience or perpetuate systems of injustice and Jesus is calling you to anger.

Courage to see they do not remain as they are...

For others of us, the disruption is the model in which we need to invoke. We need to pray for the courage to build more hope in this world because we cannot allow this to continue. For others, you may find yourself resonating with the oppressed. Life has beaten you up. You may have lost your job, or your marriage is unraveling, or your health is declining. Whatever the oppression you are feeling, Jesus is inviting you to believe that although death will have its day, put your hope in God who is restoring and reorganizing everything.

What are the areas of your life you have failed to allow Jesus to disrupt? May you recognize the Gospel is working in unexpected and often unseen ways disrupting your faith, calling you to greater connection to the story your heart was meant to sing.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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