

STEPPING INTO THE UNKNOWN

(01/30/2022)

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 14:15

Luke 9:57-62

*Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward."
(Exodus 14:15)*

This past week, for several reasons, I have been thinking about liminal places and times. As you know, in the matter of place, of space, the limen is the spot just underneath a door that separates one room from another. So, the limen is partially in one room and partially in another, or we can think of it as neither in one room nor the other. It is in-between. I guess we could think of it as a threshold.

In addition to its use by architects and carpenters, the word "limen" appears in psychology and anthropology. It is a word that is used by cultural anthropologists in their description of rites of passage, initiation rites that traditional cultures employ in the process of helping an individual move from being a child to an adult, from being single to being married, and from being alive to being dead.

For example, in traditional (primitive/archaic) cultures, the boy, when he came of age, was separated from his mother and taken to a liminal place, a sacred place, where he underwent certain ordeals that would test him and where he learned not only the sacred history of his people, but also what he needed to know to function as a man in the tribe. He only stayed in this liminal space for a limited amount of time; the goal was to return to the tribe as a changed, more mature, or more highly evolved person.

Having taught undergraduate psychology for twenty-five years at Assumption College, I tend to think of liminal spaces and times in relation to a young person's experience of going away to college. The college campus is the liminal place, and the college experience takes place in the liminal time. The goal this rich and challenging experience is not just to have the individual learn a certain body of facts and attain the information or skills necessary to earn a living; as a rite of passage, it should help the individual move from being a child to being a responsible adult, one who is able to contribute to his/her society.

It goes without saying (you may have noted that whenever I say this, I invariably go on to say what I believe goes without saying) that the past two years have robbed many of our young people of this experience. Taking college courses by computer at the kitchen table is not the same as moving away from home, living in a dormitory, adjusting to a roommate, making new friends, meeting all kinds of teachers and fellow students, and being exposed to new ideas. I totally support the use of remote learning for people who need it, and to prevent the coronavirus

from spreading and mutating, but I believe it diminishes the psychological, the developmental growth that our young people need to experience.

I feel the same way about our decision, for a second time, to suspend worship as the gathered church. I think of our beautiful sanctuary, with its deeply meaningful religious symbols, as a liminal place, a liminal space. We step aside from our daily lives and routines, put on our Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes, and enter a sacred place where we sit facing the altar, the communion table, the candles, the Bible, and the cross. The worship service, with its music, prayer, scripture lessons and reflection, the affirmation of our religious tradition and the deepening of our grounding in it, could be thought of as a liminal experience. During this experience, what we learn about God, life, and ourselves, what we experience of God, life, and ourselves, hopefully changes us. It helps us grow spiritually. It helps us become the kind of persons that can make a constructive contribution to our society, to the world. It helps us to be the kind of persons who can help to make the kingdom of God a reality on this earth.

This past month, we have missed the opportunity to be together to celebrate and reflect on the liminal experience of entering a new year. To be sure, as individuals, we had the opportunity to watch New Year's celebrations both in Times Square and around the world (this year, for some strange reason, Darlene and I stayed up to watch the ball drop), but we did not have the opportunity to reflect on this transition from the old to the new from a religious perspective. I know the New Year celebration takes place at an arbitrary date, that traditional cultures observed it more often around the time of the spring or winter solstice, but there is something inside us that seeks guidance in this matter of stepping forth into the unknown.

We could also think of the coronavirus pandemic, with its attendant dangers, with how it has tested us individually and socially, with the way its attendant restrictions have altered and limited and disrupted our normal routines, as a liminal experience. We have not exactly decided to step aside from our "normal" lives the past two years; we have been driven out into the wilderness by something so small we can't even see it with the naked eye. This experience has tested us, has tested our resolve, has tested our patience, has challenged our false sense of security, our sense that life is under our control. We have experienced a deep sense of vulnerability. We have also had the opportunity to experience what this ordeal has brought out in us and in our fellow human beings around the world, how maturely we have responded to it. What we have seen hasn't always been pretty.

