

MIND THE GAP: WHEN REALITY AND EXPECTATIONS COLLIDE

Introduction

Do you ever complain about anything? Most of us do. I am actually pretty good at it! I can't say that I enjoy complaining, so why do I do it? Why do we complain? I believe complaining mostly comes from disappointment. I simply define disappointment as unmet expectations.

We expect something or hope for something.

It doesn't happen.

We complain.

Disappointment, unmet expectations, is rooted in comparison. I like etymology—the origin of words. Comparison is the idea of pairing two things to see similarities and differences.

Complaining—rooted in disappointment/unmet expectations—comes when we co-pair/compare the Ideal with the Real. Disappointment comes when we compare the ideal—the way we expect things should be—with the reality of the way things really are. There is a gap between Ideal and Real, and in that gap, disappointment shows up because there are unmet expectations. This often results in complaining.

I've heard Tim and others speak of an expression that comes from London, specifically the subway system—*The London Underground*. On the platform where the train pulls up and lets you board, there are words boldly on display that say:

MIND THE GAP

It simply means be careful how you navigate the space between where you are and where you want to be. Mind The Gap. Be careful because you could fall into a dark and painful place. Mind The Gap.

Kedra and I lived in New Zealand for several years in the 1980s. We, along with another couple, were planting a new church in the city of Auckland. It was difficult, but by God's grace and guidance, it got done. One of the difficulties was simply being so far away from home. This was before cell phones and the internet. Letters took 10 days one-way, and phone calls were \$2 a minute. It was hard to communicate.

The holidays were different and challenging. Homesickness was a constant threat. Christmas of 1986 was especially difficult. Our co-workers were traveling home for Christmas, and we were not. We were going to be halfway around the world from our families. We didn't have any children yet, so it was going to be a really challenging time for us. We could see the gap between the Ideal—being home for Christmas—and the Real—being alone in New Zealand. It was a dangerous gap with painful darkness looming.

I'm not particularly proud of this nor ashamed by it: I really like the movie *Christmas Vacation*. It's rough around the edges and really silly in lots of ways, but I love it. I'm not alone in my love. I think its broad appeal is more than the silly quotable lines and the goofy but loveable characters.

It's a snapshot of a guy—Clark Griswold—wanting the Ideal Christmas gathering at his home. He plans it and romanticizes it, but then The Real happens. The family shows up bickering, arguing, complaining, and criticizing.

Then Cousin Eddie rolls in with the RV—“tenement on wheels.” We laugh because we know Cousin Eddie (or are him?). But Clark, undeterred, continues on his quest for the Ideal Christmas homecoming.

I think the movie appeals to most of us because we want what Clark wants: we want The Ideal. We want to be at home with peace, joy, love, and harmony—all fueled by sentiment and nostalgia. We hope, somehow, someway, we can get everyone together and it will be perfect, at least for an hour or two.

Discussion

In the mid-1940s, Bing Crosby recorded a song we all know and sing, “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.” It was written and recorded during WWII from the standpoint of a soldier. It imagines a beautiful ideal homecoming where everything is just right—presents, snow, and mistletoe. It has a bit of a sad ending, though. The soldier says, “I’ll be home for Christmas, *if only in my dreams*.” The British army actually banned the song amongst its troops, fearing it would lower morale.

Why is a gathering at Christmas such a big deal for so many of us? Why is coming home for Christmas such a powerful, emotional thing? Why do we work so hard to create this Ideal experience?

My theory is that we see it as an opportunity to have everything just right with our families, surrounded by love, peace, joy, and harmony, as snow gently falls and the fire in the fireplace warms us. I wonder if all of this is from a deeper desire that we have in our hearts—a longing for the Ideal. Ecclesiastes 3:11b (NLT) says that God,

*... has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so,
people cannot see the whole scope of God’s work from beginning to end.*

Is our longing for the perfect Christmas just an indicator of a deeper ache that we have—the God-given longing for an eternal gathering where everything will be as it should be—perfect and ideal?

