

Series: Grace Forward

Sermon #4: Church—Seize This Day!

Jeremiah 29:4-9; John 17:11-18

Dr. Matt Cassidy --- January 24, 2021

Good morning, Grace Covenant Church! Thanks for joining us here and online. I have some great news for us. On February 7th in two weeks we're going to go to two services here at Grace. Yay! And we're doing that for a lot of different reasons—certainly to make room, but also because we're expanding our ministry potential. That is the big reason. What we've done is that we've made all of the rooms on our campus with that magic filter thingy that we have, and now they are safer than any restaurant you've ever attended or probably any other building, for that matter. And then we've also equipped all the rooms with audio/video in order to broadcast the ministries on the internet. We can do that, and will make it available—we're going to have a series coming up on February 7th on Ecclesiastes and we want as many people as possible to be in groups for that, and we'll have groups here on campus, two services. It will be awesome.

Let me tell you what's it's going to look like. We will have child care at the 9:15 service only for the people who are volunteering either at 9:15 or 11:00. Children will be taken care of if you're volunteering at 9:15 or 11:00, childcare only. You need to register so that we can make sure we have enough adult supervision on that.

At the 11:00 hour we're going to have the full campus available for all of its ministries. Grace Kids will be up and running from birth through fifth grade, and our youth ministry, junior high and senior high programs, will be meeting as well. Again, in the children's ministry, age 0 through fifth grade, it's very important to register so that we know how many people are coming. There might be an issue of space limitations.

And by the way, most of the adult communities will be meeting on campus the second hour as well.

Here's what we need desperately: volunteers. I've spoken with pastors around the country and getting volunteers is the hardest thing during our pandemic time. If you can help in any way and work at either one of those services as a greeter, or driving our shuttle car or working in our production or our children's ministries, fabulous. Go to the website,

grace360.org/serve, and let us know how you can help so that we can get the church up and running as much as we possibly can.

Let me pray for that and then we'll get started. I've got to tell you, I'm pretty excited about what we're going to learn today. Let me pray.

Lord, we are grateful for an opportunity to get back to some part of normalcy, but even then, just all the ministry and its potential and how we can serve each other and be encouraged to live lives that glorify You. So, Lord, I'd ask that You would bless our plans. (Look, we're making plans again.) Bless our plans to bring the church back to two services. Could you lead people to want to serve? And cause us to be a healthy church in the context of our service and generosity and our love for one another. We'd ask that You would bless Grace. Bless her indeed. In Jesus' name. Amen.

We're going to end with communion today, so if you're here and you didn't get one of those portable communion cups, take some time and go get those, because we're going to end with a communal event.

Review of Grace Forward Series

We're doing a series called Grace Forward and we're at week four. And the fundamental theme is "For such a time as this." Seize the year, Grace Covenant Church. Seize the year. Grace forward.

I'll just summarize—we're kind of on our third point, and the points build on each other, so let me review. Part one was get in shape or stay in shape, body, soul, spirit. Become like Christ in all of life. Either get there or stay there. And guide others, help other people do that. That was part one, get in shape.

Part two was get in a group. Because life change happens in community with other people. Life goals are reached when you're on a team. Teams or groups help you get in shape; they help you stay in shape.

And groups—part three—have the power to impact and influence the culture around us. What we're going to look at today is the power of purposeful groups in the context of the local

church. Because the goal all along was to do this: it was to have a soul and a spirit so tender towards the Lord that you could hear His promptings, and then to have the courage to execute on the way He's leading you.

And now, in groups that are strengthening you and encouraging you, and those groups are also having the power of influence and impact. The purpose of the Church is to spread out in the community and have influence and impact. That's how the kingdom of God is spread, by us finding our way into other people's lives through God's sovereignty.

There's a great anecdote about when Oliver Cromwell was leading Great Britain. And they were in a financial situation where they ran out of currency. And so, Cromwell told a group of people to go and search the entire kingdom for silver. He needed more money. And so, the teams went to the four corners of the world and they said, "There is no emergency silver. We are entirely out of this. Well, except the cathedrals. At the cathedrals there are statues of the saints that are made of the finest silver."

And Cromwell said, "Melt down the saints and put them into circulation. Melt them down and put them into circulation."

