

# “Prayer for the Journey: Divine Discontent”

Responsive Reading, “Growing into God’s Purposes”<sup>1</sup>

While I’m very fond of coffee, and I *really* like my Keurig machine, I’ve never been a big fan of the fancier coffees such as those one might buy at Starbucks. I know good things often happen at Starbucks, though, and I sometimes hold meetings there or go just to experience the ambience and to smell the coffee. On the other hand, Barry Cooper was a Starbucks regular, and as a result he had an epiphany of sorts while standing in line to place his order:

“During a recent Starbucks visit,” he wrote, “I stood behind a customer who ordered a decaf grande sugar-free vanilla nonfat latte with extra foam and the milk heated to 140 degrees. As I stood in line, I actually started to think, *Maybe I want 140-degree coffee too. Maybe . . . my choice of milk temperature up to this point has been catastrophically naïve.* Suddenly his choices made me unhappier about my own. I began to covet. I wasn’t sure what I wanted anymore. I became anxious and indecisive. I wasn’t sure I was ready to commit—either to my kind of coffee or to his. Was this really freedom of choice, or slavery to it?”<sup>2</sup>

As he reflected on that moment later, Barry wondered, “What if we take the same multiplicity of trivial options we have at Starbucks and apply them to bigger questions: where we should work, where we should study, where we should live, whom we should marry, or whom we should worship? It seems that the more options we have, the more afraid we are of choosing. We become enslaved to being noncommittal. We don’t want to make a mistake or cut down our options. In fact, we may become so fearful of making a choice, we simply refuse to choose.

“As we do that, we are worshiping an idol. A false god. One of the Baals of our culture, in fact. His name is ‘open options’. . . .

“Here we are, many of us, worshiping the very gods that Christ has triumphed over, when we know they are defeated gods and will only drag us to our deaths if we cling to them. We worship the god of open options, and he is killing us.

“He kills our relationships, because he tells us it’s better not to become too involved. He kills our service to others because he tells us it might be better to keep our weekends to ourselves. He kills our giving because he tells us these are uncertain financial times and you never know when you might need that money. He kills our joy in Christ because he tells us it’s better not to be thought of as too spiritual.

“What is most frightening of all about the god of open options is that you may not even know that you are worshiping him, because he pretends not to be a god at all.”<sup>3</sup>

Our topic this morning is “Divine Discontent.” It was certainly discontent that caused the people of Jerusalem to welcome Jesus with palm fronds and cheers on that long-ago Sunday, but in only a matter of hours that discontent was revealed to have an origin other than from God.

In order to understand the reality of Divine Discontent in our lives, we must first learn to distinguish such discontent from the false gods that pretend to be Divine. Another false god that is rather similar to the “god of open options” masquerades as what might be called “Chafing as We Wait for the Next New Thing.” I expect you know the feeling. It’s the feeling that “When I get \_\_\_\_\_, I will feel fulfilled and *then* I will be happy.” After we pursue this god for a while we begin

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on March 24, 2013, Palm Sunday.

<sup>2</sup> Barry Cooper, “Imprisoned by Choice,” *Christianity Today*, January/February 2013, 52-55.

<sup>3</sup> Cooper, *ibid*.

to realize that when we obtain the object of our current desire that obtaining only temporarily quiets the hungry voice within, and before we know it, the yearning starts all over again.<sup>4</sup>

Such discontent as this is a disease of the spirit, and we do well to beware its allure. But at the same time, if we listen carefully, God's Spirit may actually speak to us through such discontent, moving us toward what might be more accurately called "Divine Discontent." A young blogger understood this when he wrote,

"It's almost time for the service to begin. I've taken a seat in the usual area where I sit. When the music plays, I feel the words fall out of my understanding. Not that I don't understand what the words are, but I'm missing the interpretation of them. Later when the pastor comes out on stage to preach, I listen passively to the sermon. I sketch on one of the pieces of paper I carry with my Bible. I contemplate what's being said, but my thinking is driven back and forth between subjects. I can't get the question out of my mind, **"Is this all there is"?**

