

The Jesus Project

Leap of Faith 2012

Jesus is really good.

Nine years ago, our congregation faced a daunting challenge.

We were meeting in the gym of a beautifully-remodeled elementary school, but we were facing signs that we might well not be able to keep meeting there for long. There were no other suitable rental spaces for our Sunday services. And so we wondered if maybe we should do what other churches often do and get an actual church building. But that was an intimidating prospect. One gathering of pastors heard about my dilemma—the size of our congregation and our youthful demographic (lots of talented, smart people, but no captains of industry to underwrite us)—and, after a reflective moment, a pastor said (to put it in polite terms), “You’re [in a difficult position].” The others nodded knowingly, getting the point before I did. We’d need millions of dollars to find a place in Cambridge that was large enough, but we just didn’t have the moneymakers who could pull it off. And the city of Cambridge had told us that they wouldn’t zone any non-church property for us. So...when was the last time a church was for sale in Cambridge? No one could remember. Ten years? Twenty years? Hard to say.

And so we did a bold thing. We agreed to take Lent, the six weeks before Easter, to fast and pray as a congregation about this. At the end, we’d take an offering for a building—after those of us who wanted to give had prayed about how much to give. And we’d pray that a church building that would work for us would go on the market.

We had a theme for the time: “Jesus is Really Good.” Sort of a second-grade sentiment, but one that summed up our experience as a church. (It caught on to the degree that a local alternative newspaper spoofed us with a cover that played off of our graphics with the headline (parodying the then-current president): “George Bush is Really Good.”) When it was done, we took an offering, and—after a little research, we discovered that we’d matched the American church record amount for a one-day cash offering.¹ Two weeks later I got a call about a new church on the market. And here we are.

Afterwards, a surprising thing happened. Person after person enthusiastically came up to me and said, “I can’t wait to do that again next year!” I was befuddled. They couldn’t wait to give the church lots of money next year? Then why wait? No, they said—that experience of fasting and praying and reading the Bible together had been maybe the richest experience of their lives! Whether or not we need money next year, let’s just do it for its own benefits!

¹ Okay, I’m fudging. The best we could discover was the record as of ten years earlier—but we did match that! And that church had eight times the number of congregants and was in the richest county, per capita, in America.

And then I heard stories of answered prayers during the time. Diseases (anorexia!) healed. Jobs gotten. Pregnancies, marriages, restored families, newfound joy in life. Really great stories. And so we gingerly tried another one the next year. And we never seem to have stopped.

We've had a lot of fun in subsequent Leaps of Faith, as our Lenten prayer experiments have come to be called. We've prayed about big projects, like starting a new site of our church or starting a community offerings endeavor or even impacting other churches, nationwide, that are also trying to make a positive impact in very secular areas. We raised money for those things and we've seen lots of good things happen. Though the Boston site, tragically, was reconsolidated with this congregation after the cancer diagnosis of its pastor, Vineyard Community Offerings and what's come to be called "Blue Ocean" (the endeavor to help other churches) have both thrived.

And we've focused on different areas of personal growth, like learning more about what leadership throughout our lives might look like or growing in direct communication with God or taking risks to meet strangers on God's behalf or how we might profoundly experience God whether or not our specific prayers appear to be answered.

But this year we're going to go back to the beginning. My hope this Lent is that, if you decide to participate in the Leap of Faith, you'll experience that Jesus is indeed really good.

The Jesus Project

Grace and I love leading Seek, the popular class in our church for people looking to see if faith might work for them. A common story has a participant discovering that, in fact, God appears to be, who knew?, very real and very interested in helping the participant's life get better. So they're thrilled, but then they offer a confession: while they now most certainly believe in *God* and have often robustly experienced *the Holy Spirit*, they're not exactly sure how *Jesus* fits in.

I can really relate to this question. When I first left atheism behind for faith, it was clear to me that there was a God out there who wanted to connect with me. But I spent the next two years studying comparative religions (and going to Bible studies) because, while I was convinced about God, I was far from convinced about Jesus.

