

RETREAT

Week #1 of a 6-Week Easter Series, "Prepare the Way"

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Several centuries ago, the Pope made a decree that all the Jewish people had to convert to Catholicism or leave Italy. And there was quite an uproar in the Jewish community. So the Pope offered a deal: that there would be a religious debate between he and the Jewish leader. And if the Jewish leader won, they could stay and they would not have to convert. And if he won -- the Pope -- that they would need to convert or leave.

Well, the Jewish people picked a wise, elderly rabbi to represent them in the debate. And neither of them spoke the other's language. The rabbi didn't speak Italian, and the Pope didn't speak Hebrew. So they agreed to have a silent debate.

[Congregation laughs]

So they sat in front of each other with everybody all around them. And out of the silence, the Pope raised his hand with three fingers. And then the rabbi raised one finger. And then the Pope took his finger whirled it around a bit. And then the rabbi pointed his finger to the ground. And then the Pope brought out a wafer and a chalice of red wine, and the rabbi pulled out an apple. And immediately the Pope stood up and declared himself defeated and said that the rabbi was so wise and clever, and the Jewish people could stay in Italy and didn't have to convert.

All the cardinals got together afterward and wondered why ... Asked the Pope, "Why'd you lose? What happened?"

He said, "Well first, I held up three fingers, symbolizing the Trinity. And then the rabbi held up one finger symbolizing that we have one common God at the base of both of our beliefs.

And then I waved my finger around in a circle to say that God is all around us. And then the rabbi pointed to the ground, symbolizing that God is also right here and now. And then I brought out a wafer and a chalice of red wine to show that God absolves all of our sins. And then the rabbi brought out an apple to symbolize the original sin. He bested me at every moment, and so I could not continue.

Meanwhile, the Jewish community all got together and wondered why they won. And they asked the rabbi, "Why'd you win?"

He said, "I have no clue!"

[Congregation laughs]

He said, "First he held up three fingers, symbolizing that we had to get out of Italy in three days, and so I gave him the finger."

[Congregation laughs]

"And then he tells me that we've got to clear the entire country, and I said, 'No! We're staying here!'"

[Congregation laughs]

And a woman said, "Then what?"

The rabbi said, "Well then, he took out his lunch, so I took out my lunch!"

[Laughs with congregation]

So ... Alright. Polite applause; yes, we'll take it.

So how many people have at least one area in your life that you would like to have a breakthrough in? Anybody like to have a breakthrough? And I'll tell you, whether it's a breakthrough to greater peace and harmony; or a greater level of love; or health; or happiness; or financial abundance or career. Whatever it is, every one of us has something in our lives that we'd like to have transformed, changed and improved for the better.

And let's just say I could give you 40 days. I would give you 40 days to transform that area and have a breakthrough in your life. What would you do? What would you do in these 40 days? Where would you start? What would you work on? What steps would you take towards having a breakthrough and to transform whatever area of your life?

Even think of one thing. What is one thing? What is the best thing you think you could do for yourself in the next 40 days that will help you take your life to another level and bring a greater level of meaning and fulfillment.

Today we begin a six-week Lenten series called, "Prepare the Way." And it's observing the 40 days of Jesus' withdrawal into the wilderness; the 40 days of fasting and prayer. The time that Jesus needed to prepare himself for his amazing ministry and his work that culminated in the triumphant and miraculous event of Easter.

You know, Lent is a season of spiritual preparation: a time of reflection and contemplation; of prayer; of fasting; of listening; of cleansing; releasing and opening ourselves more fully to God. You know, by his example, Jesus really showed us that spiritual preparation is the vital and necessary key to have a breakthrough in our lives, or to transform any areas of our lives.

When there is a time of spiritual preparation, something good always follows it. Moses had 40 days of prayer and fasting and received the 10 Commandments. Elijah had his 40 days of prayer and fasting, and he met God -- and talked to God -- on Mount Horeb and received his mission. And Jesus did it, as well.

But Jesus also showed the importance of being spiritually prepared every day. Jesus spiritually prepared himself for all of his teaching; all of his miracles; for everything he faced, he prepared himself mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually. And by preparing himself, he prepared the way for a better breakthrough in his life.