"Ever since I've moved home I keep thinking that it's time for something new. More and more I am convinced that this something new has to come in the form of a change in my relationship with God. When I go to church, I feel that something is out of place. My faith isn't shaking and I still believe in God, so I wonder what is going on. For the past week, one phrase keeps coming up in my head and it's the best way I can describe the feeling: **I am suffering from a 'divine discontent.'**

"I've been thinking about what that means. One of the definitions for 'discontent' is a relentless desire or craving for something one does not have. The more I consider that definition, the more it makes sense to me. I was raised in a Christian home and I've attended church ever since I can remember. Over the years, my beliefs have transitioned as I've grown into deeper understanding of what I believe and why I believe. **I can only say that this divine discontent is here to challenge me to renew and look for other ways I can approach my relationship with God.** Now it is in my hands to figure out what those new things are."<sup>5</sup>

Are you familiar with such thoughts and feelings? For many years, I had a paragraph from Rainer Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* hung over my desk. The paragraph expresses a similar disquiet or discontent: "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Do not seek the answers that cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them, and the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will gradually without noticing it live along some distant day into the answers."<sup>6</sup>

James Loder of Princeton Theological Seminary has suggested a four-fold framework for understanding Divine Discontent—for "living the questions now."<sup>7</sup> Dr. Loder suggests that from time to time in most of our lives, some event comes along that precipitates a crisis of faith, which is then followed by a considerable period of time during which we try to make sense of this disquiet. Eventually, in God's time,<sup>8</sup> we experience a gift of insight that shows us the way forward, transforming the pent-up energy of struggle into a new and joyful ability to live under God's Mercy.

I've found Loder's four-fold process of "crisis," "search for understanding," "insight," and "release" to be very helpful in my own faith journey and in my own waiting before God in seasons of Divine Discontent. I don't know how it is for you, but over the years I've found myself spending more time in "search for understanding" than in any other step of the process.

<sup>4</sup> <http://theartofmind.wordpress.com/2008/12/16/the-gift-of-divine-discontent/>

<sup>5</sup> [www.revelife.com/708856191/are-you-suffering-from-divine-discontent/](http://www.revelife.com/708856191/are-you-suffering-from-divine-discontent/)

<sup>6</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (1934), Letter Four (16 July 1903).

<sup>7</sup> James Loder, *The Transforming Moment: Understanding Convictional Experiences* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> That is, *καιρος* (sacred time), not *χρονος* (clock time).

God's gift of insight that resolves the present tension of Divine Discontent is sometimes as clear as the "word of the LORD" (*dabar Yahweh*) that came to Abram, Samuel, Nathan, Solomon, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other ancient prophets of the Lord,<sup>9</sup> but more often than not, God's response and guidance is more subtle.

In my own journey, living prayerfully in the tension of unanswered questions and Divine Discontent has resulted, if not always in "answers," then in the settled conviction that when I finally see life as God sees it from eternity, my questions will find their answers—if indeed the questions still matter at all.

And while we wait for guidance with respect to the "particulars" of our journey, we can rest in the assurance that the "particulars" will be congruent with what we already know for sure—which is the point of our texts for the morning. These texts from Ephesians are worth much more attention than I'm going to give them, but let's look at them briefly once again.

1. <sup>3</sup> *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ* (Ephesians 1:3).

This verse tells us that God is for us, not against us, and that God has already made "every spiritual blessing" available to us through Jesus. This reality underlies all the others.

2. <sup>13</sup> *When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,* <sup>14</sup> *who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory* (Ephesians 1:13b-14).

These verses assure us of God's Spirit's presence with us at this very moment as the seal, the deposit, the "earnest money" of our eternal inheritance with the saints who have preceded us to the Heavenly City. God's purpose is to bless us throughout all eternity!

3. <sup>17</sup> *I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.* <sup>18</sup> *I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people,* <sup>19</sup> *and his incomparably great power for us who believe* (Ephesians 1:17-19).