There we are. That's the purpose of the Church. That is how the Church has fulfilled its ambition, especially a church like ours where every believer is a minister. And the ministry for most of us is out there, in those neighborhoods where we're starting to get reconnected, or in new ways in our workplaces. We need to be out in the circulation. We are that church.

Reason for the Church to Have Hope

One of the reasons that I'm thrilled about the circumstances that we're in, and particularly this church, is because it's getting so bad, it's getting good. It's getting so bad that it's getting good. There's been an increase in the volume of the nag of the human condition. There's an angst and there's an aching that is part of the way we're designed. And that aching is to know and to love our creator God. It is to have life with meaning and purpose. It is to be part of a community that's connected, having relational contact to know and be known and to love and to love other people. And that's part of our design. And it doesn't matter whether you're male or female; it doesn't matter what your race is; it doesn't matter what your socioeconomic status is. All of these things are expression of God's creativity. But the nature of man is this longing. It's God's calling us back to Eden.

And the amplification of the angst that's taking place around the entire world is this fact: we are running out of dead-end streets to go down to find what God has for us without having God there. We're running out. And what's happening is people are coming to the realization that it's not going to work the way they are planning it. And that's why anxiety levels are going up and anger levels are going up. We want what only God can offer, but we don't want God.

And people are getting worn out. It's like we're on an Easter egg hunt in a graveyard. And God says, *There's only one place you're going to find that egg, and it's that empty tomb over there.*

Oh, I won't look there.

Well then, keep looking.

And people have been looking for a long time. And they're growing tired of it. Whether their ideology is on the left or on the right, it doesn't matter. They're running out of room. The escalating depression and anxiety are at levels now that we haven't seen in modern lifetime. And what's happened is this: people all around us, and maybe you too, if you've clung to ideologies that aren't biblical—people are done, all around us, d-o-n-e. And they are so desperate, they might consider a supreme being revealing himself in Jesus Christ to provide salvation and purpose, bringing about community, learning how to love and be loved—all those things are coming up.

Who's the hero of the story? Okay, yeah, we're in church. It's Jesus. But wait ... kind of. It's His bride. The hero of the story, of the situation that we're in right now, is the Church. It's the bride of Jesus Christ: the primary means by which the kingdom is expressed in the world today is the Church.

And few times—maybe one other time in American history--has the Church been where it is right now. I mean, where real Christians are a true minority, only a few times in our country's history.

And then the other thing that's taking place is what people used to tolerate with Christians is now becoming treated with increasing hostility--increasing hostility towards Christians that are simply practicing their faith or just acknowledging the clear biblical ethics of right and wrong.

Let me just give you two examples that have taken place during this ten-month pandemic, or whatever month we're on, during COVID. Now the first one, I admit, they're just outliers and

very vocal when they get pressed. But remember when Samaritan's Purse moved a mobile hospital into the New York City area to help people live? And there were some people that said, "We want no part of these people coming into our town because they believe in God and Jesus." Wow.

But the one that really describes what's happening to the Church right now was when Vice President Pence was assigned the job to find a vaccine as soon as possible. And so, he gathered people in the room together and they had extensive times of planning and delegation, these scientists and business leaders and anyone that could help. And they had that meeting, and Vice President Pence said, "Well, why don't we pray for the Lord's blessing on that?"

I mean, why not? Ask for a little supernatural help here, right? And just a few decades ago, Aldous Huxley would have said, "Sure, who cares? If God doesn't exist, then it will only take a few minutes."

Not today. It wasn't the outliers. When Pence came up from that prayer, political leaders and media leaders openly scorned the idea of calling upon a supreme being to help mortals during a global plague. He was openly mocked for just practicing our faith.

How Do We Live?

How are we to live? And why am I so excited about this? I really am. It's getting so bad, it's getting good. They're running out of dead ends. And here's the other thing: the Church. Yeah, we're a minority that's persecuted and mocked. That's the way the Church is! It's not like it's the first time the Church has been here. This is kind of the way we're designed. This is the context of its birth.

Let me just put it another way: the bride of Jesus Christ never looks better than when she's wearing army boots. She's going to be just fine. She's okay with this.

And what's going to happen is that we're going to start reading our Bibles, because those Bible letters were not written to a church that is in a majority and is living life comfortably. And we're going to start reading the Bible for a church that's in the minority, that's being squeezed out. And verses are going to jump off the page and we're going to see them for what they are.

