

NEW GROUND

Title: Part 3 – “Don't Quit in the Middle”

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Well, if this is your first time with us, or the first time in a few weeks, you picked a GREAT week to be here! As a pastor, you are not supposed to have favorite messages. It's like having a favorite child, you are supposed to treat them all the same. But... today might be my favorite message.

So, grab a Bible or pull up the Bible app and find **Acts 1**, Acts chapter 1. That is the New Testament after the four Gospels. While you're getting there, turn to somebody near you and say, “*The middle is not a mistake!*”

AND it's no mistake you are here in the middle of a collection of messages (I know) called **New Ground** where we are trying to get wisdom for those moments in life when the ground you are standing on is ground you have never stood on before. Right? Everything changes, things like a new job, a baby, getting married, moving, graduating school, retiring... It's new ground and nobody hands you a map.

Week one, we stood at the edge of the Jordan River with Joshua, and we learned to name the water, follow the ark instead of demanding the map, and to get our feet wet. Last week, with the Apostle Paul, we said you can't cross with your hands full—that every new beginning stands on top of an ending, and you've got to grieve it, release it, and turn your body toward the field, pressing onward.

So, we've put our toes in. We've let go. And now we're standing in the what? The middle! **IF YOU HAVE ACTS 1**, let's read our text. This is right after the resurrection. Jesus is about to ascend back into heaven, and He gives His guys some final instructions. Acts 1, beginning in verse 4:

⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” ⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses... ⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. [And then verse 12] ¹² Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of

Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. ¹³ When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. [Verse 14] ¹⁴ They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

You want to talk about New Ground, for Jesus disciples they are now His witnesses, the church is on their shoulders, AND they are without Him! SO, today I want to preach a message I am calling:

Don't Quit in The Middle

There's a Tom Hanks movie from, gosh, probably 15 years ago now called The Terminal. How many of you remember this? It was inspired by a real-life story, but in it Hanks plays a guy who lands at JFK, and while he's in the air, there's a coup back in his home country—so his passport is suddenly issued by a nation the United States no longer recognizes. Meaning, he can't enter America AND he can't fly home either, because home doesn't officially exist anymore. In the movie, he ends up living in the airport terminal for months, sleeping on the chairs, getting his meals from vending machines. In real life the guy lived in the Paris airport for 18 years! That's horrifying, right?

As I was thinking about our disciples huddled up in that upper room that was the image I had. AND maybe you know what that feels like too. To be stuck in a place that was designed to be passed through. Airports aren't built to live in. They're built to move through. There's no neighborhood, no schools, nothing that says "stay." It's a nowhere-place. And every single one of us, at some point, gets stranded in a nowhere-place in our own life. You've left the old thing. You are in the middle of the river, and the new thing hasn't arrived. So, you are living in the terminal.

I compare this to renovating a house. Anyone ever renovate a house? Then you know this feeling in your bones. The demolition's done, you tore out the old kitchen, and that felt productive, that felt like progress. But the new kitchen isn't in yet. And now you're four weeks into washing dishes in the bathtub, eating microwave meals off a paper plate on a folding table, and you're starting to wonder if you made a horrible mistake. The old is gone. The new isn't ready, just yet. So, you're living in the dust and the plastic sheeting.

And it's not just the big, obvious transitions. You know the middle in a hundred smaller ways. It's four months into the new job, when the shine has worn off a little and you're not good at it yet and you're terrified you made a huge mistake. It's the second year of marriage when the wedding is a memory and the work is actually beginning. It's the long, gray stretch of recovery after everybody stopped bringing meals and checking in, but you are nowhere near 100 percent. It's that season with God after a major

breakthrough where you're still showing up, still reading, still praying, and it all just feels flat, like you're going through the motions.

That's the middle. AND here's what I've noticed after doing this for a while:

The middle is where people quit.

Not at the start, the start has adrenaline. And not at the finish, nobody quits at the finish, the finish has a party. People quit in the middle. The middle is where the excitement's gone and the payoff's not here yet, and it just feels like a slog through nothing. The middle is where you compromise. The middle is where you go crawling back to the old thing, the old habit, the old relationship you had no business texting her or him, because at least the old thing was familiar and this New Ground is not.

SO, I want to say four things to you about the middle, preaching to myself here, so ride with me:

1. The middle is not accidental it is assigned.

Write that down. The middle is not accidental. You've left the old thing. You are in the middle of the New Ground God has given you, but you aren't sure yet if this is the Promised Land or not. That is not an accident because look at what Jesus actually does. Verse 4 again:

⁴ “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.”

