

Sermon notes December 6, 2020. **Focus** hope for a future **Scripture** [2 Peter 3:8-15a](#)

What sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God?... But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace.

The scripture says, “beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace.” We don’t seem to be particularly good at striving to be found at peace right now, or least I am not a pro at it. This moment is *not* as good as it is going to get. The purple tier is not the new normal that we will be in forever. We can be at peace knowing that God, vaccine scientists, and people caring about others are giving us a future. If you have ever wished to slow down in December – *be careful what you wish for.*

Like I said last week, Advent and December 2020 are being touched by grief: grief over families not gathering, grief over 1/4 million Americans dead from covid, and grief that all our usual planning for the future is on pause. Advent has themes that can us help wait, grieve, and hope - all at the same time, even though I want our future back now.

Grieving When the pandemic first took out holy week early in 2020, I couldn’t imagine Easter being a causality. When weeks turned into months, and months turned into semesters at school, I couldn’t believe it. Even now, I can’t imagine the possibility of school being closed in 2021. I would have never dreamed that Christmas and Thanksgiving would be boosting Zoom’s stock portfolio even more.

Waiting The hardest part of all this is the lack of a future. We are in a perpetual present. Despite my Zen meditation training always encouraging the present moment, I actually hate living in a perpetual present. I hate not going home to Texas, I hate the thought that we can’t plan for anything besides dinner and homework.

Hoping I am wondering what steps I can take to prepare a future for my kids, our community, and our helping agencies. We have hope to reunite and that keeps me from losing my marbles. My prayers are about a future where mRNA scientists continue breakthroughs and people commit to work past their own personal inconvenience.

A Story about getting a future back. In a podcast interview, [Kevin Kelly](#) recounted a peculiar story of faith. In the interview, Kelly tells *This American Life* how he came to believe in Jesus’ resurrection. At the time of the story, he was a photographer jaunting all over the world to observe interesting religious festivals. He did not do his work as a faith act (his questions about God and faith were sort of an inchoate mess). He was working to get vivid pictures and professional recognition. He had made his way to Jerusalem and ended up being locked out of his hostel. He was literally standing out in the cold on the streets of Old Jerusalem. Because of that mishap, he spent his night in the court of the [Holy Sepulcher](#) (a church built on reputed place of Jesus’ burial). Kelly woke from his fitful night to an Easter Morning where pilgrims were filling the church grounds. With no booming God styled voice, Kelly came to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead.

Being the jumbled mystic that he was, he pondered how this belief should change his life. He came to believe that he should live as if he had 6 months live. He felt that God had given him this death sentence so that he would urgently pursue his faith. Like I said before, there were no voices, no angels, no miracles, just a brewing conviction. He believed that his final mission was to go to his childhood home and just be *ordinary*, living in the present moment for the last six months of life. He helped his parents around the house (I am not sure they were thrilled). On the day he *doesn't* die, he feels like he once again has a future. His hopes and dreams return with a new shine.

Kelly said in the episode: *I also decided that it (the perpetual present) was an entirely unnatural and inhumane way to live. And that having a future is part of what being human is about. And that when you take away the future for humans, you take away a lot of their humanness. And that it's not actually a very good thing to live entirely in the present. That one needs to have a past, and one needs to have a future to be fully human.*

I find meditation and yoga very helpful for staying “present,” but I refuse to demonize the past or future. If you ever craved living the present moment, your wish has been granted by the covid fairy. This has been a deeply unpleasant experience, at least for me. The future is a gift, and Advent is about hope for a future. Advent is a promise that our current moment is not all there is, there is more to come, God is here, and God will be there. I am deeply praying for the coming of Jesus in our lives and an mRNA vaccine.

Until then, I keep my eyes on the prize of protecting the vulnerable; creating a place where the elderly can be free from the prisons of their homes; and where my kids can finally go back to school doing all of the activities meaningful to them. And, I seeing you all come through the church doors, again.