Nonetheless, I have a vivid memory from only a few years later. I was in a church and singing a song with the lyrics: "Jesus, Jesus, your name is like honey on my lips" and I was choking up. As syrupy as some might find the song to be, doggonit, it was so true! My story of connection with God really *was* all about Jesus. Evidently there was a reason Jesus has gotten so much discussion (not to mention worship) over the millennia.

Our hope for this Leap of Faith is both a modest and a profound one. We hope that, through this experience, you'll experience Jesus in a fresh and powerful way. And we hope that, as a whole congregation, we'll *all* experience the love of Jesus in a fresh and powerful way. Such experiences have been called "renewals" or "revivals." It would be wonderful if that's actually happened for us.

Now, along the way, I'm hoping you'll see some wonderful answered prayers. I know that I'm planning to use this Leap of Faith to pray about some things that are very important to me, so important that I've gotten a little over-eager and that (for the moment!) I've even started a Lenten fast a week before Lent. I'm really excited about what this Leap of Faith might offer me.

Here's an important key we've discovered over many Leaps of Faith: only do what you want to do. This is meant to serve you, not to be a kind of spiritual litmus test for how "serious" or "dedicated" or "radical" you are. Each element of the Leap of Faith is offered to you as a gift, rather than as some kind of awful obligation.

That said, here are the elements of this Leap of Faith. I'll explain each one in more detail, below.

1. **The Jesus Project—an interactive, collaborative, hopefully fun discovery process**
 - a. *Search "The Jesus Project" on Facebook or go to the "Greater Boston Vineyard" Facebook page and search our "Likes." Once you find it, click "Like" to join in.*
2. **A daily Bible guide in John's Gospel**
 - a. *See Info Kiosk on for Leap of Faith App for Android and I-phones.*
3. **Three daily prayers**
 - a. **For you, for your six, for your church**
4. **The possibility of some sort of fast**

Let's dream of experiencing Jesus together this Leap of Faith!

When you read the four gospel stories about Jesus, you'll likely note a surprising truth—Jesus pretty much only scolds religious people. The "sinners" he meets do indeed get occasional instruction from him, but he saves his ire for the people you'd think he'd like. And what is he so upset about with them? They've substituted a code of conduct for actual, living relationship with him. To take just one example:

John 9:13-16, 24-25 (TNIV)

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. ¹⁴ Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. ¹⁵ Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see."

¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath."

... ²⁴ A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God and tell the truth," they said. "We know this man is a sinner."

²⁵ He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

The religious leaders are upset that Jesus is so cavalier with their understanding of an important religious rule—not “working” on the Sabbath. The once-blind man is uninterested in all that, but is duly impressed that, because of Jesus, he can now see. It’s a story we see repeated again and again in the gospels—woe to us if we miss actually connecting with Jesus because we’ve chosen the minimal comforts of being “good religious people!”

This Lent, we’ve had a playful thought: What if we could dream of experiencing Jesus through things we could try—through “projects?” Maybe it would be through an art project—

- through, say, writing a song about Jesus as you experience him (or hope to).
- Or through a short story.
- Or, heck, an iPhone video.
- Or a painting, or a photography project or any medium that captures your imagination.

These would be, initially at least, for your own benefit, though we’d love to see whatever you’d show us!

Or maybe it would be through a devotional practice that hasn’t crossed your mind until this point.

- Perhaps taking communion whenever your small group—or your family—shares a meal. (Jesus did seem to be advocating something along those lines.)
- Or by way of daily (or frequent) morning prayer sessions with your small group or family (or spouse or roommate).

A number of us plan to keep a daily notebook, a “Jesus Notebook.” Each morning we’ll ask Jesus something like: “Help me see you today.” And each night we’ll take a moment to ask Jesus, “Where did I see you today?” I’ve already started. It’s evening as I write this, and I just jotted down two quick areas that immediately came to mind as I asked the question. I then asked a follow-up question: “How did I see you in those things?” And then I wrote down the two immediate thoughts that came to mind. The hope is that this will be an encouraging, cumulative connection with God.

