



Days

of

Hope

June 2016

Harvesting in By Jon Wells Every Season

Life comes at us in seasons. There are stages in parenting, seasons in marriage, phases in our careers. And it seems that just when we master one season, the next arrives with new challenges and opportunities. The youth we serve at Days of Hope all find themselves in a difficult season of life. Many of them are weathering legal storms in family court as judges and Children's Division workers sort out custody issues. The younger ones struggle to accept a judge's order for no contact with mom or dad. Older youth who were previously removed from their homes face the specter of adulthood, independence, and resumed contact with that abusive parent. This season is also characterized by instability, as so many of these kids bounce from one foster family to another, one program to another, year after year.

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.
-Ecclesiastes 3

To be sure, these kids are mired in a messy stage of their young lives. But as I work with them day in and day out, I try to remind them that these struggles are only temporary. They in turn are teaching me, and I am learning some lessons about how to manage the season I find myself in.

I always seem to assume that my current season is never-ending.

The parent who is changing diapers seems to do little else—that little baby has supernatural powers, and diapering becomes an hourly task. At some point she comes to believe that this is her new normal—diapers are going to be a regular part of life from now on. That same assumption seems to bleed into every stage of parenting, but the truth is that nothing lasts forever. We plod through the baby stages, the terrible twos, the elementary years, but in retrospect they seem to have flown by.

Kids in residential suffer from the same assumptions. They give little or no thought to the changes that they will face in the near future; they seem to assume that they will live in a

Continued on page 2

Continued from page 1 . . .

placement forever. Many of them lament the never-ending nature of their predicament. I often find myself reminding them that they will look back on these years as tough but short- few seem to believe me.

When I am in the valley, I can't see clearly over the next hill.

This is a universal reality for all of us as we struggle through a challenge. It is often hard to see beyond the problems that stare us in the face. It is tough enough to get clarity on the season we are in, much less be able to understand what the future holds. My son Lincoln reminded me of this last week.

"When-when-when, when I grow up, I'm gonna be a fighter-fighter, and drive a fire engine, and spray out the fire and rescue people who need help."

Our three-year-old has been obsessed of late with all things fire fighter. Whenever we drive by anything that looks like a fire engine, the little squeaker explodes with a monologue about his future exploits and career. Aside from his adorable mispronunciations, his plans seem ill informed. What toddler understands the career path required to achieve an officer's assignment in a city fire station?



For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

-Jeremiah 29

In the same way, so many of the kids we serve have aspirations of greatness but no real clarity about how to achieve any of their plans.

"I'm gonna play basketball for Oklahoma State."

"I'm going to get out of state custody and own my own business."

There is nothing wrong with having high hopes. But like a three year old dreaming about driving a ladder truck, so many of them have no real idea what the future holds. Likewise, I am unable to clearly see past the season I find myself in.

I rarely appreciate the season I am in until it is gone.

This summer I have been working with residential kids who are attending a weeklong camping program called 'School in the Wilderness.' This is a yearly event for us, and we look forward to it each summer. I often find that kids at camp complain about the rigors of outdoor living.

'There's a spider on my tent.'

'It's too hot.'

'It's too rainy.'

'The mosquitoes bit me today.'

The complaints at camp can be never ending. But when I see these same kids a year or two later at a different placement, they wax eloquent about the good ol' days at camp.

'Wasn't that great Pastor Jon? School in the Wilderness was so fun, I wish I could do it again!'

Continued on page 3

Mona Lisa Smile

By Aaron Jeffers

She gave me the smirk. Jon and I see it many times through the year. Knowing I was the "Preacher-Guy" on campus, she was asking herself, "Do I really share what's on my mind with this guy?"

"Can I guess what you're thinking?" I asked.

"Sure."

"I'm going to guess that you're wondering whether or not it's 'safe' or not to express what you're feeling to me."

"Right...go on."

"Then you're wondering if you can really ask me the question about God that you have on your mind..."

"How'd you know?"

"Because it comes up at least once or twice a year; and you have the look."

"Okay, here's my question, 'Why would an ALL-righteous, ALL-loving, and ALL-knowing God let all this crap happen to me and let me go through what I've gone through?'"

She answered her own question, reciting the Bible-College answer, like she was reading it straight out of the textbook. "Yeah, Adam and Eve messed up, causing sin to enter this world. Now we live out the consequences of that."