The whole Kelly transcript *This American Life* is a radio broadcast that is now fully available via podcast. Below is the full transcript of the episode's portion involving Kelly. The audio is available on <https://www.thisamericanlife.org>. I have no illusion that all of you will read the whole 10-minute, 2096-word enchilada, but I do believe it is worth your eyeball time. This originally aired in 1995, which makes Kelly 69 in 2020. The whole transcript follows (pgs. 3-7)

Todd

Episode 1, Act 1 of This American Life in 1995. Link to [full audio episode](#)

Transcript:

Ira Glass Well, Kevin Kelly spent most of his twenties wandering around Asia. He was basically wandering around as a freelance photographer. And he found himself photographing a lot of religious ceremonies and drawn to religious ceremonies of all sorts. And he says that he was really confused about what he believed. And he was the kind of person who had always dreamt about a new beginning, where he wouldn't struggle with these questions.

Kevin Kelly I would get twisted and caught up. And these things were in the background, consuming me. And actually, I found that I could think about little else for many, many months, that behind all that I was doing, there was always this unresolved question of was God real. And if he was real, then how could we ignore him? And if we were trying to not ignore him, what would we do? And if he was real, then what about these other things that people said about God?

Ira Glass We will not attempt to answer these questions, by the way, in this hour. I just want to just give you a sense of scope here, just modest scope. But what we want to talk about is what happened to Kevin Kelly. What happened is that at the age of 27, all of this changed when he came into Jerusalem on the eve of Easter and Passover. It was the same weekend. And flocks of people are coming into the city.

Kevin Kelly So I entered Jerusalem on Easter with a simple expectation that I was going to photograph another religious ceremony, another religious festival. And then, for various reasons, I got locked out of my hostel room. They had a curfew. And I didn't make it back in time. And I was in quite a fix because I was a stranger in this very strange town. When it happened, I didn't have enough money to stay elsewhere, nor did I even have knowledge of where to go.

So, I wandered the Old Town of Jerusalem at night, which had been shuttered up and was like a time machine. It was as if I had been transported back to the 15th century, because all the souvenir vendors were gone, and what was left were the labyrinthian paths of cobbled passageways. And I wandered around for a number of hours, and it was getting colder. Eventually, I found myself at the one place that was still open, which was some of the churches. And particularly, after wandering around until about 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, I finally settled into the Church of the Holy Scepter, which is called and viewed as the church built over the mound where Jesus Christ was crucified.

And I was getting very tired. And there weren't many people around. And so eventually, I laid myself out on about the only flat area that was left, which was this marble slab underneath some pendants that had incense on them. And this was presumably the slab that commemorated the exact positioning of the crosses. So, I slept there. I slept on the crucifixion spot on that night because it was the only place-- they had no place in the inn.

I slept there until early morning, when the activity started to increase, and people started coming in. And I went out and followed the crowd where it was going when they were going out to the tombs area in Jerusalem. And I went out. And there were some folding chairs set up in front of this tomb area. And as the sun was coming up on that Easter morning, I was staring at empty tombs. And for a reason that I can not comprehend, as I sat on that chair contemplating this view of the early sun morning coming into the empty tombs, all that I had been wrestling with for the past many, many years in thinking about religion sort of became resolved in my mind. And at that very moment, I believed that Jesus Christ had, indeed, risen from those tombs.

In an instant, the tension of trying to figure things out was resolved, because now, suddenly, everything was figured out. It was as if you had been working on a problem for a long time and suddenly the answer was there. And it was very clear that was the answer. And although there were many things that were still not clear to you, you were very certain that you were on the right path.

Having that realization that I believe that Jesus Christ had actually risen from those tombs did not settle 1,001 other things about what one was supposed to do with that, what I was supposed to do with that. Did that mean I was supposed to be a monk? Did that mean I was supposed to be an evangelist?

Did that mean that I had to immediately renounce all that I had, and get into sackcloths and ashes, and march out into the desert? All that was left unopened. And that is, in fact, what occupied my mind as I went back to my hostel to lay down and think about. Because I had no clue what it really meant to me ultimately, and that's what I was pondering when I was laying there napping. And I wouldn't say it was a voice, but there was an idea that came into my mind that just would not go away, and that was that I should live as if I would die in six months, that I should really, truly live. And that I could not tell for certain whether I would really die, but that either way, I should live as if I was going to die. And so that was the assignment.