One more thing. We’ve reserved a Facebook page (“The Jesus Project”) (You can find it by going to the Greater Boston Vineyard Facebook page which has “Liked” “The Jesus Project” page and like it from there. Or you can search for it. The profile picture is the amazing painting that Deidre Tao made during the Advent services this year.) for you to post the things you try—the art projects, your reflections on the service or prayer projects, however God is speaking to you. We’d love to have an ongoing record of what God is doing to encourage us.

Our kids’ church will be exploring their own projects along these lines. And I know small groups that have already planned things like watching a movie about Jesus together (one that I’ve mentioned recently is called *The Gospel of John*—which will follow along with the Bible portion of this Leap of Faith). Or perhaps your small group has its own idea.

Ways you can participate in The Jesus Project:

1. **Would you like to believe for an art project during Lent?**
2. **Would you like to try a new devotional practice?**
 - a. **Communion as a part of small group or family meals?**
 - b. **Morning prayer with your spouse or roommate or family or small group?**
3. **Would you like to keep a daily “Jesus Notebook?”**

And don't forget to post on the Facebook page! (Or to check out what others are posting. See page 3 to figure out how to join in.)

Let's read the Bible together during the Leap of Faith.

Each Leap of Faith, Brian Housman—sometimes along with a team—has put together a highly-acclaimed daily Bible guide which runs from tomorrow until Easter. This year we'll be looking together at John's Gospel, a unique look at the life and death and resurrection of Jesus with a good deal of material not found anywhere else in the Bible. We considered suggesting a book about Jesus that we could all read in common. (Last year we looked at a classic book on hearing God's voice moment to moment called *The Practice of the Presence of God*.) But then it struck us that the four gospels are pretty much the best books about Jesus that we have. If you'd like, join in with the fun.

Let's pray the three daily prayers together.

During that first Leap of Faith, we stumbled across something powerful that those of us who wanted to could do together. We could, every day, pray three prayers in common.

The first prayer: **What do you want Jesus to do for you?**

The second prayer: **What do you want Jesus to do for your six?**

The third prayer: **What do you want Jesus to do for your church?**

Here's what turned out to be so powerful.

What do you want Jesus to do for you?

Asking what we want Jesus to do for *us* might well, at first blush, seem to be pretty selfish. There are lots of people in the world with problems worse than yours or mine. But the Bible, again and again, emphasizes how the first step in faith is for us, personally, to come to God with all the things we need and want. The only other option the Bible allows is that we'll look for help from some other source, and the Bible is certainly not excited about *that*.

James 4:2 (ESV)

You do not have, because you do not ask.

Psalm 116:1-2 (NLT)

I love the Lord because he hears
and answers my prayers.
Because he bends down and listens,
I will pray as long as I have breath!

During my first Leap of Faith, I prayed that I could go from having a draining soul-crushing full-time job to being a freelancer. That was back in 2005 and I am happy to say that I have continued to work on a freelance basis since that year. It is such a better fit for me, for my dreams and my personality. The Leap of Faith gave me courage to step out, even when I couldn't immediately see how it was all going to come together. Can't wait for the upcoming Leap of Faith!

Now, of course, the risk of praying every day for something you actually want is that you won't get it and you'll be disappointed. Why did you expend all that faith only to be so disappointed? And you're very right: those of us who've participated in lots of Leaps of Faith almost certainly haven't seen all of our prayers answered. Some haven't seen any of our prayers answered. So why pray then?

My Leap of Faith experiences in general have brought me deeper into my relationship with Jesus. There is a stronger spiritual-openness feel and sense during the period of time we, as a community, are praying together. Each year I look forward to this time even if my requests to Jesus are not answered during that time or even at all. What I find is that deeper heart issues are addressed by the Holy Spirit in a way that is amazing and profound. Typically, things I wasn't aware of or to the degree that end up going through. Regardless of everything else, Jesus meets me where I am and propels me deeper in a way that doesn't happen when we are not in the Leap of Faith season.

Sometimes I've been helped by asking myself *two* questions here: What do I want Jesus to do for me as I pray this Leap of Faith? And then also asking: What do I *really* want Jesus to do? If I'm praying, say, for a job, would I also be happy even in the absence of a job if I ended up feeling completely provided for—and *was*?

