



12: Practice Presence

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 12. If this is your first time listening in, this is a podcast for the second guessers, the chronically hesitant, or anyone who suffers from decision fatigue. This is also a place for those of you who may just need a little white space or a few minutes away from the constant stream of information, or the sometimes delightful, but also a distracting hum of entertainment. You long for thoughtful story, a little prayer, and a simple next right step. Today, we'll practice stopping on purpose so that we can, as Eugene Peterson says, be alert, and attentive, and receptive to what God is doing in and for us, in and for others on the way. We wait for our souls to catch up with our bodies. That's from his book, *The Jesus Way*, and this week story is a perfect example of why his words rings so true. Travel with me back to January of 2015 when I flew from the East coast to the West coast for a four-day trip.

I've been in California for nearly 24 hours now, most of the afternoon spent at LAX waiting for my final leg flight to Santa Barbara. I couldn't keep my eyes open past 8:30 last night, 11:30 East coast time. Of course, this morning, I woke up hours before daylight, mapped out a coffee shop in Montecito, took a shower, got full-out ready, and still it wasn't even 6:00 AM. Glad I rented a car for this trip. I made my way out of the retreat center where I'm staying. It was late when I pulled in last night, and now as I leave before the sun rises up, I still haven't seen what this place looks like. But nestled into the rocky hillside, I can tell it's lovely.

Nerves and curiosity pushed me onward, searching for coffee and awake people, something familiar to grab a hold of. I know the general direction of a coffee shop. So I'm not using my phone to navigate, but I'm frustrated that the streets here have no curves, and even main roads look like alleys. And just as I start to mini panic and curse the darkness of this eternal morning, I turn down one street and up another, and like magic, there at the top of the hill I am suddenly in the presence of a wide open space with nothing but dark blue morning and a golden glow of a distant sun making her way West. No one is around but me, the palm trees, and the empty fancy restaurants. I can hear a faint rumble and I'm not sure what it is.

I lower the driver's side window and instantly realize it's the sea crashing just beneath the road. I sit there in awe for a moment where a Butterfly Lane meets Channel Drive, listening to the churning crash of waves against a West coast beach. Both awesome and eerie in the darkness of morning, the sound makes me uncomfortable in a way I can't explain. It's something about longing, and distance, and God being other than me. Tears threaten. I turn left deciding it's time to find that coffee shop.

I find the right streets more easily this time, and there she is, the only shop open on the road, warm glow of light and caffeine inside. Through the front windows, I see men sitting in jeans reading their

newspapers. I park, I even get out, but I can't go in. That morning sky has set out to haunt me. I can tell from looking overhead that the sun is working her way further up and I just have to see more. Looking on my map, I retrace my route back to Channel Drive, and this time I park and get out.

A few other early morning people are there too, several with dogs, one with coffee. I know the time zone is different here, but just knowing that John and the kids are all up and into the day back home, I can't help, but feel like California is so lazy sleeping in so long. The whole country is already awake and your sun hasn't even come up yet. There is a lot of life happening just over those Hills, you know. California doesn't seem bothered one bit about it.

And so, I stand there mingling among the other morning, people I found, and I stare over the railing at the water, the gray blue rocks in the distance, and the teasing line of golden orange. A woman walks near to me and we watch in polite, respectful quiet for a bit. She has her phone out too, waiting. Soon as she strikes up a conversation, and having been traveling alone for over a day now, I don't really mind it. It turns out she grew up here, and her life has borne witness to countless numbers of sunrises and sunsets. The beach in Santa Barbara faces mostly South, so they get views of both rising and setting sun. It may be one of the most beautiful places I've ever been. But I actually say that a lot when I travel.

But we wait there together, she in her running clothes, me in my ready for the day outfit, both holding our iPhones. Others meander out as well, a man with two dogs running free, some bike riders, an older couple holding coffees. We stand, and we watch, and we wait. The sun, she's in no hurry. She's been doing this every day since the beginning, and she will neither wait nor rush for anyone. If you're here, you see it. If you leave, you miss it. No pausing, no recording, no fast forwarding through commercials. Just this moment, rolling into the next, changing hues you can only distinguish if you look away and then back again.

The runner I've been talking with, I learn her name is Jordan, and she's waiting to find out if she gets a job this week. She decides to continue with her run once we wait past the time the weather channel app tells us the sun will rise. We realize the cloud cover and the islands out in the distance probably means we won't see the sun and her fire this morning, only her water color influence. I think of how I'll never see this runner again, but her life will go on, and she'll get her job and probably moved to Amsterdam for a month, and then back to LA, and she and her white teeth will keep on seeing the sun come up three hours late every morning.

I do this a lot when I meet new people I know I'll never see again. Such is the traveling life of someone who thrives on connection. But she leaves, and a few minutes later, I do too. I don't want to give up on seeing the actual sun, but I've been up for hours by now and I'm in desperate need of that coffee. I retrace my path and find The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf again. But once again, I park and I cannot bring myself to get out of my car. What if I miss the prettiest part of the sunrise? What if I waited there by the water for 30 minutes only to miss the best part?