I responded. "God knew about all this painful stuff and made a way for us to handle it with His power and strength. I met a girl who had been raped for years by many different men because her parents prostituted her out for money. God put on my heart to say to her, 'You're pure, you're holy, you're righteous, and you're God's beloved child.' She received that truth in tears. And those truths apply to you. I don't always understand why God lets stuff happen, but I do know that everything he does for us is to get to know Him better."

Continued from page 2 . . .

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty.
-Philippians 4

The irony is hard to miss. I spend my day on Wednesday working with kids who reminisce about the wonders of last years' camp, then on Friday I listen to campers voice their frustrations. But they are just living out a truth that I also experience; I don't really appreciate the season I am in until it is gone.

I obsess with the wonders of the next phase of life . . . until I get there.

Another thief that robs me of any appreciation of the present is my constant obsession with how great life is going to be in the future. It is easy to see how a child would feel like their life is on hold until they get out of treatment, but my life isn't much different. That new car, that different job, an impending graduation; all of these things and more hold such promise. If I'm not careful, I will suspend my gratitude while awaiting the next step.

My problem comes into focus once I am ushered into that anticipated new season. Instead of celebrating and finding joy, I so quickly begin to pine for whatever new thing is coming next. In this way it seems I am perpetually longing for what I do not

have, regardless of how far I have come.

Because of my laser focus on past and future seasons, I often refuse to engage in my current phase.

"If I could just go back to my last foster home . . ."

"Once I get back to my mom's house I will stop actin' up . . ."

"My last placement was way better . . . I liked the staff there more."

"When I turn 18 I am getting out of custody and moving to Colorado."

I can't count the number of times that I have seen these youth abdicate their responsibility in the present by deferring to some other season "when everything will be better." These kids have real challenges right in front of them, battles that need to be fought in the moment. But so many of them shift into neutral and coast through the season they find themselves in, building excuses from past or future scenarios. The problem is, *when I disengage from my current season, I stop moving through it and just camp out in it.* Without exception, every child I have ever met in treatment stayed there longer than necessary, waiting for that moment when they finally decided to engage and move forward.

Remind you of anyone?

Continued on back page

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.
-James 4

Mona Lisa Smile Continued . . .

He didn't want sin in the world, but he did want intimacy with us. He also made a way for us to have perfect intimacy, and to get through life. That's what the Cross of Christ is all about: Intimacy. He sacrificed his son so that our relationship with Him could be fully restored. You and I get to choose what defines us. We can embrace God's love for us, or we can let the bad junk, bad actions, and other people control how we see ourselves. God's love brings His life into us. How other people, our sins, and their sins label and define us bring death and separation from the life we could have in God. You can give to God these bad labels and all the bitter bad junk that happened, is happening, and will happen. In return God will give you His purity, His righteousness, and His love. Like I said, I don't always understand why that stuff happens. But I

do understand for sure these two things: One, He's made a way through it all with his son's death, burial, and resurrection. Two, He loves us so much because that's who He is, and He wants to have an intimate relationship with us."

Throughout our conversation, I was hoping for a breakthrough moment. Instead, her response was as ambiguous as Mona Lisa's smile. I was reminded that you can't outsource the Holy Spirit. I can tell that she is still on the path, still asking questions.

It is tragic to see how many people check-out spiritually and stop pursuing unanswered questions of faith. Her tenacity to keep seeking is inspiring to me.

Will you join me in praying for this young lady and so many like her who are working through big spiritual questions?

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Harvesting in every season continued . . .

God has a purpose in every season of my life.

I am so comforted with the assurance that God brings purpose and redemption to every phase of my life. Regardless of how I came to this current juncture, God has a plan woven into it for my growth. Whether I like it or not, whether painful or joyous, short or long, this valley I am walking through holds precious riches for me. Like a great artist chiseling stone, God uses the seasons of my life as the tools that form my character. I can choose to surrender to this gracious forming, or resist. I am learning that a submitted life is so much better! It is so much easier to learn the lessons of this current season when I ask the Father to show me the path. Painful seasons become shorter when I stop running and engage the challenges I face. And even though I don't clearly see the outcomes, I can trust the One who holds those outcomes in the palm of His hand.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose . . . to be conformed to the image of his Son. -Romans 8

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