So: what do you want Jesus to do for you?

I'd encourage you to pray for this every day and share what you're praying for with someone else. Support and other peoples' prayer are often very helpful.

What do you want Jesus to do for your six?

Each Leap of Faith, many of us have found it very helpful to think that our prayers might not only help *us*, but might also help six local friends or coworkers or acquaintances whom, best as we can tell, don't seem to be experiencing much from God. Praying particularly for *local* friends has proven helpful because it helps us see the people God has *actually put in front of us*. By all means pray for your

grandmother in Topeka. But consider also praying for six people who are local and seem distant from all the benefits God might offer them.

Last year's Leap of Faith was the first time I prayed for my 6, and I did it almost every day (I wrote their names on my shower wall, so I would see them every day!) I found that over the course of Lent, things started happening for many of them – one friend got a surprising and high-paying job after months of unemployment, one was able to enjoy her wedding despite family conflict (she had previously been resigned to a bad experience.) Another friend also had several successes in his life. I was surprised at how God was working in their lives!

I felt closer to my 6 as a result and found that I had more compassion and really cared for those people in my interactions with them, specifically during those 40 days.

Why don't you write down the names of your six here? (If you're not sure, why don't you take a moment to ask God?)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

People pray in different ways for their six. I tend to pray for spiritual breakthroughs for them. (I've got some neat stories I'll tell you sometime.) Other friends pray for actual needs they know their six are feeling. Either way, the power seems to come from daily prayer for them. And my experience has been that God blesses us more when we pray for our six.

What do you want Jesus to do for your church?

One of our dreams each Leap of Faith is that the faith level of our whole church would rise. What if we could all feel so encouraged by how alive God is for us? One way that might happen is if, when we pray for ourselves and our six, we also pray for our church. By all means pray whatever's on your heart. But, if you're out of ideas, you could certainly pray something like: "God, would you fill our church with your Holy Spirit? Would you encourage our members that you are alive in their lives? Would you, if I can be so bold, revive us spiritually in every way?" Lacking any other ideas, that prayer would rock.

So would you consider praying the three prayers each day?

Let's consider fasting together.

Fasting in some fashion is a very common way that churchgoers throughout the centuries have experienced God during Lent. It seems to communicate to God and our own spirits that we're...well...hungry for more of God. Somehow the voluntary deprivation seems to focus us!

While food fasts of some sort are common, they're by no means exhaustive. People fast from TV or criticism or luxury shopping, whatever is meaningful to them (and, in fact, if you've ever suffered from an eating disorder, we strongly discourage food fasts). Many people do find that fasting adds to what the ancients called "unction"—the *oomph* that can empower answered prayers. But it's meant to be a powerful experience unto itself as well.

Leap of Faith: I fasted TV (I love TV) and I spent that time praying and engaging in conversation with God, Jesus & Holy Spirit. I found that I grow much closer to God, and had an amazing experience.

Last Leap of Faith I prayed and fasted to get clarity about my work, help dealing with a really hard situation, love and priority of Jesus' centrality in my life, and help losing some extra weight. It went great and every one of those prayers was addressed.

And there's your 2012 Leap of Faith!

To recap:

Ways you can participate in The Jesus Project:

1. **Would you like to believe for an art project during Lent?**
2. **Would you like to try a new devotional practice?**
 - a. **Communion as a part of small group or family meals?**
 - b. **Morning prayer with your spouse or roommate or family or small group?**
3. **Would you like to keep a daily "Jesus Notebook?"**

Consider reading John's Gospel by way of the daily Bible guide.

Consider praying the three daily prayers:

1. **What do you want Jesus to do for you?**
2. **What do you want Jesus to do for your six?**
3. **What do you want Jesus to do for your church?**

Consider fasting.

Here's to a fantastic Leap of Faith for you. I'm praying for you!

I LOVE Leaps of Faith! They've been awesome times for me to focus more on God and pray big prayers for new jobs and major life changes. God has met me in all of those times.