I wonder if Jesus ever got homesick. He leaves his perfect Heavenly Ideal home, pitches his tent with us, really moves into our Real neighborhood, and becomes one of us. He lives in the Real world, this broken, fallen world, and weeps with us, as he experiences disappointments and our real pain.

He also demonstrates the peace, joy, and confidence that come from a relationship with his Father—who is also our Father—who lives in an Ideal home.

I love John’s Gospel. There are some verses in it that really enlighten us about how Jesus “Minds The Gap” between his Ideal home and our Real world. John 13 is a wonderful chapter. It is the final few hours of the life of Jesus. I hope you’ll read it later, but for now, notice some of the key lines from the first four verses that show Jesus knows how to tell time. He knew it was time for him to leave the Real and go back to the Ideal.

*Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.
Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power,
and that he had come from God and was returning to God;*

—John 13 NIV

Jesus knows where his true home is. He knows where he came from and where he is going. He’s going back home to be with his father. I wonder if, during his 33 years here, Jesus ever got homesick? Did he get tired of the Real world? I’m guessing he did. To overcome it—to Mind the Gap between the Real and the Ideal—does he dream of going back home, where everything is perfect? I’m guessing he always had that in view.

As the hours pass and he gets closer to his departure for home, he prays about it and prays about us.

I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

—John 17:13-15 NIV

Jesus essentially says, “It’s time for me to come home, Father. I have enjoyed my time here, it’s been Real, and I pray these folks can also enjoy their time on earth, even though this world is not really their home, just as it’s not mine. Please watch over them. Help them Mind the Gap.”

At the end of that prayer, Jesus says something so encouraging and so powerful:

Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory . . .

—John 17:24a NIV

Jesus wants us to be with him in his forever home, where everything is perfect/ideal in the presence of God: peace, love, joy, and harmony. And there is no more death, disease, rebellion, ruined relationships, pain, or problems. It’s what we dream of and long for! I think this is the deep-seated God-given ache in our soul.

What do we do with it? What do we do in the meantime, while we wait to go home where Jesus is? How do we Mind the Gap? We look at Jesus, his teachings, and his practices. The prayer and the mission of Jesus make it clear we don’t withdraw from the world. While we are not of the world, we are certainly still in it.

While here, living in the gap, we continue the work of Jesus. We demonstrate the love of God by the way we live, love, and treat each other. Jeremiah 29 is interesting because God tells the Israelites who have been taken as captives to a foreign land, “Get married, build homes, plant gardens, work for the peace and prosperity of the (foreign) city. Pray for it.” Mind the Gap! Manage Real life, never forgetting the Ideal.

He is saying, “While you wait to go back home, get busy and work to make where you are a better place.”

This becomes a model—demonstrated by Jesus—of what we do in the gap, how we manage the gap. We work to make this world a better place, as we long for the Ideal. That longing for something better, a better home, something permanent comes from God and makes him proud when we acknowledge it.

In Hebrews 11—the famous Hall of Fame of Faith—we are introduced to a bunch of flawed but faithful people. At one point the writer/preacher sums them up, using language of the Ideal, a heavenly home. He says they lived their lives like *foreigners* on earth. Then he hits it home in verse 16.

. . . They were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland.

*That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God,
for he has prepared a city for them.*

While we wait, we live and work and love, and we are not alone as we mind the gap, managing the tension and the time between the Real and Ideal. We have the promised presence of Jesus.

*Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them,
and we will come to them and make our home with them.”*

—John 14:23 NIV

God as Father, Son, and Spirit, promises to be present while we live here, to help us live appropriately in the Real even as we long for the Ideal.