That is a command. He doesn't say, “Well, if you happen to end up with some downtime, maybe hang around.” No, He orders them into the middle and says to stay put. Don't scatter. Don't go back to the fishing boats or whatever else you came from in your old life. Sit in this in-between on purpose, because I'm not done.

Meaning the middle wasn't a scheduling error. It wasn't the disciples taking a wrong exit and God going, “Oh no, how do we get them back on track?” The middle WAS the assignment and Jesus deliberately put ten empty days between the promise and the power. He could've sent the Holy Spirit that same afternoon, right, but He didn't. He built the middle in.

A few weeks ago, I told you about William Bridges, the guy who studied transitions, who said that change happens fast, but transition happens much slower. Anyone remember that? This was the big idea:

Change is what happens TO you.

Transition is what happens IN you.

Bridges had a name for this middle time. He called it the Neutral Zone. And here's what he said about it—he said the Neutral Zone is the most important phase of any transition, and it's the one everybody tries hardest to skip because it's where the real reorientation actually happens. BUT it feels like being lost. It is disorientating because we are reorientating, so we'll do almost anything to get out of it, and so we bail before the work is done.

Anthropologists also have a word for this in-between stage, they call it liminality {lim-uh-NAL-uh-tee}, from the Latin word for a threshold or a **doorway**. I verified this with my daughter who is in Latin II, so we are good. But when they studied cultures all over the world, they found that basically every society builds these liminal middles into their most important transitions. Every rite of passage always has a stage where you're not who you were and not yet who you're becoming—and that's exactly where the transformation is designed to happen.

Sadly, in the West, we have forgotten this. We don't really have any rites of passage anymore, so we miss that you don't grow at the start of the journey and you don't grow at the destination. You grow in the middle. In the nowhere-place. And that is on purpose.

If you know anything about the arc of Scripture then you know this is what God did with His people in the Old Testament. Israel comes out of Egypt, that's the ending, the release, the goodbye to slavery we talked about last week. And the Promised Land is the new beginning waiting on the far side. But between the two, God parks His people in a wilderness for forty years. 4. 0. We call it their “wilderness wandering” BUT in reality God didn't strand them out there because they kept fumbling the directions. He led them there, on purpose!

AND in that middle, He fed them with manna, but only ever enough for one single day. You couldn't stockpile it or it would rot! You couldn't get ahead. Every morning you woke up with nothing and had to trust God for that day's bread all over again. WHY? Why would God design it like that? Because He wasn't only trying to get Israel into the Promised Land, He was trying to get Egypt out of Israel. The wilderness was the classroom, and the daily manna was the lesson. God said, “I am teaching you to lean on Me one day at a time, because that is a muscle you are going to need for the rest of your life.”

SO, the first thing I need you to hear is that if you're in the middle right now, you are not off the map. You're not being punished. God did not lose track of you between chapters. The middle is not a detour from the plan. The middle is the plan!

Turn to somebody next to you and tell them, “This is not a detour.” Now tell the other person next to you, “This is not a detour.”

Which leads to the hardest part of the middle, and it's the reason we panic, number 2:

2. The silence is not the same as absence.

Write it down. Silence is not the same as absence. We spent 5-weeks talking about this over the summer, God's silence is not to be confused with His absence.

When you take New Ground and you are standing somewhere you have never stood before, God often will seem quiet initially. As you were leaving the old and dipping your toes into the new, God feels close—there are signs, there's confirmation, there's that sense of “yes, this is right.” At the end there's the payoff, the fruit, the “aha, now I see what You were doing.” But the middle is where you're doing everything you thought you were supposed to do and God seems... gone.

And nobody prepares you for that! Amen? We're comfortable talking about the mountaintop, when God feels close. We're even open to talking about the valley, as long as there's a nice lesson waiting at the bottom of it. But the climbing? The days of just putting one foot in front of the other in this new reality and God seems to have stopped returning our calls. We don't have a lot of worship songs about that one, right?

So, when you land in it, you assume you must have done something wrong, and you start digging back through your whole journey of walking through this wondering if you miss heard God along the way and got off course. But what if you didn't do anything wrong? What if the silence is just what the middle sounds like?

The disciples felt it. Look at their question in verse 6, the second Jesus mentions the promise, they blurt out:

⁶ “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Which is just a holy way of asking, “Is it now? Are we there yet?” They want the timeline. They want a date. And look at what Jesus says back, verse 7:

⁷ He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.

Which is not the answer they wanted. It's barely an answer at all! It's Jesus saying: you don't get the timeline. You don't get to know how long the middle lasts.

