

Stepping in, and walking in the in-between

Exodus 14: 19-31; Matthew 18: 21-35

So, when we thought about the idea of leaving the church for a time we imagined that by Easter we could totally come back here, and we'd have this great celebration with trumpets and flowers and then that dream quickly dissipated. And today looks nothing like I expected. I have no doubt that we are all experiencing a myriad of emotions today. Some who are at home might be wishing and longing to be here to see their spiritual friends and at the same time are probably experiencing some feelings of fear. Fear for those who have come, hoping, and praying that everyone stays safe and healthy. For those of you who walked through the door you might be surprised at the beauty and richness of the sanctuary especially if this is your first time. And for some it's like a homecoming. When you walked in and did you notice the smell the church and did it bring back memories and a feeling of comfort? This was the first thing I noticed when I came back to the church a couple months ago. Yet when you come back after a time it's the same and yet it's not quite the same.

I find the words in the song that Erin began our service with to be quite comforting. The song entitled *God Is Here* captures this hybrid liminal moment that we are living in. It said, 'neither here nor there but among you, neither here nor there, God is here in our waking and our dreaming, God is here in our darkness and our gleaning.' God is here and for this we are so thankful for in these times of uncertainty, in times of change, in times of the unknown we can trust in God's presence. We can trust in God's love where God is holding us together while we remain apart God is holding our fears, our joys, our sadness, our hopes, and our prayers.

Last Sunday I introduced the concept of liminal space and this is a new word for many people and so I'm going to repeat a definition again. A liminal space is defined in the Webster's dictionary as "occupying a position at or on both sides. It can also be described as a threshold the in between or betwixt." Reverend Susan Beaumont writes, "Liminality can describe the evolving state of an individual, a place, an organization or an institution; anything stuck in the neutral space between an ending and the beginning Liminality can also be understood relative to physical spaces and periods of time in fact liminality can describe the disorientation of an entire era or civilization."¹ I suggest that God is inviting Robertson-Wesley to step into this liminal

¹ Rev. Susan Beaumont, "How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going. Leading in a Liminal Season" p. 6.

space. I would suggest that God is also inviting this entire world into a liminal space just as God invited the Israelites into a liminal space in the story from Exodus. Liminality begins with an ending and this can be heard in a way that is difficult for us this day because it feels like we're kind of starting to get back to normal, but this is anything but normal. We are worshiping both together and apart today and let's just name it, it's weird. As I look out at the camera knowing that many of you are watching from the comfort of your living room on a screen with your coffee and maybe your breakfast I look out at the pews and I see people I know I know, but you are all wearing masks so it's taken me awhile to kind of get past those masks to see you. I was thinking we should put names on the masks instead of name tags maybe you would all wear them, and it would be great. We get to know each other a bit, but at the same time you're not all sitting where you normally do. It feels weird little disorienting, but I remind myself in these moments that God is calling us to stand firm in this disoriented state. We're being asked to stand in a way that is open to being disoriented into a state of openness, readiness to learn and change and move into a new way of living out our faith and there's no clarity and we have a choice.

We all have choices to make individually and we have choices to make as a collective. Making a choice though as a group requires commitment by the whole. A collective decision does not mean that we all agree; that it's unanimous. I mean think about it when the Israelites chose to follow Moses; I have no doubt that many of them were skeptical, some were probably resistant, some probably brought stuff that somebody said just leave it and they were like no, I'm bringing it with me. They grabbed whatever they could to hold on to what they knew some were probably even defiant once they were freed from slavery. There was no going back. The story of the parting of the Red Sea demonstrates this. They had a choice. God sent Moses to deliver them from slavery to freedom and liberate them, to cross the sea. They did it together. They made the collective decision to be God's chosen people, to be freed from slavery, to go to the promised land. They let go of all that they had known, left behind their homes, and followed Moses into the wilderness. The crossing of the Red Sea was the choice to go with God. This was a journey of the people of God from fear to faith, from slavery to freedom, from death to life, from the known to the unknown.

