

LIMINAL TIME

Sermon delivered by Rev. M.J. Pattison

Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: Isaiah 58 1-12; : John 13

In March of 2020 there was a sudden and cataclysmic break in the preciously predictable order of our daily lives. When I was told, on March 16, 2020, to go home and not come back to work for two weeks, it was beyond imagining that I would not ever be returning to a job I had loved for 13 years and to colleagues I admired. I was only vaguely aware of a software platform called Zoom but in the weeks and months that followed my mother's memorial service, my retirement celebration, my niece's wedding reception, my grandson's bris, Advent, Christmas and Easter would all be Zoom events. In the words of Joni Mitchell, "You don't know what you've got till it's gone...". We all have our own "when Covid hit" stories. The pandemic impacted us all differently from catastrophically to strangely, sometimes even pleasantly, solitarily and everything in between; now, three years later, as we pick up and weave together the threads of normalcy, just below the surface there is the uneasy sense that there really is no "normal". We are wrestling with what should endure, what to leave behind and what is here to stay whether we like it or not. We struggle to come to terms with our grief over lost lives, lost time, lost learning, lost work, lost travel, lost relationships, both personal and global.

In his annual report to the congregation, the pastor of the church we now attend on Cape Cod wrote "This [is] a liminal time. Liminality is the threshold between the way things used to be, our past, and the way things will become, our future. ..We cannot see the future. We cannot go back to the way things were. The key to liminal times is to be patient, to ask good questions and be attentive to how the Spirit of God is moving us forward. "ⁱ

For me, liminality is a helpful way of thinking about this time, when we are indeed rebuilding lives and rebuilding communities in the still choppy wake of a global pandemic. This morning, I am particularly interested in reflecting on times of liminality in scripture. What did faithful people do when suddenly and tragically thrust into liminal time? And more importantly what did God require of them?

The setting for this morning's Old Testament lesson is the 6th century BCE. Scholars identify this prophetic voice as Third Isaiah, who guided the remnant of Israelites returning from the Babylonian exile to ruined Jerusalem. Isaiah's little community is NOT in a good place. They are shocked and angered by the state of Jerusalem and their own weakness and poverty after generations of exile in Babylon. All through the exile they have, in their minds, been faithful and loyal. They have adhered to the most difficult rituals of fasting to please God with their devotion. But apparently, God has not noticed their pious good behavior: They feel betrayed and angry with a God who has appeared to abandon them. But it's difficult and unsatisfying to be mad at God so they turn their anger on one another, fighting about who is more pious and who might be responsible for God's apparent lack of interest in their plight. "Look," The Prophet, voicing God, points out, "when you do this you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight."

Isaiah reminds them that the “fast” that God would have them choose is the throughline of all the Judeo-Christian scripture:

*Is not this the fast that I choose
To loose the bonds of injustice
To undo the thongs of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke.
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house
When you see the naked to cover them,
And not hide yourself from your own kin
.. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, and you offer
food to the hungry and satisfied the needs of the afflicted,
Then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noon day.
[Then] You shall be called repairers of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.*

In other words, we “worship” God when our worship leads to participation in the healing of our families, our communities, our world. The fast that God wants us to choose is not a performative act, it is a habit, a discipline, a way of life. It is not an easy choice. We are called to choose it when others seem to have given up because it’s too costly, or too complicated; We are invited to choose it because it is the right thing to do, because it glorifies God. When we participate in the fast that God chooses, we can be part of God’s mission as repairers of the breach and restorers of streets to live in.

In this morning’s New Testament lesson, the context is related but different. Here, Jesus is looking forward to the liminal time to come when he will be gone, and his disciples will need to carry on his work in the world. To prepare them, their leader, their rabbi, the one they revere and look up to, the one for whom they have forsaken everything, removes his clothing, gets down on his hands and knees and begins washing their filthy feet.

They are appalled.

I chose this passage because when I was beginning to think about this sermon I happened to listen to an interview on NPR with Dr. James O’Connell, who spent his career treating homeless people at Pine Street Inn in Boston. ⁱⁱ He remembers with chagrin leaving his position where he had been very important: the resident in charge of the medical intensive care unit at Massachusetts General Hospital. He recalls “I marched into the shelter. All the nurses were sitting around...I thought they were going to be thrilled to see me, but in fact they were very severe and explained to me that they had been taking care of homeless people for 15 years without...doctors or hospitals and I would do well to listen to them.” One nurse “lifted my stethoscope from around my neck and put all my doctor stuff aside...she said ‘for the next two months I want you to soak feet’”.