Because, guys, we are in exile and we never left home. We are refugees in our own country. We are, as the Bible says, foreigners. We are citizens of heaven. And it's starting to feel that way. And friends, this is what we're made for.

So, the Old Testament and in the New Testament both speak about how do we live in this sort of thing? Here's how. We just listen to Jesus' prayer. He prayed for you, He prayed for me, in times like these.

John 17:11, 15-16, 18

Holy Father, protect them by the power of Your name ...

¹⁵ My prayer is not that You take them out of the world but that You protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.

¹⁸ As You sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

Listen to how He tells us how to live in this prayer, John 17: "Holy Father, protect them"—yeah, wow, they're in danger—"Protect them by the power of Your name. My prayer is not that You take them out of the world, but that You protect them from the evil one while they're in the world. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. And as You sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world."

Look what He says, for you and me. He says, *Stay on mission*, and specifically, He says, *Father, don't take them out of the world. Keep them safe while they're in the world doing what they're called to do.*

Three Ways to Live in This World

There are three ways to live in times like this. Two of them are wrong. One of them is right, and it's the only one that works. The two that are wrong are imitation of the world and isolation of the world—imitation and isolation.

1. Imitation

Imitation of the world is when you're assimilated into the culture like the Borg—resistance is futile. So, you just kind of go along to get along and try to stay safe. And James says there's no friendship between the believer and the world. You have to choose.

James 4:4

... don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

Look at James 4:4: “Don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, if anyone chooses to be friends of the world, he becomes an enemy with God.”

And friends, I understand a lot what motivates you to be friends with the world, just to imitate the world, to assimilate into it. A lot of times it’s just insecurity. *I just want to belong. I just want to be part of something. I don’t like being mocked and made fun of. Shame doesn’t look good on me. I’ll just give a little of my values little by little.*

But here’s the thing. The idea of not fitting in here—we’re not supposed to fit in. We’re supposed to be homesick.

And the other thing about imitating or being assimilated into the culture is that we’re supposed to be distinct from the culture. The culture, the people, our family and friends around us, are supposed to say *You have something that I don’t have. Have you found the voice of God? Do you have purpose and meaning? Do you have community? Because that’s what my soul’s been longing for. I’m on this hunt in a graveyard and I haven’t found it.* That distinctive—we need to hold that.

2. Isolation

It’s not by imitating. And isolating is when you just separate from the world. *I’m out of here, me and my family. We’re going to hunker down, come Lord Jesus.* It’s getting harder to do that. Don’t imitate. Don’t isolate.

3. Infiltration

Jesus is praying this: that we would infiltrate the world, in community. It’s an idea that we understand the sovereignty of God has brought us here at this time for such a time as this, for big things. Not to run and hide, not to be afraid. If you imitate the culture, if you isolate yourself from the culture, you lose your purpose. And what He’s saying here is to infiltrate the culture in community to have influence and impact. That’s the goal. That’s what He prayed for.

In the Old Testament, same thing. It's a story that you might know. Hundreds of years are filled with warnings from the prophets. They're talking to Israel and Judah, the nation of God, and they've been saying, "You have got to stop with your idolatry and your injustice. You have got to come under God's tutelage. We are in His protective care."

And eventually, after hundreds of years of going deaf to God's warnings, He says, *You want your freedom outside the fence of protection? You can have that. The gate's open. It always is. You can leave.*

And so, they leave the protective custody of Yahweh, God Almighty. And it doesn't take long before Babylon sees they have easy prey. They invade Judah, they tear down Jerusalem. Tens of thousands of people are killed. And some that remain are taken by the Babylonians about 700 miles east to Babylon. Those are called "in exile." They're Jews in exile in Babylon. And when those Jews showed up in Babylon, it was "Toto, we are not in Kansas anymore." There was a lot to be afraid of with the culture and the religion and the ethics, the language itself.

Jeremiah 29:4-9

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase there; do not decrease. ⁷ Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to Yahweh for the city, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." ⁸ Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. ⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the Lord.

And Jeremiah writes these exiles and he says—now listen for *don't imitate the culture, don't isolate from the culture. Infiltrate the culture in community.* Look what he says. Here's his letter from Jerusalem to the Babylonian Jews. He says, "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those who were carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Build your houses and settle down; plant your gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and

daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters into marriage, so that they too can have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; don't decrease. Also, seek the peace and the prosperity of the city into which I, God, have sovereignly had you carried off into exile. Pray to Yahweh for the city, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.'"