You know, the legendary basketball Coach Bobby Knight said that, *"We all have the will to win, but very few have the will to prepare."*

Alexander Graham Bell, who invented the telephone, said, *"Before anything else, preparation is the key to success."*

Last year I had my house painted by this fabulous painter named Antonio. And he told me it would take seven days to paint the house. And after four days, there was no paint on my house. [Congregation laughs] And so I chatted with him and he said, *"Well, you know, painting is easy, and it's quick. But if you want a really good job done, it all comes down to the preparation. The preparation is the key to having a good paint job."*

So I want you to think of that thing in your life that you'd like to have transformed. And my question for you is: Are you prepared for it? Have you been preparing yourself mentally, emotionally and spiritually to raise your consciousness to expand your capacity to allow God to have a breakthrough happen in you and through you?

The first step to prepare the way for a breakthrough is to **RETREAT**. And that sounds like a weird thing. Because retreating is more like withdrawing in defeat. You know, losing a battle. It's kind of an identification of failure and not doing well, and pulling back and moving backwards. And none of those things sound like progress. None of them sound like success. It doesn't sound like preparation. So why would I say the best way to break through and move forward is to step back and retreat?

And that is because, when we step back and retreat, it's stepping back from the hectic pace and the busy-ness and the craziness and the stresses of life to give us the opportunity to reflect. To take stock and re-evaluate where we are in our lives. Evaluating and looking and reviewing what we're doing and why we're doing it, and where it is we want to go, and where it is we're being called to go. It is an opportunity for us to recharge and replenish and renew our reserves, and to refresh our outlook.

Jesus spoke about this idea of retreat when he said, *"Come apart awhile to a deserted or solitary place and rest awhile."*

Paramahansa Yogananda said, *"Every person needs a retreat, a dynamo of silence where he may go for the exclusive purpose of being newly recharged by the Infinite."*

And so we're going to look at three things that we can do to prepare ourselves for a breakthrough.

And the first thing that retreating does is that it helps us **CREATE SPACE AND QUIET**. Jesus withdrew to the wilderness to retreat from the busy-ness of life ... to give himself the space and quiet he needed to spiritually prepare himself for the great work he was being called to do.

Sometimes we don't have a lot of space in our lives. Our lives are so jam-packed and crammed with so many things, with the hectic pace of one activity after the other. Life can just be loud and noisy and never-ending. And so sometimes it's hard to find peace when our minds and our lives are so crowded. Sometimes it's hard to go deeper spiritually; to have creative ideas and solutions come through us.

Years ago I read an article about the importance of "white space." That, regardless of the written content, if it is too crowded or too busy, you can't get the message through. You can't fully appreciate it. There needs to be space in between that actually highlights and actually makes the content stand out in greater ways. Space in our life is really important! As we get more crowded, we kind of lose some of the meaning and the feel of the experience. Designers know that spacing is important. Gardeners; musicians. In sports spacing is important: in hockey and soccer and basketball.

You know, we just got Kevin Durant. And besides the scoring and the great talent, one of the things that Durant's presence does is space the floor much better, which actually gives opportunities for greater scoring with greater levels of ease. Space creates flow. It creates rhythm. It creates a level of ease in how we live our lives. Space helps functionally and it also helps aesthetically. But again, when everything is crammed into our lives, it blocks the flow. It blocks the level of peace and joy and beauty.

And so it's important to have physical space, but it's also important to have inner space. That inner space is withdrawing to quiet our minds; to be still; and to listen and to connect with that Spirit of God.

You know, Jesus said, *"When you pray, go into thine inner chamber and close the door, and speak to your Father in secret."* And what he's saying is: Create an inner space and quiet yourself to listen and connect with the Living Spirit of God.

So my question for you is: How important and significant and how much are you creating space and quietness in your life? And I'll bet every one of us -- it would behoove every one of us -- to increase and make a greater commitment to creating space and quiet in our lives. And sometimes it could be anywhere. Just finding a quiet place in your house; a quiet place in your yard. It could be just about anywhere!

When I used to compete in speaking competitions in Toastmasters that were in all these hotels. And there were people everywhere! And before the contest, I just wanted some quiet. So I would always go in the restroom and go in a stall and pray there. [Congregation laughs] And that became my space and quiet to recharge and reconnect.

It doesn't matter. You don't have to go to Sedona ... although there's nothing wrong with that. [Congregation laughs] If you go to wherever that you can withdraw to, and it can be anywhere! But the importance is giving yourself the space and giving yourself the quiet that is needed to replenish, to renew, to recharge.