I'm a pretty rational person. I'm pretty logical. And after thinking the thought that I should live as if I was going to die in six months, the first thought that comes to my head was, "Well, that's pretty silly. I have no evidence whatsoever. I could live like I'm going to die in six months and not die at all. It would just be an interesting exercise."

But at the same time, it was equally probable that I might die in six months. It happened all the time. There was no guarantee that I wouldn't die. And so fairly quickly, I decided that I could not settle that issue of whether I would really die or not, or just think that I was going to die in six months, and that, in either case, the important thing was to live as if I really believed that I was going to die in six months, which is what I set out to do.

The next couple days, I had the joyous experience of saying to myself, "OK, what do I do for six months if I have only six months to live?" And the answers to that surprised me as much as the assignment, because after thinking that through and contemplating it, the conclusion that I came to was that what I wanted to do for six months was to go home and be ordinary, to go back to my parents, to help them take out the trash, and trim the hedges, and move furniture

around, and to be with them. And I was really shocked by that, because I thought that with six months to live, I would climb Mount Everest, or I would go scuba diving to the depths of the ocean or get in a speedboat and see how fast I could go. But instead, I wanted to go back home and be with my family for that time.

I, of course, did not tell anybody my crazy idea. This is, in fact, the first time I'm really talking about it publicly. Because it's a very scary and alarming idea. And I never told anybody why I was coming home.

I got back to where my parents live in New Jersey, and things were unbelievably ordinary. And yet, I found myself relishing the ordinariness and finding it in some ways as exotic as anything that I had traveled to see. I helped around the house. I dug up shrubs. I worked on a deck. I moved furniture, washed dishes.

And I was intending to spend my last remaining six months at home getting to know my parents better and myself, hopefully. But about three months into that, my travel urges, I guess, got the better of me. And what I was most concerned about was I wanted to see my brothers and sisters. I had four brothers and sisters. And they were scattered all across the country. And so, I felt very strongly that I wanted to see them before I died. And I got the idea that the way to see them was to ride my bicycle across the country and visit them on bicycle.

But before I did that, I made up a will to dispose of the little things that I had. And I had some money left over. And one of the things I did with that money was I went to the bank and got some cashier's checks for \$500 and \$1,000. And I mailed the money to various people anonymously as gifts. And I think giving away those thousands of dollars was the first true act of charity I had ever done. Because there was absolutely no way for any kind of gratitude or elevated feelings to come back to me, because the people had no idea who had sent them that money.

It was really remarkable to see the consequences of getting an anonymous gift like that. Because when you get a check for \$1,000 in the mail, you immediately become suspicious of all your friends of having given that to you. And so, there's this suspicion of charity, suspicion of goodness that starts to infect the people that are around you. And you look at someone, you think, "Hm, I wonder if he gave me that \$1,000?"

Ira Glass Does that make sense? You look at them, and you think, "I wonder if he gave me that \$1,000?" And then you act really nice to him. And then the next person you see, the next of your friends, you think, "Could this be the person?" And then you act really nice to them.

I almost want to begin a little speech here about let us all now take up this practice. All of us. Everyone within the sound of my voice. If we all could just do this right now, then I would believe that our little radio show, just 19 minutes into the program, had contributed in some way.

Kevin Kelly, I had enough money left over to basically pay for food and whatnot on my bicycle journey across America. And the path that I had to visit all my brothers and sisters was not a direct route, going from San Francisco to New York. I actually had to go up to Idaho, and back down to Texas, and then back up through Indiana. So, it was a 5,000-mile trip. The day

which, coincidentally, was exactly six months from when I had this assignment, was October 31. It was Halloween. And so, the plan would be that I would ride back home, so that I would come back to die on the day after Halloween.