The only warning against is: "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says: 'Do not let the prophets and the diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams that they encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,' declares the Lord."

Don't Imitate

Do not imitate the culture. Don't be assimilated into it. I know it's easy. You just go downstream on this thing. And in our culture, spiritually speaking, it's just being a cafeteria Christian where you just go through and you just pick the things that you want. *A little bit of Jesus, the words that you like, the love of Jesus—not His ethics, just the love.* And in the church you do that too. *If the mood is right, if the church is interesting, if it validates what I already believe,* then you can have a little bit of this, a little bit of that.

You're one semester deep in college and all it takes is a couple of people in the dorm and they shame you for what the Bible clearly teaches is right and wrong, and without a backbone, you fall. Or three months into the workplace and people sit down with you and say, "You're going to join this cause or else." And that cafeteria Christianity doesn't work because it's not real.

Don't Isolate

Imitating the spiritual world right now—spirituality—nah, don't do that. Don't isolate, don't find yourself in these little cul-de-sacs of Christianity where no one knows anyone outside of your little bubble. That's not the way it goes.

Do Infiltrate

He wants you to infiltrate. Another word that I think is graphic for this is "insulate." Because the idea is to insulate. What happens when it's really cold outside? Remember two

weeks ago that one day? You get on jackets. You put on layers of coat. You have your community put your coat on so you can go out in the cold and not be influenced by that cold. You insulate to infiltrate. That's what's he's talking about—for impact, for influence.

He's saying, *Look, make a great city out of this city where you're in exile. God brought you here.* God brought you here to Austin for this time. Make it safe. Make it prosperous. Do whatever you need to do to help those who are in need. And participate in the whole experience of being here now. I know you're homesick. Make the best of your journey.

Look closely at the passage itself. There are about six or seven commands—not suggestions. There are six or seven commands in here. The first one is “Build houses, settle down. Plant gardens and eat the produce.” Bloom where you're planted. Do you know what He's saying? Settle in for the long haul. Many of you are going to die in Babylon. Plant a tree.

Don't be afraid of the culture. Get involved in that. It says, “Seek peace and prosperity for the city.” That's another command. Seek peace for it. When you work, work seriously. Your work matters to God, and it's an expression of worship. Do that. Go about your city like it would be Jerusalem, and you try to make it into a Garden of Eden of old. That's what we're made to do, is to take chaos and make it into something beautiful. Do that for your city.

Do you know how many years Austin won the most beautiful city in America? How many times? Ten years in a row or something like that back in the '80s when I was here. I don't think it's up for that. No, it's been some time. We need to be part of being good citizens to help clean up that part of the city.

Pay our taxes—oh, that hurts. Pay our taxes. Vote. Be involved in justice. That's what he's saying here.

The most radical thing that He says in this passage that you won't find in other places is that he says to pray for the city. “Pray to Yahweh for it to prosper, because if it prospers, you will prosper too.” Here's what Jeremiah just said: *Pray for Babylon.* Can you imagine what that audience heard when they read that? *Pray for Babylon? They killed my family.* Yeah. That's good. Pray for Babylon.

And then the only command of what not to do is “do not let the prophets among you deceive you.” And that's a word for us in exile. You can make bank right now being a false prophet, teaching Christianity that's not Christianity. It's easy. Because people are taking

advantages of our fears and our anxieties, the fact that we're off balance. And they're going to tell us what we want to hear. And he says, *They're not from me.*

Application as a Church

So, let me tell you how we're going to apply these words from Jesus and Jeremiah about how to live in times like this. Here's what we're going to do.

Our 2021 preaching calendar up here—here's what we're going to do. We're going to go through the various orthodox beliefs, the foundational beliefs, the convictions, of a church—Grace Covenant Church, but *the* Church. We'll be working on that throughout the year.

We're going to spend some time in 1 and 2 Peter. 1 and 2 Peter were two epistles written for a church in persecution. The theme is how to take a punch and still smile, maybe with a cracked tooth. That's the theme of 1 and 2 Peter. Let's do that.