I've been to a lot of retreats. And I'll tell you, one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself is the gift of silence. A gift of stillness and quietness. Every time in every retreat, I've always come back recharged, refreshed and revitalized.

You know, as we quiet the outer, we develop inner peace. And as we quiet the outer and develop inner peace, the voice within speaks. And the more still we are, the better we can hear the still, small voice of God. If we really want to prepare ourselves for a breakthrough, the first step is to make sure we create space and quiet.

The second thing we need to do to prepare ourselves for a breakthrough is to **CONNECT TO OUR BREATH**. So everybody, let's just take a deep breath. [Takes a deep breath] Now take another one. [Takes a deep breath] And how about one more time? Deep breath ... [takes a deep breath] ... and just let it go.

You know, there's something amazing about the impact of a simple, deep breath to calm us; to center us; and to relax us.

You know, I grew up as a Presbyterian, and when I went to Unity for the first time I was 22 years old. I'd never been to a Unity church before and around the prayer time, the minister said, *"Okay now, I just want you to breathe. And just breathe as we enter this time of quiet."* And my first thought, being a Presbyterian, was, *"Why are you telling me how to breathe? I know how to breathe!"* [Congregation laughs] *"I don't need direction in breathing, thank you! I think I've got it down."*

And so the question is: Why say, *"Breathe?"* You know why? As natural as breathing is, most of us breathe very shallow throughout the day. Most of us don't breathe deeply. In fact, not only do we tend to breathe very shallow, when we get scared, what do we do? [Gasps quickly, drawing breath inward] We hold our breath! When you're working out and straining yourself, often you'll be like [pantomimes holding breath while pushing a big weight]. And your trainer has to say, *"Okay, breathe; let it out."* [Congregation laughs]

You know, as natural as breathing is, we do not take the full benefit and the power of the gift of breath.

Andrew Wahl said breathing and our breath is one of the great keys of good health. Shallow breathing reduces our energy and our vitality. Shallow breathing makes us less able to handle germs and illnesses. And when we don't breathe as deeply, even our minds aren't as positive. Breath is vitality!

Everyone take a deep breath. [Takes deep breath] And I bet you feel stronger! You feel more powerful! More vibrant and radiantly alive!

And so sometimes we need to remind ourselves to take a deep breath! Still, after all these years in Unity and all the meditations, every time I say, *"Take a deep breath,"* or I hear, *"Take a deep breath,"* I always take a deep breath! It's always a good reminder to use the power of breath, because it is through breath we calm and center ourselves, and we come into the present moment. It is through our breath that we also connect with ourselves spiritually.

Do you know the Greek root word for breath is spiritus? And in Sanskrit, the word breath is "prana," or the life force. And so, when we forget to breathe, it is like we're forgetting the life force and the spirit that is in us, and the spirit that is available to us.

In the Songs of Solomon it says, *"Breath restores me to my exact self."* That when we connect with our breath, we connect to Spirit, and we connect with our divine nature. We connect to our exact self.

And breath can keep us connected, even in difficult and challenging times. Even through something that's painful and difficult.

I think I mentioned I had a little surgery on my hand a few years ago. And I don't like needles; I'm a bit of a wimp when it comes to that. And they had to give me two needles in my finger. And I was wincing and screaming, and the nurse said, *"Just breathe through it."* [Congregation laughs] *"Just breathe through it."* It annoyed me, but I did it! [Congregation laughs] And there was pain there, but it made it so much easier. I stayed conscious; I stayed present as I breathed through it.

Breath can help us through difficult and painful times to stay connected and grounded and knowing we can make it through it.

Do you remember Jesus with the loaves and fishes? You know, 5,000 or 4,000 people? Not enough food? Stressful time! But I guarantee you, while it didn't say those words in the Bible, I know Jesus took a deep breath. [Congregation laughs] And do you know what the first thing he did was? Oh, we always say the first thing he did was give thanks. No! The first thing he did: Tell the people to sit down. I'm sure Jesus -- in a Unity way -- would have said, *"Now just take a deep breath and sit down and relax."* [Congregation laughs]

And that is the truth! In those difficult times he's teaching us: Just breathe. Relax and stay calm and know that connection of God is with you, and a resolution and answer will come. It will come! That was a powerful teaching, message and lesson: To breathe. Stay connected through the pain, through the difficult and challenging times.

Get a flat tire? Breathe. Get an unexpected bill? Breathe? Have to have a difficult conversation with your spouse? Breathe? Feeling overwhelmed by life? Just breathe.