These verses highlight the fact that whether we perceive God's presence in the present moment or not, God is not hiding from us, and wants us to know Him in intimate and loving relationship. They tell us that God calls us to unquenchable Hope; that we have been numbered in Christ with the holy ones who will inherit "the Kingdom prepared since before the creation of the world" (Matthew 25:34); and that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is available to us in the present moment.

4. <sup>8</sup> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—* <sup>9</sup> *not by works, so that no one can boast.* <sup>10</sup> *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do* (Ephesians 2:8-10).

These familiar verses highlight the fact that while we may not always know right now what God wants us to do next, there is in fact a "next" that God "*prepared in advance for us to do*," and this will be revealed to us in God's time.

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<sup>9</sup> See Genesis 15:1; 1 Samuel 15:10; 2 Samuel 7:4, 24:11; 1 Kings 6:11, 17:2; 2 Kings 20:4; 2 Chronicles 11:2; Jeremiah 1:2.

5. <sup>4</sup> *In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, <sup>5</sup> which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. <sup>6</sup> This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus* (Ephesians 3:4-6).

The key point in these verses is that through Jesus, God has included us who are Gentiles as co-heirs with Israel, “*members together of one body,*” and “*sharers together in the promise*” which is the New Creation in Christ. God's promises just keep getting bigger and better!

6. <sup>14</sup> *For this reason I kneel before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. <sup>16</sup> I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup> may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God* (Ephesians 3:14-19).

Finally, Paul prays that we may be not only “*rooted and established in love,*” but that we will understand the depth and breadth and length and height of the Divine Love that surrounds us, and that we will be “*filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*”

It continues to be the case that life is going to bring us many “in-between” times when we're not sure what it is toward which our experiences of Divine Discontent may be leading us; but God has kindly given us such soul anchors as these to which to cling and in which to rest along the way. There will be many times when God creates in us a sense of Divine Discontent that challenges the “way things are” in our personal lives or in our church.

Divine Discontent produces a kind of passionate readiness that pushes us to overcome the inertia of maintaining the status quo and doing the same old things over and over. And while Divine Discontent leads to the next step in our individual or collective journey toward God's Future, it is passionate love for God that lifts the foot that takes the step.

David described such passionate love in Psalm 63:1: “*You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.*” It is such longing love that keeps our hearts passionately connected with God's heart, even in—perhaps *especially* in—the in-between times of Divine Discontent before the next steps of the future have been revealed to us.

And now, as I draw these thoughts toward a close, I invite you to choose a number, any number. Got one? Did you pick a number greater than a million? Greater than ten million? If you didn't why didn't you?

While most people choose a number like 14 or 98, Larry Page and Sergey Brin chose the number 1 followed by 100 zeroes, the word for which is “googol.” I'll bet you've heard of them and of the company they founded while still in college. It's called *Google*, which is another spelling of “googol.” Among the company's many other accomplishments, Google's million-plus servers around the world process more than a billion Internet search requests every single day. Google does amazing things because its founders had an amazing vision. They didn't choose a number like 14 or 98.

The truth of the matter is that the Spiritual Strategic Journey that we've begun using “Prayer for the Journey” is a project that has much in common with the googol/Google idea. We're trying

to discern the future toward which God is pulling us, a vision so amazing that it is currently unimaginable, unthinkable, and thereby undoable.

George Bullard reminds us that “**the only image that will really work for your congregation is God’s image.** That image is found only in the future and is yet to be discerned, discovered, and developed. Only your full Kingdom potential is an eternal goal. It focuses on pulling you forward to a future God already knows. **Only this goal is worthy of your passion.**”<sup>10</sup>

“Your full Kingdom potential is always beyond your reach,” George observed. “**It is always further up and further in.**”<sup>11</sup> Or, as God said through Isaiah, “**See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland**” (Isaiah 43:19).

While we’re probably neither in wilderness or wasteland, let us continue to join our hearts in passionate prayer that God will guide us through this season of Divine Discontent toward the full Kingdom potential that is . . . Next!

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<sup>10</sup> George Bullard, *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation* (Lake Hickory Resources, 2005), p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Bullard, p. 19.