

Liminal Space, Sacred Space  
Luke 4:1-13 Jesus in the Wilderness  
Toronto United Mennonite Church  
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Sunday, November 20, 2016

It was Jesus who said, "If you cling to your life, you will lose it, and if you let your life go, you will save it."

It was Thomas Aquinas, a 13th century theologian, who said, "This is the ultimate knowledge of God, to know that we do not know."

Wise words from wise men. And utter nonsense, wouldn't you agree? Better for Jesus to have said, "If you cling to your life, you will preserve it. And if you let your life go, you will be lost!" How would we keep track of anything in our household if we didn't label it, put it back where it belongs, take mental notes, make sure all is as it should be? How would we know anything if we didn't study it, test it, believe it, commit it to memory?

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We're not good at living in paradox, in that awkward space where two opposing things can be true at the same time, where the rules are all bent out of shape, when someone has thrown a wrench into things, and the way forward is murky. It's tremendously uncomfortable and anxiety producing when things aren't the way they should be, the way they always were. When the past is gone, and the future hasn't yet come, and in the meantime everything has changed and everything we thought we knew holds water like a sieve.

Richard Rohr calls it "liminal space." "Limina" is the Latin word for threshold, the space betwixt and between. Liminal space, says Rohr, is a unique spiritual position where human beings hate to be but where the biblical God is always leading them. It is the moment when you have left the "tried and true" but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are in between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. It is no fun for anybody.

At times it is something or someone dying, and the loss leaves a gaping hole where once there was fullness. Sometimes it's something we are shedding and are moving on from.

At other times it is something asking to be born – within you, around you, but whose impending debut is asking something of you. A door is waiting to be opened, though what lies on the other side is unclear and feels risky.

With the recent election, our neighbours to the south have entered a period of disorienting liminality. The past eight years have brought such hopeful winds of change - could we possibly be looking at a future where discrimination is re-entrenched, where walls are built and Muslims are scapegoated, where the White House becomes a bullhorn for racism and white supremacy? Liminal space indeed.

As we prepare to gather as a congregation this afternoon to continue our discussions around Marilyn's journey, and our journey with her, we are conscious of our own liminal space here at TUMC. What will the future hold? How will we walk together with integrity? How can we find our way forward?

Rohr calls it the "cauldron of transformation", the belly of Jonah's whale, and it feels for the life of us like we are being (in his words), "chewed up and spit out on new shores".

The Bible is in some sense a collection of stories about liminality; the actual physical wandering and looking for a home. Think of Israel in the desert, Joseph in the pit, the three Marys tending the tomb.

The wilderness was liminal space for Jesus, and sure enough, it's the Spirit who led him there. Luke has just recounted his baptism, has named him the Son of God, and he has been unequivocally called for ministry. And instead of striding with confidence and certainty into the work he's clearly meant to do, he's led into the wilderness to wander aimlessly doing nothing, accomplishing nothing, fulfilling nothing of his purpose and calling. Forty days of eating nothing, forty days of testing. And after forty days, the devil approaches him, full of ideas of how he could alleviate his discomfort. "You're hungry!" he says, "c'mon! you're the Son of God! You can do anything! Look, here are some stones - say the word and they're bread!"

And then on top of a mountain,

"So you're the Son of God, eh? how's that working out for you? Look at all these kingdoms - I can give them to you, easy peasy! You'll

have all the power that should come with your lofty title. I'll make you great again! Better than your current sorry lot!"

Then, on the temple,

"I actually don't even believe you are the Son of God. Probably you don't either. Prove it - throw yourself down. If you are the Son of God, the angels will catch you!"

As the liberation theologian Justo Gonzalez puts it, the temptation for Jesus in this passage is not about pride or grasping at power but rather in preempting the process set by God. Jesus has been chosen and named by God: to stake his claim on kingdoms and power (what already will eventually be his) prematurely is to concede to the power of evil. It's a lack of trust, and an unwillingness to follow the Spirit through the wilderness, a path and process set by God. We know, because we know the end of the story, that for Jesus, the path to Sonship has nothing to do with the kind of power offered to him by the devil in this story. It's a path of suffering and sacrifice, but one that will alter the course of history.

As Gonzalez writes, the greatest temptation is not pride but acquiescence and a desire to return to the existing order, the way things always have been. What appears to be humility may well be an unwillingness to take the risk and pay the price of a new future. “You will be like God” has power only if one forgets that one already bears the divine image. The invitation to claim one’s rights and possibilities becomes a temptation only if one forgets that one already bears the image of God. It’s the easy way, but not the best way.

In our story, Jesus emerges from the wilderness having resisted these temptations, full of the Spirit and ready for his ministry.

To stay in the wilderness, to hold a paradox, to resist the temptation to solve and fix and explain and decide, to dwell meaningfully in liminal space is a tremendous act of courage.

These are fallow spaces; crucial spaces, the necessary soil for creativity and growth. spaces where untapped potential is lying wait. It’s the moment of fruit basket upset, when the pieces will fall where they may and all bets are off. It’s a moment of infinite possibility -

both frightening and energizing - when creativity and growth can flourish. But to take full advantage, it's important to stay with it.

According to Susan Beaumont, a consultant with the Alban Institute who helps congregations and organizations think through major transitions, during these liminal seasons there is a body of work to be done, but it is not problem-solving work. She insists that when we focus on the wrong work in a liminal season we contribute to our own exhaustion and inability to move forward. We churn instead of rest. When we do this we truncate the true potential of the season for healing, rediscovering vocation, shaping values, framing memory, tending soul and strengthening the core. In the words of Richard Rohr, we must not get rid of the pain until we have learned what it has to teach us.

According to an article I read this morning on Huffington Post, there is an increasing number of cases of people - throughout the world, actually - responding to the fear and distress of the US post-election by shutting down and opting out, in essence building their own internal wall. Defriending people and shutting out the conversation because it's all too overwhelming. Richard Rohr suggests that the

best posture in the wilderness is participation, engagement, being  
and abiding together, holding the paradox, entering the pain, sharing  
in the loss.

In the words of the 14th century Persian poet Hafiz,

Don't surrender your loneliness

So quickly.

Let it cut more deep.

Let it ferment and season you

As few humans

Or even divine ingredients can.

Something missing in my heart tonight

Has made my eyes so soft,

My voice

So tender,

My need of God

Absolutely



Clear.

And in the poetry of the psalm:

Be still, and know that I am God.