

JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN NEW YEAR'S DAY

(01/01/2023)

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 14:10-15
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)*

Well, it's been quite a year! If I remember correctly, the week before Christmas Eve last year saw a dramatic spike in COVID cases in our area. Before the Christmas Eve afternoon service began, several people asked me why I didn't cancel the service. I felt it was too late to cancel the service, so I asked those in attendance if, in addition to wearing masks and social distancing, they would please refrain from singing the hymns and carols; I suggested we simply listen to them as Michael played them on the organ, much as we would if we were at a Christmas concert. This made me, temporarily I hope, the most unpopular person in the church—the person who spoiled Christmas! But, as far as I know, no one contracted COVID from attending that service.

The numbers were so high at this time last year, that after a quick consult with the Diaconate, we canceled worship services and continued the suspension of all other meetings. So, on January 2, the first Sunday of 2022, we did not meet. We returned to church Sunday, March 6. On the day before we resumed meeting as the gathered church, some of us met here in the sanctuary to take down the Christmas decorations and start to prepare for Lent, which had already begun the previous Wednesday. That was a strange experience.

For the entire year, we were unable to return to normal, nor have we been able to stake out the ground rules for the "new normal." And we are still working this out. Not to start the new year off by calling attention to a cloud hanging over us, but in addition to a dramatic increase of COVID in the wastewater in our area and an increase in hospitalizations, a new coronavirus variant named XBB has swiftly become the dominant form of COVID-19 spreading in the Northeast, jumping from about 35% of cases during the week ending December 17 to just over 50% last week. XBB is apparently more adept than its predecessors at evading the immunity that comes from vaccines and infections. So, our struggle, our diligence, the formation of guidelines based on caution, care, concern, and a strong sense of social responsibility are not over.

As we embark upon our journey into another new year, I find myself 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. 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.

In addition to its use by architects and carpenters, cultural anthropologists use this word 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 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. Here he learned not only the sacred history of his people; he also learned what he needed to function as a man in the tribe. He remained in this liminal space for only a limited amount of time; the goal was for him to return to the tribe as a changed, more mature, more highly evolved person, someone who could make a constructive contribution to the collective.

Having taught undergraduate psychology 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 a liminal place, and the college experience takes place in liminal time. The goal of 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 make a constructive contribution 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 three 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 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.

Over the past three years, during those periods when we did not meet as the gathered church, I missed the experience of gathering in our sanctuary with its deeply meaningful religious symbols. Our sanctuary is a liminal place, a liminal space. Once a week, we step aside from our daily lives and routines 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 sermon, 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 that can help to make the kingdom of God a reality on this earth.

Whenever we celebrate the New Year, like the mythical two-headed dog Janus, we look backward as well as 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 embark upon a journey into the unknown.

The sense of liminality that we experience each New Year provides us with the opportunity 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 some unexpected pandemic haunt us in the year or years to come? What will happen to us, to our family, to our country in the coming year? What will happen in our next presidential election, and how will this affect 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 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 gives rise to a sense of vulnerability. Some people escape from this uncomfortable feeling by regarding every 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--your 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 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. We can change the present, and in changing the present we change the future. We may not be able to determine what happens to us, but we can control how we respond to it. The past three years have shown this to be true.

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. 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 them 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 must have seemed hollow. Was this vision of a land flowing with milk and honey, a land where they would be free to 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 was a visionary. He saw what the average Israelite could not see. He saw the Promised Land that would be theirs if they persevered. 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 knew that to do so would betray their deeper call. Moses called his people to go forward.

God calls us forth into the future, just as he did for the ancient Israelites. 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. We have a deep and meaningful history in this church. 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. For over 157 years, it has been a presence for good in our community.

Even as we look back in gratitude, 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. One of the very positive signs that we have as a church is that we have recently welcomed six people into full membership, full fellowship, full communion with our church. And all of them are workers who are already making their contributions to our life as a community of faith!

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. Not the same; not different.

Heraclitus would tell us that the experience 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!

At the beginning of every day, just as at the beginning of a new year, we embark upon a journey into the unknown. In this coming year, let us pray that the Holy Spirit 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 that has been implanted within our soul 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. We need to put our hand into the hand of God. 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, in this liminal time, we will be able to discover new and creative possibilities to guide our journey into that great unknown that we call the future.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
January 1, 2023*