

Daily View

“But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’” Hebrews 3:13

April 20, 2020



We can't travel, but we can dream [Paris, 2018]

“Mental Placeholders

And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. John 20:22

When Bible students read the verse above they tend to say, *“hold it; what is this? The apostles didn't receive the Holy Spirit the Day of Pentecost, several weeks after this incident.”* And that's right. When it came up in class, I explained the verse the way I always have — without much confidence. Clearly, I said, it is a precursor of the real thing that came later. Terry Raposa then commented that it was possibly a “mental or psychological placeholder” — something to keep them going until things become clearer; in their case, the receiving of the Holy Spirit in the upper room, recorded in Acts 2.

That comment resonated with me since I have used placeholders for years in designing publications. You've probably seen it: when you open up a template and you see that “dummy text”: *Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet...* That allows designers to put together layouts before the content has been created. It's a “placeholder.” The practice dates to the 1500s and the text comes from Cicero's *de Finibus Bonorum et Malorum (The Extremes of Good and Evil)*, written in 45 BC.

This reception of the Holy Spirit was not the first “mental placeholder” that Jesus gave his disciples. He frequently told them that some thing was going to happen in the future. Famously, he said, *“let not your heart be troubled”* (John 14:1) long before they had any reason to believe their hearts should be troubled. Later, in chapter 16, he used an analogy of giving birth (16:21), which must have caused these rugged men a head-scratch or two. Then in 16:33 he said, *“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”* That was a *mental placeholder*.

We all need mental or psychological placeholders at times — something that prepares us for something to come. Parents do it with their kids when their kids are scared. The words, “It's alright,” from a parent to a small child, provides assurance that helps them sleep.

This “mental placeholder” thing seems so appropriate during this health crisis. Leaders in churches want to provide assurance for the flock they shepherd. “It'll be alright” is OK but most want something more. And any good leader wants to do all he can to help reduce the anxiety and uncertainty that lingers at a time like this. It's especially hard when we can't do anything in person.

It seems that most of us here at Folsom are doing OK. We have not yet heard of people who are out of a job or even in the hospital with the coronavirus. The elders want to provide a “placeholder,” without raising false hope. It's difficult because, unlike Jesus, we don't have any absolutes about what the future holds — or if there will even *be* a future.

There are many layers in this health emergency. Most of it comes down to two crucial aspects of life: health and economic stability. Health experts lean toward longer periods of “safe distancing,” while economic experts say that the economic impact could be worse than the disease itself (people die due to economic distress, too) — so open it up!

For what it's worth, I see a light at the end of the tunnel. One of the most accurate prognosticators, The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), shows California “reopening” (or at least easing safe distancing) sometime between May 25th and June 1st, if certain conditions are met. That's no guarantee and it is still a month or more away, but maybe that can operate as a little “placeholder for us,” as something to look forward to.