I think there are a lot of people who have trouble staying in the present. There are some people who like to slip into the past as a means to perhaps fantasize or escape. And they find that the past is the place that they retreat to. And I often retreat to the future. I was not a person who planned or had a career staged out, or who had a particular woman he wanted to marry some day, or some vision of a house. The future that I found so hard to give up was a much more insidious type.

It was that of I'd like to buy this record because, in the future, I want to hear this song again and again. Or I will read this book, and there are some cool ideas in it because someday I may write an article about this. And it's good to know that. There was a sense in which my entire life was shifted to the future. And the thought of doing something now for the enjoyment, or the pleasures, or the principle of the function of just right now, without any sense at all that it would ever be used again or that it could ever be brought forward, was extremely difficult and disconcerting. And I fought it day by day and tooth by tooth.

One of the ways I dealt with this was that I was actually able, by the last weeks, to not think about my life beyond Halloween. There was a way which I had just-- each time a thought came up about something that was beyond this horizon, I just said, "Nope, can't think about it. It doesn't work. We have to dwell in the present."

And at the same time, I was doing that, and I was able to do that, I also decided that it was an entirely unnatural and inhumane way to live. And that having a future is part of what being human is about. And that when you take away the future for humans, you take away a lot of their humanness. And that it's not actually a very good thing to live entirely in the present. That one needs to have a past, and one needs to have a future to be fully human.

It was a journey that began at the tomb of Jesus. And as I set off to my own presumed death, I did, indeed, think about Jesus Christ who, according to the Gospels, surrendered his own life in a very knowing way. So, we have the history in the Gospels of Jesus's torment in his soul, as he approached what he knew of his anointed time to die. So it was, again, that very harsh information of knowing when you're going to die.

And Jesus's soul was in great turmoil and pain because of knowing that. And I think I did experience some of that, not because I had the same weight. It was just my own life. But Jesus prayed that this burden be lifted, and there were days when I did pray that, that if I didn't have to die, I really would rather not.

By late fall, I was pedaling through the Appalachians, and it was getting colder and colder. And my hands were freezing on the bicycles, and there was ice on my tents in the morning when I got up. And as each day went on, I was coming closer and closer to terrain that I was familiar with and that felt like home. And I was riding into New Jersey, and I was elated. I was elated that I had accomplished this long journey. And I was elated that I was home to see my parents.

And I came into their house on Halloween day. And I was so filled with ideas, and things, and emotions, that I didn't really say very much. And again, I couldn't say very much. I think we had a wonderful dinner. They were, of course, glad to see me because they hadn't seen me in a long time. They knew I was coming back, and we had a wonderful dinner.

We had baskets of candy, which I gave out to the kids. And we had a discussion that night which was about nothing in particular. It was not about the future. It was just about, I think, talking about our family and my brothers and sisters. And I was telling them all that I had learned about them. And so, it was a very together and, again, not a very dramatic evening, but just a pleasant one, one that you might have a memory about as you were dying, which was not a special evening, but just an ordinary evening.

And I went to bed that night, which was a very difficult thing to do because I was fully prepared at that point never to wake up again. I had been praying. I had gotten everything arranged. I had fully gone through in my own mind, in my own soul, all the things that I might have regretted. And I had righted as many of those as I thought I could through letters. And I was prepared, as much as anybody could be prepared to die.

And so, I went to bed while the kids were still ringing doorbells. And I went to sleep, because I was very tired after that long trip. And I didn't know what was going to happen the next day. I thought I had done all that I could. And the next morning, I woke up. And the next morning, I woke up, and it was as if-- The next morning I woke up, and it was as if I had the entire-- my entire life again.

The next morning, I woke up, and I had my entire life again. I had my future again. There was nothing special about the day. It was another ordinary day. I was reborn into ordinariness. But what more could one ask for?

Ira Glass Well, Kevin Kelly is 43 now. That happened when he was 27. In his latest rebirth, he is the executive editor of *Wired* magazine, a glossy magazine about the future and the present. He told us that he wasn't even sure he has ever even told his parents this story, even this many years later. Anyway, he spoke with me and Paul Tough from the studios of KQED in San Francisco. This is *Your Radio Playhouse* on WBEZ Chicago.