And for the next two months, that’s all he did. In a sense he fasted from his identity as a doctor and placed himself at the feet of his patients. He described one patient whose feet he was assigned to soak. The man was someone he had seen frequently in his emergency room. The staff had labeled him treatment resistant. Dr. O’Connell recalls: “Then one day after about six weeks he looked down at me and said ‘Hey I thought you were supposed to be a doctor’. And I looked up.. and I lit up because it was the first person in the entire shelter that ever said doctor to me. And I said ‘I am’ and he goes ‘what the hell are you doing soaking feet?’ And I remember answering ‘I don’t know, I just do whatever the nurses tell me’...That was the beginning of a relationship with the man that eventually resulted in his accepting and asking for antipsychotic medications that [we] had spent 25 years trying to get him to take in the emergency room.”

Dr. O'Connell reflected that one of the problems with his training was that great value was placed on moving quickly. But the nurses at the Pine Street Inn "just showed me a way of taking care of people that I had not learned when I was in the hospital because ...we were being asked to do something completely different. But if you're going to reach this population, you've got to just slow down, you've got to take care. It was a revelation to me...It's an interesting upside-down world...I've also learned that I can serve a lot of soup and sandwiches and then mention to somebody that I'm also a doctor, and you'd be surprised how that breaks down many barriers".

Dr. O'Connell discovered an upside-down world when he went from being in charge of the Emergency Department at Massachusetts General Hospital to being on his knees washing the feet of the homeless. He became a healer when he sat at the feet of his patient. We, also, have the opportunity to change our social location, like Jesus did when he washed his disciples' feet to prepare them for service. The pandemic has accelerated a shift in the role of churches in our culture that was already underway. For most of the 20th century, protestant Christianity had a seat at the tables of power and influence, but for a variety of reasons that institutional influence is waning in the 21st century. We have moved from a position of expertise and authority looking down, to being on our knees looking up with openness and humility. This is disorienting, but frankly it is a better place for us to be: The fact that God chooses requires us to slow down and to look up, and to listen. Jesus changed the world from the margins of society and that is where hope and genuine wisdom take root and grow: slowly, painstakingly, one relationship, one soul at a time over lifetimes. It is slow work.

In her book "Emergent Strategies", writer and social activist Adrienne Marie Brown has identified some principles for bringing about change on the margins.ⁱⁱⁱ I find these aphorisms helpful. She writes:

- Small is good.
- There is always enough time for the right work.
- There is a conversation in the room that only these people, in this moment can have. *Find it!*
- Move at the speed of trust.

One could argue that we are always living in liminal time, there are just certain events or seasons that make us acutely aware of it. In liminal time, our goal must NOT be to move as quickly as possible either to get back to the elusive before times or to rush into whatever the new normal might be. This is our chance to reset our expectations and reflect on what we have taken for granted and to decide what is most important in our lives and in our world. God requires us to move beyond our opinions, political beliefs, our social location, or any single cause. The first step is to stop "the pointing of the finger" and simply say: Let's begin to be repairers of the breach. In a time when the rise of loneliness is in inverse proportion to the decline of church communities, this is a good time to double down on the things we have always done well: Bible studies, potluck suppers, fellowship gatherings, welcoming worship, outreach and community service projects are more important than ever. Let's build new partnerships with unlikely fellow travelers that will restore streets to live in. It is quiet work, it is a long game. It takes being with people who are not like us and listening to their stories. Our faith requires that we welcome the stranger, that we engage in a radical hospitality. Faith communities are uniquely positioned to "remove the yoke" that is "the pointing of the finger" at someone or some group that is responsible for speaking evil, because God's unconditional love is our organizing principle.

My pastor wrote: "This [is] a liminal time. Liminality is the threshold between the way things used to be, our past, and the way things will become, our future...We cannot see the future. We cannot go back to the way things were. The key to liminal times is to be patient, to ask good questions and be attentive to how the Spirit of God is moving us forward".

So, let us step over this threshold unafraid. Let us move slowly in a world that values velocity. Let us ask good questions and be open to hearing new and unexpected answers. Let us recommit ourselves to the fast that God chooses and in this liminal time, be repairers of the breach and restorers of streets to live in.

Amen.

ⁱ The Rev. Christian Holleck, St. Peter's Lutheran Harwich MA. Annual Report 2023.

ⁱⁱ House calls to the homeless; A Doctor treats Boston's most isolated patients <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/444214320>

ⁱⁱⁱ Brown, A. (2017). Emergent strategy. AK Press.