AND that right there is the loss nobody warns you about in a transition. It's the loss of control. You can't control the clock, you can't rush the Spirit, you can't project-manage your way to Pentecost. And for those of us who like to be in charge, who like a plan and a deadline and a progress bar, that quiet, timeline-less middle feels less like peace and more like abandonment.

Last week I mentioned a little book C.S. Lewis wrote after his wife died (I think we still have a copy or two of it at Next Steps if you want to get one today). But I want to come back to it, because he wrote something else in there that belongs in this week as well. I'm paraphrasing, but Lewis said that when things were going well and he turned to God, it felt like being welcomed with open arms. But when he turned to God in his most desperate hour, in the worst of his grief, he said it felt like going to a door, and hearing it bolted from the inside. And then, silence. That's how the middle felt to him.

SO, if that's how it feels to you sometimes, you are in good company, and it is not a sign that your faith is broken. BUT watch where Lewis goes, later in the book he starts to wonder if the silence wasn't God leaving at all. He starts to think that maybe his grief was smashing his picture of God, that he'd built an image of God in his head that was too small, too neat, too much like a cosmic vending machine, and the silence was God refusing to be that. And then he concludes something truly remarkable:

“My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself... [He goes on to write] Heaven will solve our problems, but not by showing us subtle reconciliations between all our apparently contradictory notions. The notions will be knocked from under our feet. We shall see that there never was any problem.”

What if the silence you're experiencing isn't God walking away? What if it's God tearing down a version of Himself that was too small for what He's about to do in you and through you? What if the quiet is not abandonment, it's demolition! Same as the kitchen! You can't build the new thing on top of the old picture! Sometimes the silence is the sound of God clearing the ground!

We are Holy Saturday people, church! Think about it, Friday, Jesus dies, and it looks like the end. Sunday, He rises, and it's the greatest morning in history. But there's a day in between and on Saturday, God said nothing. The disciples sat in a locked room and heard absolutely nothing from heaven while the Son of God lay in a tomb. And they didn't know Sunday was coming! To them, Saturday wasn't the middle of the story, it felt like the whole story was over. But it wasn't over! It was just Saturday! And Sunday was coming!

Your silence is not the end of the story. It might just be your Saturday. Here's my next big takeaway:

3. The middle is where the work gets done.

Because here's the mistake we make, we treat the middle like it's dead time. Like it's the buffering icon spinning while the real thing loads. But look at what those disciples actually did in the upper room, verse 14:

¹⁴ They all joined together CONSTANTLY in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

That word “constantly” caught my eye when I was preparing for this message, so I did some digging, in the Greek it means:

- To be devoted to something intensely.
- To persist in it, to hold fast and refuse to let go.
- It's not passive or just killing time.
- It's the picture of somebody who has grabbed hold of God and will not release the grip until He moves.

So, the upper room was not ten days of the disciples twiddling their thumbs and checking the sky. It was ten days of the most focused, devoted, stubborn prayer of their lives! The middle looked empty from the outside but on the inside, it was the most important work they'd ever done!

I put it in my notes this way:

The middle is where you get made.

And, next to it I wrote like a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. We tell kids this cute little story about a caterpillar going into a cozy chrysalis and coming out with pretty wings. Here's what we don't tell kids. Inside that chrysalis, the caterpillar doesn't just sprout wings. It dissolves. It releases enzymes that break its own body down into a kind of soup, it basically turns to goo. If you cut open a chrysalis at the wrong moment, you would not find a half-caterpillar, half-butterfly. You'd find liquid death! It looks like the thing fell apart. But inside that goo, there are these cells—scientists call them imaginal discs—and they're holding the blueprint of the butterfly, quietly building wings out of the wreckage of what used to be a caterpillar.

Church, that is the middle! But God is not wasting the goo! There are imaginal cells at work in the wreckage, holding the blueprint of who you're becoming, building something in the dark that could never have existed if you'd stayed a caterpillar! That growth doesn't happen in spite of the disorientation. It happens because of it! You do not get those wings without the goo! There is no shortcut through the chrysalis.

And can I tell you what actually gets built in there? Roots. The middle is where God grows the part of you that nobody ever claps for, the deep-down stuff, underground, out of sight. Anybody can look strong on the mountaintop. Anybody can coast across a finish line with a crowd cheering. But character, and real dependence on God, and the kind of faith that still holds when the lights go out, that doesn't grow in the highlight reel. That grows in the goo!

Because the middle strips you of everything you used to prop yourself up with. Your competence isn't enough anymore. Your old playbook stopped working. The timeline got yanked out of your hands. And with all of your usual crutches kicked out from under you, you finally—finally—learn to lean your whole weight on the only thing that was ever actually going to hold you, which is God Himself.