C.S. Lewis wrote a lot about living in the gap and having a deep longing deep in our souls, deep in our hearts. He used a German word to describe it, *Sehnsucht*. He says it’s an inconsolable longing in the heart for something we cannot quite grasp in this world—an unquenchable longing that haunts us and helps us realize there is more. It’s the longing that can only be satisfied in eternity. He says,

*If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy,
the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.*

This helps us understand what it means to have eternity planted in our hearts by God (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

We feel the Ideal deep in our hearts. We get glimpses of it. We try to grasp it. But we can't quite get it in the Real. There is gap between what experience in this world and what we know exists in the next world. We are living in the gap—minding and managing.

Clark Griswold got hit hard by the gap, but in the end, Clark manages it. Despite all the bad things that happen, has a wonderful, joyful celebration even in the midst of the messiness of a broken world full of broken people. An odd collection of people gather in his house to joyfully sing and commune.

In 1986, as Christmas approached, Kedra and I decided to take the words of Jesus in Luke 14 to heart. There Jesus talks about a Great Banquet and how you should, *"invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind."* He encourages us to include the marginalized, the misfits, the left-behinds.

So we decided to invite an odd mixture of people—some who were a part of our fledgling church and some who were not. We sent out invitations to come to our Christmas Gathering at 4 Downing Street in Glenfield. It was a warm, if not hot, sunny Summer day in New Zealand when they started arriving:

- Tim the photographer.
- Karl the computer guy who never matched his socks.
- Jane who had, and caused, all kinds of pain. She was "Jane the Pain," but we loved her.
- Strange Mark who collected beer cans and Mark's mom—also strange.
- Jay—a very prim and proper AirNZ flight attendant who was an Australian living in New Zealand—came.

There may have been others. It was such an odd collection of odd people, but it was wonderful! We cooked out, laughed, and remembered why we gathered—to remember that our Savior had entered this Real world, lived and died, lived again, and went back to his Ideal home.

As I have reflected on it over the years, to me, that gathering is a dim reflection of the Great Banquet of Isaiah 25 and also scenes out of Revelation where every tribe, and language gather, along with myriads of angels to feast, to celebrate and to worship forever in our forever home!

We got a glimpse of that so long ago on a Summer Christmas day in New Zealand. It was soul-satisfying for a little while. But the longing to be where Jesus is remains. I long for the completion of God's Story where everything will be made right forever.

Conclusion

In the meantime, we mind the gap and manage the gap between the Real and the Ideal. We don't allow disappointment to turn into complaining that places us in darkness, but rather we see the gap as the place of hope, believing God is with us and for us and wants us to be with him.

I know this time of the year is really rough on lots of people. You don't dream of a great Christmas gathering. Instead, you are trying not to make it through your loss and grief. My prayer is your time is this gap may be short and filled with hopes of our eternal home.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

—Romans 8:18 NIV

*"No eye has seen, no ear has heard,
and no mind has imagined what
God has prepared for those who love him."*

—1 Corinthians 2:9 NIV

We haven't seen it and can't even imagine it but we feel the Ideal in our hearts and souls.

Communion

Communion is a time to think about Minding the Gap with peace, joy, and confidence. This is how Jesus managed his time between the Real and the Ideal—his time on this Earth before returning to Heaven. As Jesus left, he promised his powerful presence. “I will be with you always,” he says. He promises the Paraclete—the Holy Spirit.

Jesus promises especially to meet us in communion in a real way. He is really present. So as we think about our disappointment and possible complaints because of unmet expectations, as we think about the gap between the Ideal we hope for and the Real we live in, let’s think of Jesus.

Jesus never lost sight of the Ideal. He dreamed of going home, I think, but he also knew he could navigate the gap of waiting through prayer and connecting to his father in various ways. He knew where he came from, and he knew where he was going. He knew what his mission was—to seek and save the lost.

We’ve been invited into his story, his life, and his mission. Communion reminds us of these things. Don’t let disappointment lead you to complain. Worse, don’t let it lead you into the darkness of depression. Instead, fill the gap with hope—hope in the promises of God best seen in the life of Jesus.

Mind The Gap with the Bread and the Juice.