The bigger value here is to see the sovereignty of God. God has power and He has a plan and He is watching and He has put us here in exile for such a time as this. So, we are to pray and we are to fast and worship ... wait, I've got a better outline. It's called Grace forward. Get in shape: body, soul, and spirit. Become like Christ in all of life. Get in a group, a purposeful group, to get in shape and stay in shape. Because then you can see the power of a group for influence and involvement as we infiltrate our culture for impact, for influence.

Listen, right now it's very easy to understand that we could be afraid, that we feel vulnerable, we don't feel like we have a lot of faith. Let me tell you what fear does. The first thing fear does is that it kills love. You can't be afraid and love, not what the Bible says about love. And we're missing an opportunity to love because we're too busy being afraid. It goes back to this—the way we're designed. The bride wears boots—army boots. She thrives in this context. And that's just the Church. If we turned outside the Church and looked around us and you looked at all the ministry that's out there—people, written on their foreheads, “I am d-o-n-e, done. Where do I find God? How do I find purpose? Is there a community that will accept me the way that I am?” There's the Church. It's only going to take a few of us. It's only going to take a few. But those few can't care about things that aren't going to be here a thousand years from now. You just can't hold onto that.

I got a word from an old boss, a pastor I used to work for. His name is E. V. Hill. And every Sunday he rocked the world. Here's one of the messages that he has for you and for me.

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Video Link:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/mualfprfohcgkjh/EV%20HILL%20CLIP%20E>

[Rev. E. V. Hill speaking at a Promise Keepers meeting in 1993(?)]

Edgar Hoover was head of the FBI. He invited a number of leaders, some two hundred or more, to New York to discuss the plight of our country as it related to subversive activities. They began to discuss the Black Panther party and its impact upon New York City. That the Panthers have New York; the Panthers were roaming the streets of New York; the Panthers had shut up all stores after 5:00 in Harlem, New York. The Panthers made millions of people cross the bridges, hurrying out of New York. The Panthers had fear grip New York City. Millions of people, near four million people, fled because the Panthers were on the march.

So I asked Mr. Sullivan a question. I said, "Mr. Sullivan, how many Panthers are active in New York? How many of them are causing stores to be locked up? How many of them are causing churches not to have worship at night? How many of them are closing down Central Park at night? Lovers' Lane? How many of them have gripped the town with fear? What is the active membership of the Black Panther party of New York?"

Mr. Sullivan said, "Eighty-one."

Eighty-one running four million people across the bridges. Eighty-one closing down churches and businesses. Eighty-one causing fear to grip and shutting down the places of social activity. Just eighty-one.

My friends, there needs to be a condemnation of the Black Panthers activity, but there needs to be a compliment of their effectiveness. Because if I look out over here, there's eighty-one everywhere I look. And we are not closing down nothing. We

are not closing down institutions of ill repute, abortion centers and what have you. We're not closing them down. And there are more than eighty-one of us here.

But those eighty-one were dedicated to the point of their own lives. They cared not for their lives. And they were effective in closing down New York.

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Phew! That's preaching right there! I don't know what I'm doing, but that's preaching.

What does that look like for Grace? We get in shape. We owe it to the team. We join a team, we get in a group with purpose. And we're using the power of that group, not to just huddle, but for impact and influence. We're insulating each other and ourselves so that we can go out in there and do stuff, to have impact and influence.

How does that look for us? It looks like incrementally we're just doing things around here. Strategically, it's something else. We are becoming an online church with community--for this season, an online church with community. Here's why. It's so important. You have to see the strategy in this.

We've always been a regional church. We're by three highways, people drive in from all over to come to us. And that brings about two problems that we have with being a regional church. One of them is the distance. The second is the threat level to bring a friend here. Just to walk in the doors, it's kind of weird. But if you're an online church with community, then with all of our ministries available, mind you--with all of our ministries available—look how it solves some difficult problems for us.

First of all, the distance issue. What's happened during our COVID time since we've gone online and we've changed everything around to do that, is that we've been able to reconnect with some families that drove a long way. And some other families are connecting with friends and other family members outside of the state of Texas. In other words, people are starting to watch the service together and then have community later to talk about it. But community is key, because that's where you have the sermon.

So, people that move too far away and they just want to find a church in Georgetown or Elgin or something like that, they realize, *I can just come back to Grace now. It's never been easier.*

Some people are part of the country north of here where the Bible isn't taught much, like Oklahoma, for example. Just kidding. But it's a true story. We're seeing adults here with parents in other parts of the country and now they're going to church together online, in community, for the purpose of application of the Bible. There you go.