I found a poem that I think captures this beautifully by Joyce Rupp called Crossing Over and it says:

“Crossing over into the unknown, crossing over from a secure land to one whose roads I have never walked, companion and guide you are my transition coach, you say to me cross over the bridge, go ahead come on over it's sturdy enough, don't look down though or you might get terrified and never walk across, and don't look back too or you will lose courage and want to stay right where you are, hang on keep going that's what bridges are for to get you to the other side trust me to protect you. For all of us in transition who

have bridges to cross bless us God of the journey, gift us with the desire to go ahead. Help us to trust that the bridge will be strong, and the risk will be worth it.”²

Like the Israelites we have stepped into the space between God is calling us to cross the bridge or to walk across the Red Sea between the parted waters just like the Israelites have. And it's going to be uncomfortable and the reality is we're human, which means we often prefer the devil we know. We cling to old patterns and old structures because we know who we are in that context, but now is not the time to do that. We need to take the risk just like the Israelites and walk across and follow God.

Resistance to change is common and it “stems from the fact that liminality always begins with an ending, an experience of loss. Humankind resists loss. We also resist the unknown inherent in not yet, the loss of control over our destiny.”³ One theologian suggested that humanity has an amazing capacity to seek death in preference to submitting to God. But why? All we must do is follow God. All we must do is accept the invitation and trust that God is here with us guiding us and leading us and delivering us and freeing us. So how are we going to create a safe space so that we can stay in this liminal time and not rush to find an end? To truly prepare ourselves for a new beginning how will we commit to entering this liminal space together? We will do it with patience, with forgiveness, not seven times but 77 times with grace and with compassion. We need to decide together to walk into God's waiting room where God can truly work on us and transform us as individuals and more importantly as a faith community. And as a world we need to be open to the transforming power of God to liberate us. So, you might ask what are we needing to be liberated from?

This Covid time has taught us a lot of stuff or at least it has for me. We need to be freed from our individualism. We need to be freed from our need to be successful. We need to be freed from our need to be busy and productive. We are being called to focus on and be in relationship; relationships that help us to grow as individuals to share the gifts that God has given us, to help transform the systemic change that needs to happen, to let go of the institutions that are forcing us to do things we know are wrong. This reading from Exodus I find is most often used on Easter Eve, that moment when we are waiting for the resurrection of Christ. We know that Jesus is no longer with the disciples and there's this waiting period or waiting time before they discover Jesus is resurrected and when they do discover Jesus they don't recognize him because it's not the same, it's different.

The end is our beginning. Jesus did not come back the way that we expected, nor will we come back in the way we expect so we need to let go of our assumptions. We need to really discern and take time to think about what we need to cling to. What do we need to let go of as if our life depended on it if we're to trust God who's standing at the top of that cliff telling us to let go?

² Joyce Rupp, *Out of the Ordinary; Prayer, Poems, and Reflections for Every Season*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2010.), p. 202.

³ Rev. Susan Beaumont, p. 4.

What is it we need to let go of? What do we need to land on? In September we remind ourselves of our holy manners. I again do that today reminding us that through our holy manners we will create a safe space to be in the unknown, in the uncertain. We promise every year that in our behavior and our words that we will relate to one another with respect, humility, patience open mindedness, courage and compassion and we promise to treat ourselves with kindness.

I hope as we slowly walk together that we will remember these things, that we will help each other discover where God is at work, that we will help each other stay in the in between; knowing that that's where creation happens, it's in the chaos it's in the muck it's in the mud. That's where something new will come. For in the end is our beginning. So, don't see this as like coming back and we've started all over again, see it as a walking into the in between. Preparing us to listen and have God guide us to the promised land the point where we will know what we're called to do is a faith community. Let us help each other to stay there to stand firm in our in between thanks be to God. Amen