Think of that thing that's challenging you in your life right now. Just think of it for a second and repeat after me, and we'll breathe in between.

"God is in this situation."

Together: [with congregation] *"God is in this situation."*

Now breathe. [Deep breath]

"God is my source."

[Congregation]: *"God is my source."*

Now breathe. [Deep breath]

"God will see me through this."

[With congregation] *"God will see me through this."*

Now breathe. [Deep breath]

"God means this for good."

Together: [with congregation] *"God means this for good."*

Now breathe. [Deep breathe]

Rajneesh/Osho says, "If you can do something with breath, you will attain the source of life." If you can do something -- if you can do anything and everything -- with breath, anchored in Spirit, that you will attain the source of life.

Finally, last one ... this quote. Elizabeth Barrett Browning said, "Whoever breathes the most air lives a better life." [Congregation laughs] I mean, isn't that cool? So if you breathe more air, it means you're more calm; more centered; more present. If you breathe more air, it means you're connected with the Spirit and your exact self. If you breathe more air, you can stay centered and grounded, even in the midst of a difficult time. Just breathe through it. Breathe through it.

To prepare ourselves for a breakthrough, it's important to connect to our breath.

And the last one is **YOU'VE GOT TO BE WILLING**. You ever get, like, guidance from God or a little nudge to go do something, but you weren't willing to do it? Anybody ever? [Congregation laughs] Apparently just four of us ... but that's okay. [Congregation laughs] Ever been unwilling to apologize? Ever been unwilling to let go? Ever been unwilling to forgive? Ever been unwilling to accept? Or unwilling to learn? Or unwilling to risk your heart for love? Or unwilling to go to counseling? Or unwilling to stop eating chocolate and fried foods? [Congregation laughs] I don't know!

You know, preparation and progress can't really happen when we're unwilling. And when we're unwilling, it's a bit of a showstopper. You know, but it is so important for us to be willing! Willingness makes a bigger difference than we realize!

In the Book of Matthew, Chapter 8, it says, "A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.' Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean.' And immediately he was cured."

Willingness I think is the prerequisite for success, advancement and progress. Are you willing to learn? To improve? To grow? To change? Are you willing?

I'll tell you, on my spiritual path, four of the hardest words to say -- and say it with sincerity and truth -- were the words, "Thy will be done." I don't know what it was! When it came to, "Thy will be done," in my head right after that I'd say, "Yeah, but please don't make it too hard!" [Congregation laughs] "Don't make me the first one to take the step back from that dirty so-and-so who didn't treat me ..." or whatever it is. You know, it's like, "Yeah; Thy will be done ... mostly," would be my answer. [Congregation laughs]

And the thing about it is: Willingness. Are you willing to trust God with all your heart? Are you willing to listen to Spirit? Are you willing to surrender? And are you willing to open your life to allow God to use you for something greater? To allow God to move through you to help bring peace or healing or joy or love into this world?

Martin Luther King said, "Use me, God. Show me how to take who I am, who I want to be, and what I can do and use it for a purpose greater than myself."

There is more in every single one of us. But that "more" could never come forth unless we're willing. Are we willing to allow the magnificence and the beauty and the genius and the gifts and talents that we're meant to bring forth? Are we allowing ourselves to be more willing to do it?

You know, in the Book of Isaiah, God needs someone to go and help the children of Israel. And Isaiah says, "Here I am, Lord. Use me." He was saying, "I am willing!" He didn't even know what the instructions were! [Congregation murmurs] And he was willing! Are you that willing? Are you that willing?

to open yourself and surrender to allow God -- even if you don't know what it is? To trust that depth? You know, when we're willing, possibilities open and they're endless. The question is: Are you willing?

You know, sometimes the best way ... When it comes to breakthrough and transformation, the first thing we want to do is full-steam ahead. Let's go for it; let's push; let's get after it! And that's good. But sometimes the best thing you can do if you want to go forward for a dream or a breakthrough to transform your life is to take a step back. To be able to reflect and revisit. To regroup. To refocus and recharge ourselves. And to prepare ourselves. And to do that inner work that's needed.

And that is to create space and quiet. To connect to our breath and spirit. And to be willing to have God use us. The first thing -- and the first way to prepare ourselves for breakthrough -- is to RETREAT.

God bless you all! [Congregation applauds]

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