Whenever we face a New Year as individuals, as a church, as a nation, and as a world, we, like the mythical two-headed dog Janus, try to look backward and also forward. Let me ask you a question. As you look back over the year that has just passed, did it bring what you expected? Was it what you thought it would be? Was it what you hoped it would be? Was it better in some ways? Was it worse in other ways? Were there any surprises, anything that you

didn't anticipate? Did any of these surprises, these unexpected life events, change your life in a significant way?

Actually, that's seven questions. But that's ok. All seven questions distill down into one basic theme. They remind us that at the beginning of every New Year, we step forward into the unknown.

This past year brought more than its share of unknowns, more than its share of unpredicted happenings. Some of these unknowns were difficult or painful to bear; some still are. But we need to acknowledge that there were also unexpected joys, times when something nice, something beautiful and caring and loving happened. We need to remember these times, these experiences as well.

This feeling of stepping forth into the unknown not only happens every New Year; it happens every day! When we wake up every morning, we step forth into a new and unpredictable world! The New Year is a time to think back over the year that has passed. It is a time to reflect on what happened in our nation and the world, on what didn't happen, a time to try to understand the events that shaped not only our lives but also the lives of our brothers and sisters. It is a time to reflect on our own moments of joy and moments of sadness, our experience of health and our struggles with illness, the things that went well and the things that did not go well, the relationships that are still an important part of our lives and the losses that touched us so deeply.

This arbitrarily designated liminal space between the years is a time to look back, but it is also a time to look forward. Will the pandemic continue to haunt us in the year or years to come? Will new variants of the coronavirus, which we know will make their appearance partially thanks to people who offer themselves as unvaccinated hosts, be more highly transmissible than Omicron, more deadly, or will we begin the transition from a pandemic to an endemic, to a virus that is no more incapacitating than the common flu? What will happen to us, to our family, to our country in the coming year? What will happen in the mid-term elections, and how will this affect us and our country? What will happen to our church? Will it grow and become stronger, or will it begin the descent that many churches are taking toward closing? We don't know. However, we do know, we know deep down that no matter how carefully we plan the future, we cannot control it. The only thing certain about the future is its uncertainty.

The certainty of uncertainty brings with it a feeling of vulnerability. Some people escape from this uncomfortable feeling by regarding every single event, no matter how accidental it may seem, as a part of God's master plan. If you believe this, then you have a ground to stand on when illness or tragedy strikes--the conviction that the accident, illness, tragedy, or death is purposeful and is in accordance with God's will.

Other people cannot adopt this theological stance. They cannot bring themselves to believe that God wills the death of little children, accidents that snatch our loved ones from us, illnesses that impact our quality of life, or wars that wreak havoc upon innocent civilians. These people would rather live in a world where free will, accident, and fate play a role than to believe in a God who micromanages the universe.

As you know, I find myself in theological sympathy with the second group. As strange as it sounds, I believe we can trust in a God who allows bad things to happen to good people, who allows the precious gift of free will to play its role in human affairs, and who does not prevent or forbid accidents, illnesses, and tragedies. If God does not predetermine the course of human events, then we humans are empowered to be co-creators with God. At least we can change the present, and in changing the present we can change the future. A great big part of life is up to us, not only in what happens to us but also in how we respond to it. The past two years have shown this to be true.

We need to understand the factors that lay beneath the events of the past year, for many of them did not come out of nowhere. We also need to look ahead. We need a vision to guide our unfolding as individuals, as a church, and as a nation. I believe that God not only plants the vision of a healthy and meaningful life within us; God is working within us to make that vision a reality.