In other words, the middle kills your self-sufficiency. And honestly? Good riddance to it. Amen?

So, if you are in the goo this morning, if you feel like you're dissolving, like the old you is gone and the new you hasn't shown up, stop reading that as failure. Read it as construction. God does not waste a middle.

The middle is not accidental, it is assigned. Silence is not the same as absence. The middle is where the work gets done. AND one more today:

4. Don't trade the promise for an exit.

Write it down. Don't trade the promise for an exit.

Because here's the danger of the middle, and it's a real one, when you're stuck in the terminal, when the silence is loud, and you're dissolving in the dark between the old and new, the enemy will always offer you an exit. And the exit will look reasonable. The compromise in the middle never shows up looking like sin, it shows up looking like relief.

And it's almost never some big dramatic fall. It's subtle. It's texting the person you swore you were finished with, because being alone in the middle got too heavy to carry. It's you picking the old coping thing back up, the drink, the scrolling, the spending because it numbs the nowhere-feeling for an hour. It's you shrinking the dream back down to something safe and small and calling it "being realistic," when the truth is you just got scared somewhere in the middle. It's going back to Egypt and telling everybody you made a mistake.

The exits all wear different disguises BUT every one of them whispers the same things:

- "Just go back to the old thing. At least you knew who you were there."

- “Just take the shortcut. Nobody would blame you. You've waited long enough.”
- “Just quit. This clearly isn't working. God will understand.”

How many of you have heard those whispers before? And listen, I get the pull. In the 20 years of starting and leading this church I've had multiple times when an exit whispered. And it has even held the promise of salvation, usually in dollar signs. When you are in the goo, an exit door looks like salvation. But hear me:

An exit in the middle is not an escape from the pain, it's an escape from the promise.

BECAUSE the promise is always on the other side of the middle, not around it. If the disciples had gotten impatient on day 7 and said, “Well, this isn't happening, let's just go back to Galilee and pick the boats back up...” If they had done that then they would have missed Pentecost by three days. BUT the fire was coming! The wind was coming! The Holy Spirit was coming! Three thousand souls placing their faith in a risen Jesus, and the church being born was coming! It was all just 72 hours away, and they almost couldn't see it because the middle is where the promise feels the most impossible right before it becomes real.

SO, what do you do instead of bailing? You do what they did, you stay, you get devoted, and you surround yourself with the right people. And can I give you the most practical, unspiritual-sounding advice you'll hear? Build some margin. I mean it!

The middle is exhausting, and the temptation when you're exhausted is to strip your life down to nothing but the grind, to cut out rest and cut out people and just white-knuckle through. Do the opposite! You cannot survive a long middle at a sprint. You will burn down. So, guard your Sabbath, keep your people close, prioritize sleep, pray stubbornly... Because the middle is not survived by gutting it out. It's survived by staying tethered to God and to the people He gave you.

Hear me, I'm not preaching this at you from an ivory tower. I've bailed on middles before, I have looked at a hard, silent, dragging stretch and told myself a very spiritual-sounding story about why it was clearly God's will for me to quit—when the actual truth is I was just tired and I wanted out. I've walked away from things God was about three days away from doing. So, I am with you today.

BUT look at what Jesus promised the disciples if they stayed. This time from Luke's Gospel. Luke 24:

⁴⁹ “I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been **CLOTHED** with power from on high.”

"Clothed," like to put something on like a garment. The power they were waiting for was not something they could manufacture by trying harder. It was something they had to receive, something that would be draped over them like a robe, from the outside, from on high. Church, you cannot get dressed in this power until you've stood still long enough in the middle to let God put it on you!

So, don't you dare walk out of the room three days early! Come on, somebody. The fire is closer than it feels! The wind is already on its way! You have not been abandoned in the terminal; you are being clothed for what's next! Stay in the room! Stay in the room until the fire falls!

Let me land with this, here is your assignment for this week, wrestle with this question:

Where are you trying to sprint out of a middle that God put you in on purpose?

What's the exit that's been looking really reasonable lately—the compromise, the shortcut, the trip back to something you already grieved and buried? And what would change this week if you actually believed the silence wasn't absence, and the middle wasn't a mistake, and there were imaginal cells at work in your goo?

Maybe the bravest, most faith-filled thing you could do this week is nothing dramatic at all. Maybe it's just to stay. To not bolt. To wake up tomorrow in the same unfamiliar new middle and pray a stubborn prayer and trust that God is building wings in the dark where you can't see them yet.

In a culture that worships the exit, that treats quitting as self-care and staying as foolishness, sometimes planting your feet in the middle, because God told you to, is the gutsiest act of faith there is.

Would you pray with me?