And so, here's what I want you to consider, especially those of you who are living outside the hub right here where we are. If you're living in Georgetown or Liberty Hill or Hutto or Elgin, you're planting a church. In this season, look at your house and that television as a church plant where you guys could maybe pod a watch party together in or out of the living room, and then come together in the week to take advantage of the discussion questions, and apply that sermon. In shape, in community, with purpose. It brings us closer together, oddly enough, as we're farther apart.

The second thing is the threat of coming—I'm talking about ministry for your friends and family members. Who are we kidding? It's kind of weird to come to church. You've gotten to the point where God is working on you and you have done your part as a minister to say, *Would you like to come to church?* It's still uncomfortable for a lot of people, especially if they weren't raised in a church culture. It's never been easier to invite. All you have to do is say, *Why don't you do a watch party?* Or, *Why don't you watch it this weekend and tell me what you think.* And then maybe (watch this), step one: *Just watch the church.* Step two: *why don't you watch the church and join a community? I could meet with you and maybe we could get two other gals to do that as well and we could try and apply that week to our lives.*

You could start your own little small groups. There's so much ministry right outside your door, right outside your afraid little world. There are people that are done and they are looking for someone to invite them to something super nonthreatening.

And that's not all, by the way. It's not just the worship service that is available. It's all of our communities. And so, when people are in places of transition or panic (like they have teenagers now), they can watch the Parenting Teens class without the threat of going there or being seen or being followed up on and all that, you know, weird things.

But also, I want you to know, this is for your ministry. Celebrate Recovery—you can go online—it’s a twelve-step program except we name Jesus in it. ReEngage, our marriage ministry—those two ministries right now, because of the pandemic—addiction is going up and divorces have gone up. *Hey, I have a ministry for you, neighbor, co-worker. And it’s never been easier. You can just show up and wear a mask even, not even be seen.*

But community is the key. It’s getting people connected. It’s helping each other become like Christ in all of life. It is the power of impact. That’s why we’re going through these things this year, the topics we’ll be studying. But also, it’s why we’re going to start February 7th with a series on Ecclesiastes. What better book than Ecclesiastes where people are hearing the longing for God? They don’t have purpose or meaning. There’s no sense of community or being loved or loving other people. Why not study what’s wrong with the world and how having an Easter egg hunt in a graveyard is a silly way to live? We’ll spend seven weeks on that starting February 7th. Why don’t you start a group? We’ll have a group meeting here on campus, a small group, after the discussion, seven weeks. Each week we’ll have a discussion. We’ll have some discussion questions written up, we’ll have a little book that we’ll be able to provide. See how strategically this is rolling out? We’re just being the Church and what she was meant to be.

So, come on, Grace. Be everything God has called us to be. For such a time as this ... Seize the year. This is the only 2021 that will ever be. Let’s make the very most of it. We have so much to offer.

Conclusion

Eugene Peterson wrote a book about Jeremiah. It’s called *Run with the Horses*. And talk about “seize the moment,” here’s a great little quote from it. He says, “The only place you have to be human is here right now. The only opportunity you will ever have to live by faith is in the circumstances you are in right here this very day, in the house you live in, this family you find yourself in, this job you have been given, the weather conditions that you’re experiencing.” This is that time to show yourself to be a child of God.

These are great times. This is a good time to thrive, because the Church is where she does best. And the culture ... it’s d-o-n-e, done. Let’s open our eyes and see what’s out there. Every believer’s a minister. Let’s do ministry.

Let me pray. I’m just going to pray Jesus’ prayer for me and for you. Enjoy.

Jesus said:

I'm coming to You, Father, and I've told Grace many things while I was with them in the world and they were filled with joy. I've given them Your word. The world hates them because they don't belong to this world, just as I don't belong to this world. And so now, Father, I'm asking You not to take them out of this world, but to keep them safe while in the world. They don't belong to this world any more than I belong to this world. So, Lord, Father God, make them holy with Your truth. Teach them the Word. That's where the truth is. And just as You sent me into the world, I'm sending them into the world. I gave myself as a holy sacrifice so that they might be holy in Your truth. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

I thought, *What better application could there be than for us as a family, as a community together, separate?* The people here in the auditorium that are joining us live, the people that are in their living rooms right now—we can do this together and separately. It's not the way it was meant to be; it's the way it is. And we're going to seize that moment.