The book of Exodus describes the arduous journey undertaken by the ancient Israelites as they traveled through the wilderness. They had just left Egypt where they were slaves. They embarked upon their journey with a vision planted in their hearts, a vision of a land of their own. The Israelites were known as the Children of the Promise: God's promise that if they would be his people, he would be their God. God promised that they would have a land, an identity of their own. The Israelites wandering in the wilderness had not yet seen the fruits of this promise. All they saw was the seemingly endless hardships of living in the wilderness.

Time and time again, the Israelites were tempted to turn back. At least in Egypt, though they were not free, they had had enough to eat. They had no idea what the future would bring. What if it brought only hardship? The promise of new life, at times, must have seemed hollow.

We know from the testimony of scripture that the ancient Israelites had their doubts. Was this vision of a Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, a land where they would be free and where they could embrace their own religion openly, just the delusional ramblings of an eccentric prophet with a speech impediment, a man who heard voices and saw burning bushes that were not consumed?

Moses, their leader, was a visionary. He saw what the average Israelite could not see. He saw the Promised Land that awaited them if only they would persevere. He knew how the hardships of life in the wilderness were shaping them, how the hot desert sun was tempering the steel of their spirit. He knew that in their moments of weakness they would like to go back to their old life, to their old way of being, but he also knew this would betray their deeper call. Moses called his people to go forward.

Like the ancient Israelites, we, too, are Children of the Promise. God calls us forth into the future. God calls us forth into new life. God is continually trying to create something new in us, and God is continually trying to create something new in the world through us. God also promises that no matter what the coming year will bring, we will not have to face it alone.

When we fail to think of life as a process that must be envisioned and then lived forward, we become a victim of the present and a captive of our past. When this happens, life stagnates and begins to slip backward. This is true of us as individuals, and it is also true of our church. Our church has carried out its ministry to this community for over 156 years. We have a deep and meaningful history. Our little church has touched the lives of many people, many families. It has been a center for worship and spiritual growth. It has created the kind of fellowship that I imagine characterized the very first Christian gatherings. It has been a presence for good in our community. And for over 156 years it has reached out to those in need.

Even as we look back in gratitude, we know that we also need to look forward. We need to live forward into the creation of a healthy and vibrant church, a church that celebrates its past, but which is also deeply committed to moving forward into an unknown future.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said that it is impossible to step twice into the same river. When I first read this, I thought Heraclitus meant that the river is always flowing, always changing. To be sure, it is the same river, but it is also and at the same time a brand-new river. This is the way it is with time. This is the way it is with life. Not the same; not different.

Then I realized that Heraclitus was not only talking about the river; he was also talking about us! To be sure, I am the same person that I was yesterday, but I am also and at the same time a brand-new person. So, I am a brand-new person stepping into a brand-new river! This is the way it is with life. Everything is constantly changing.

Let me return to our original questions. Do you think that the year that has just begun, 2022, will bring what you expect? Will there be any surprises, anything you didn't anticipate? Do you think that some of these surprises will change your life in a significant way?

At the beginning of every New Year, we step forward into the unknown. We do this as individuals, as families, as a church, and as a nation. In this coming year, let us pray for that spirit which will not shrink from the unknown, but will lead us forward into the future. To create this future, Jesus tells us that we will need the courage to put our hand to the plow and not look back. We will need the conviction that, if we can be true to the vision has been implanted within us by God, we can help to create the future. Above all, we need to remember that we do not walk this way alone.

M. Louise Haskins reminds us of this truth in her poem "At the Gate of the Year."

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: "Give me a light, that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

And he led me toward the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.

So, heart, be still.

What need our little life, our human life, to know if God hath comprehension? In all things high and low, God hideth His intention.

We do not have a crystal ball to tell us what will happen to us in the coming year. This is why we need to put our hand into the hand of God. This is why we need to put our lives into the hand of God. We need to let God guide us and help unfold the vision he has for us, for our church, for our nation, and for the world.

My prayer is that, as we pass through this liminal time, we will be able to discover new and creative possibilities within that great unknown that we call the future.

*A reflection shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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