And so, if you can actually believe it, I drive away again. I go back to my old spot where I'd met Jordan a few minutes before, and again, the sun plays coy. The sky is awake now, and the sun has found a way to sneak up behind the clouds. This morning, she holds her secrets close. All right, then, it's time, for real this time. Coffee and a bit of work. And so I drive back through the streets a different way to the coffee shop, this time through the little town that I'm coming to know by heart. I think about how ridiculous my

morning has actually been so far. I think about how difficult it's been for me since I got here to settle in.

I'm traveling alone this time. But when we traveled together, John always unpacks his suitcase within the first five minutes of arriving somewhere. When I saw him do this for the first time, I could not believe it. Those dressers aren't for using, they're for decoration and to put your stuff on top of. Your suitcase is for your clothes. And so I have this settling in problem when I travel. I'm always looking around, always wondering what's around that corner. What am I missing? How could I be enjoying this better? And as I drive up to the coffee shop for the third time and finally get out of the car after chasing the sun all over Santa Barbara, I realize this very morning is so much like my life. This is my actual life. I have a settling in problem. In this kind of constant movement, my body rehearses anxiety rather than practicing the unforced rhythms of grace.

There's a reason why God invites us to be still first and then know he is God. Ironically, in choosing to finally stop chasing something we don't think we have, we may end up finding what was always there. There's a good chance this week in the middle of October you feel a little like you're driving a car back and forth from the coffee shop to the beach. Maybe not exactly that, but the feeling is the same. Maybe you are also motivated by a deep desire for wonder and for beauty that you don't want to miss, but you also have to get the life stuff done. Maybe it leaves you wondering, do I want mystery or productivity, sunrise or coffee, back and forth, and back again.

The truth is we want both. We need both. But when we feel scattered, we can't be present to either one. The trick is not to become undone in the pursuit of both. The deeper truth is this is not a trick at all. This is the journey of walking with Christ into the next ordinary moment. No matter what it is. This is what it means to do the next right thing in love. Having a scattered soul isn't a one-time declarative statement, but an ongoing way of being. Sometimes I feel centered in the morning only to lose it all by lunch. Rather than being a scattered person unable to do anything, much less my next right thing, I want to be a gathered person aware of the presence of Jesus with me.

When it's time to be still, do so without an agenda so that when it's time to move, you can do so from a place of love. Part of remembering our soul's center is engaging in practices that help to make space for God to move. One of those practices for me is the practice of being still. If you feel scattered without a center, like you're flying out in all directions, let these few moments be a speed bump in your busy day. Resist the urge to scold yourself for being scattered, and remember that no one has ever been shamed into freedom. Let be what is in the presence of God. Acknowledge what is true.

Listen to the emotions that rise up to the surface and name what you hear. Say the day in your mind, the date, the month, the year. This is where you are. This moment is what you have. You can only be one place at a time. So be here now. As you take a deep breath in and another one out, listen to this prayer written by Ted Loder and let it be your own. Oh, God, gather me now to be with you as you are with me. Soothe my tiredness. Quiet my fretfulness. Curb my aimlessness. Relieve my compulsiveness. Let me be easy for a moment. Gather me now to be with you as you are with me.

Thanks for listening to episode 12 of The Next Right Thing. If you would like to connect beyond the podcast, the best way to do that is to join my email list at EmilyPFreeman.com/join, where you'll receive

my monthly letter that's always filled with first word news, the books I'm reading now, my favorite things list of the month, and a secret post you won't find anywhere else. And listen, you can always be sure that everything I write or speak about will always have one goal in mind, to help you create space for your soul to breathe so that you can take your next right step in love.

And if this is your first time hearing from me, welcome. I'm so glad you're here. I'm Emily, in case you didn't get that at first. My husband is John, and we've been married for 16 years. We have twin girls who are 13, and a son who's 11. I've written four books, including *Simply Tuesday* and *A Million Little Ways*. My favorite place to stand is at the intersection of faith and creativity. If that's a place you like to hang out too, you can find out more about my books, my courses, and other offerings by visiting EmilyPFreeman.com. And while you're there click join in the navigation bar so you won't miss a thing.

Finally, you've probably noticed that each week I reference at least one of my favorite books, if not more, in each episode, and you can always find the links to those books in the show notes at TheNextRightThingPodcast.com. As always, you can find me on Instagram, my favorite social media platform, at [Emily P. Freeman](https://www.instagram.com/emilypfreeman). And again, join our little tribe at EmilyPFreeman.com/join. That's EmilyPFreeman.com/join. And now, I'll leave you with a simple but profound phrase from Brennan Manning. In the act of silence, you're not waiting for God to make a move, you're becoming aware of the moves he is making.