Let me start with a little parable, a modern parable. There was a little seacoast peninsula that was especially dangerous. And ships would regularly wreck right off that beach. And so, there was a life station put there. And it was just a simple thing. Don't misunderstand, it was just a hut and it was a single boat. But men and women who cared not for their lives would go out and save those that were wrecked. It didn't take long before people would realize, *Hey, I want to be part of something like this.* So they gave money and effort to that little life station. And they got new boats and they got a couple of more workers that could help, new crews.

And then after a while, people realized, *You know, it's not a very comfortable place to come. Once you've been shipwrecked, there aren't enough resources and facilities available for people when they come in.* And so, do you know what they said? *Let's just add on to that little hut.* And so, they did. They put in some showers and had a lobby, and they decorated it very nicely, and they put that first little rescue boat up over the fireplace mantel. And they continued to invest in that life station.

Then they realized, *You know, the shipwrecks only happen when there's inclement weather.* And so, they just started hiring crews to go out and to help people. And the fireplace was attended well. And memberships were taken up. *I'm a member of this life station.*

And then one day there was a huge shipwreck just off the coast, and they sent all the boats and all the crews, and they came back filled. The life station now was overrun with sick people and dirty people and dying people. And some were even dead. They were all over the lobby and all over the facilities. And when they had a meeting after that, there was an assessment of what that cost. And they decided, *Why don't we just call this section "the clubhouse," "the country club."*

And the people said, *What about rescuing lives? Where's the life station?*

We'll just put that a little bit further down the beach.

And that's what happened. The life station became a country club. And a new life station was formed, and people went out to save lives.

But history keeps repeating itself, and each one of those life stations became a bigger and better country club. And now all along the beach is just a series of country clubs. But the ships still wreck. And now the people just drown.

It's a metaphor for the Church in so many different ways. The thing that we should fear is comfort. And sometimes the best thing for us is persecution and discomfort and a need to fight.

And so, I want to do communion with that as the context. I'm just asking, are there people out there that care not for their own lives? We just need eighty-one. Get out of the country club. Get back in that life station, what we were designed to do. We stay in shape as a team, we work as a community for purpose, impact, influence. That's what we're here for.

So, maybe we end Grace Forward with a commitment to be who we were meant to be; a commitment to thrive.

So, on the night Jesus was betrayed, He took the communion meal, the Passover meal, and He took the bread at that moment and He broke it and He said, "This is my body. It will be broken for you."

So, family of Grace, if you're a follower of Jesus Christ and you want to take this together, before we put this bread in our mouth, let's pause for just a moment. Do you want to be in a country club or do you want to be in a life station? We're going to take this as lifeguards together.

Let's take the bread together.

And on that same night, He took the cup and He said, “This is the blood of the new covenant—my blood, all the promises fulfilled. Take this cup and do this in memory of me.”

Let’s drink it together.

When He ended the communion meal, He said, “Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, do this in remembrance of me until I come again.” *Settle in for the long haul, but I’m coming back. Plant, harvest, pray for your city. I’ll be back. But you look best in boots. Enjoy that moment.*

Let’s close this time in prayer. We’re going to sing a really fun song. I’ll be back to close. Let’s pray.

And then the Lord God, Yahweh, said, “And then when seventy years is complete, when my sovereign, providential will is fulfilled, I will come to you and fulfill my good promises and bring you back. I have great plans for you, Church, declares Yahweh. Plans to prosper you, not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. And then you will call on me and come and you’ll pray, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and you will find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

Lord, we see this exile without ever leaving home; this sense of being a refugee and we still have our passports. We see this as a sovereign act, this feeling of being a captive. And we realize now that we will not be afraid, because it’s keeping us from loving the people that You’ve brought into our lives. Lord, I’d ask that You would cause us to rise above our inadequacies and our fears, our anxieties; that we would rise above that and we would initiate friendships and relationships, we would turn communities to what they were meant to be so that we would please You in all that we say and do; that You’d speak to us in that still, quiet, calm voice and we’d have the ears to hear that. Lord, I’d ask that we would have the courage to do what you say. We pray this as a church in Jesus’ name. Amen.