



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 19
Proper 23 (A)

Peace in Liminal Spaces

[RCL] Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:6-7)

It has been said that in life, change is the only true constant. We are in a constant state of flux in all ways, from the microscopic – in how our bodies regenerate themselves on the cellular level, to the experiential – discovering suddenly, after years of avoidance, that you really do like Brussels sprouts! Most of life’s changes occur over long periods, so we hardly notice them. Yet, at other times, we are brutally thrust into change without any warning. The process of change can also linger for a very long time, making the experience even more unbearable. One theologian defines this change as “entering and inhabiting liminal space.”

So, what is a liminal space?

The word liminal comes from the Latin root word “limen,” which means “threshold.” Liminal spaces are transitional or transformative spaces. Liminal spaces are in-between spaces, where our former ways of being are challenged or changed. Often, they are hard spaces to live in, spaces of disorientation and discomfort, perhaps like hanging in mid-air.

What do the people of God do when they find themselves in liminal spaces – when they have been waiting too long? What happens when we become impatient and worry? Do we rush to action in anger? Make rash decisions? Do we build golden calves and worship other gods?

Moses went up on the mountain and came back with his face aglow. Last week, we heard how the people feared the flashes of lightning and bellowing thunder when God spoke to them. They begged Moses to speak in God’s place. The people heard the Ten Commandments and pledged to obey all that God had said. Then Moses went back up to get more instructions and the cloud of the Lord’s presence covered the mountain like a devouring fire. They were happy to wait and hear what Moses had to say. They sat at the foot of the mountain and waited. And waited. They were at a standstill in the desert waiting for Moses as

they depended completely on him. In faith, they had followed him. In faith, they committed to obey the word he said God had given him on the mountain. And he had been gone for over a month.

Today, we find the people of the Exodus narrative still waiting for Moses' return from Mount Sinai with the Law. As they wait, they become increasingly anxious and impatient. They are in the wilderness – that space between Egypt and the Promised Land – in a liminal space. The people call Aaron to do something – now. Our text describes Aaron as making a rash decision under pressure. Their fear – that Moses' delay means he is not returning with the word of God – causes Aaron to succumb to the community's anxiety. He yields to the temptation to create a false substitute for God – something bright and shiny and new – something that looks strong, and most importantly, something they can see, touch, and know is there with them right now.

The problem is that there is not and cannot be a substitute for God. God may be intangible, but God is also irreplaceable. The golden calf may calm God's people in their anxiety, may bring Aaron peace from their complaining, but it is not a peace that can last. The people of God had a choice. They could have resisted the urge to make an idol and remained in their discomfort, not knowing when Moses would return from the mountain and letting their faith drive them to continue working toward inheriting the Promised Land. No golden calf can speak to and inspire God's people, and no quick fix can ease anxiety and discomfort. Besides, at times, we need to sit in our discomfort.

For months now, we have inhabited liminal space. We find ourselves in a wilderness of uncertainty and unfamiliarity. We are cut off from loved ones and experiences that brought meaning to our lives and we are waiting for our lives to return to some semblance of normalcy. Life in pandemic is truly liminal. Liminal spaces have a way of overturning the daily rhythms and practices that give our lives an element of cohesion, manageability, and meaning. They upend those rituals in life that bring us comfort.

Yet, while liminal space might put an end to or infringe upon our rituals and rhythms, they can also provide an opportunity to be more intentional and more creative, leading us to develop new rituals. There is a healing ingenuity that can arise from fearful and anxious times. Life in a liminal space offers us the opportunity to be intentional about the way we worship and communicate with God. We can be intentional about our needs and also the needs of others. Life in liminal spaces offers us the opportunity for growth and transformation.

There is great spiritual treasure to be found in waiting – the practice of cultivating patience. It's a practice that raises faith to a profound trust that God is working and moving even when things seem to be going nowhere. And that God's good time is the right time.

In our impatience and worry, our relationships and our health suffer. Sometimes anxiety and uncertainty cause us to seek gods we can control and worship idols that we choose.

As both saints and sinners, we live liminal lives between brokenness and wholeness, between suffering and joy, between focusing on ourselves and focusing on God. It is in these in-between times that we can feel uncertain, frustrated, disappointed, or frightened. It is in these times that we can become impatient. Yet, it is also in these times that we can find encouragement in the words of St. Paul, when he says, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

God is always attuned to God’s people – always intimately aware of what is going on in our lives. God observed the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt and commissioned Moses to seek their freedom.

God saw what was taking place at the bottom of the mountain and became angry with the people for breaking the first and second commandments. They forgot about what God had done for them and the promises they had just made. God wanted to destroy them, but Moses stood in the breach, reminding God of God’s promise to Abraham – reminding God that the people were God’s people.

God does not look for reasons to destroy us. Rather, God seeks ways to restore and redeem us and was open to Moses’ intercession. As with Abraham pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah, the Old Testament offers us examples of those who understood prayer to be conversation, and God to be a relational God who actually listens to people – listens to us.

May we remember that even in our pandemic-driven, liminal time and space, God is with us – present in the changes and chances of our lives. Present in the outer darkness Jesus speaks of in today’s Gospel reading. Present when we are driven to weeping and gnashing our teeth. Present even when we wander off to false gods and worship idols. God is present, patiently offering forgiveness, comfort, and the peace that passes all understanding – the peace that guards our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of Christ Jesus. Lasting peace. Amen.

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