

“A Doorway to Heaven”

Liminal. L-I-M-I-N-A-L. Liminal is not a word that I expect most of us use in daily conversation, but it is common in spiritual and religious circles. The word “liminal” comes from the Latin root, *limen*, which means “threshold.” It is often seen in the phrase “liminal space” which is a place of transition. It is a place where one “crosses over” having left something behind, but not yet having fully moved in something else.

In today’s Gospel there is liminality all over the place. Jesus’ is easiest to identify as he is transfigured, but this is not his first liminal space. In Mark’s Gospel that was his baptism, and more specifically when he rises up out of the water to hear God say, “This is my beloved with whom I am well pleased.” This abrupt transition was so overwhelming it took him forty days in the wilderness to sort it out.

Having taken what he learned from that experiences he begins his public ministry of teaching, healing, and proclaiming that “the Kingdom of God has come near.”¹ It is not surprising that the disciples are compelled to follow him and that the crowds gather ‘round him. He has had a profound experience that has changed him. People can perceive it even if they do not know what it is. They are drawn to him because they want to find out what happened, and how they might get a piece of it.

It is also not surprising that they do not understand. Jesus has entered a new place. He has transitioned and internalized the experience through his time praying and meditating in the wilderness. His proclamation is enthralling but also mysterious. He attempts to explain what he has learned through parables; familiar stories with a twist. In the twist he is trying to explain the unexplainable. The parables are an attempt to draw us into the wonder of what he has perceived. He hopes that if we wonder along with him we too might find that doorway into this new world.

I imagine it was a frustrating time for him. He is trying to share this experience of a new kingdom where the ills of this world are overcome by God’s love. He shows it to people in his healing miracles, but it is almost like a magic show. The miracles attract the curious, but they do not seem to comprehend the meaning. Indeed, even the disciples, his closest friends, do not understand his teaching and cannot figure out who he is. They keep asking questions such as, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”²

Then we come today’s reading and Jesus’ second liminal experience when he meets with Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop. The scene is replete with meaning for those with eyes to see. The mountain echoes the profound experiences that Moses and Elijah had on Mt. Sinai. Additionally, both Moses and Elijah are the greatest prophets in Judaism. Indeed, it is believed that Elijah will return to herald the coming of God’s Messiah. For Jesus to be in conversation with these

¹ Mark 1:15

² Mark 4:41

great prophets shows Jesus' special nature. It is a shock for Peter, James and John who had traveled with him. They also perceive Jesus appearance change. He shines like a star in the heavens. To top off the experience there is a voice from the cloud, echoing the words Jesus heard at this baptism. "This is my beloved. Listen to him."

The three disciples have had their world rocked to the core. James and John are dumbfounded and frozen. Peter suggests building a little memorial to what they have just seen. Preachers usually portray this as Peter's tendency to be inappropriate; but it is really not a bad idea. Peter is copying what many figures in the Hebrew Scriptures do when experiencing God. In those instances they would build an altar or a cairn of stones to mark the place as holy.³ It is a natural thing for him to do.

It is a liminal space for Jesus and it is also a liminal space for the disciples. Whatever ideas they had about Jesus have been shattered. Peter had already proclaimed that Jesus as the Christ. Unfortunately, his understanding of the Christ as a conquering hero was not what Jesus was up to. Jesus explains that he is a servant leader. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all"⁴ is something he speaks time and again.

Yet, the disciples are to be forgiven for being thickheaded. They are still in the liminal space. Jesus through his time in the wilderness had made his way through the door. The disciples are still in it. They have one foot in the past and one foot about to land in the future. Even as they get closer to the transition, they run away, back to the familiar. Only the women stay with Jesus as he dies on the cross, and even they flee at the empty tomb. It will take them time to understand and get through the doorway into the new reality that Jesus preached.

This week we are presented with the opportunity to enter into that liminal space through the liturgy of Ash Wednesday followed by the forty days of Lent. We have the opportunity as Jesus did to accept that we are beloved by God. Then we can sort out what God is calling us to do with our "one wild and precious life."⁵ We are given this great gift each year to discern and start anew. Despite our failings or dullness, like the disciples we have been given the chance to enter liminality with all of its challenges and uncertainties in order to come closer to God, and God's call on our life.

What does the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God mean to you? What about his life and teaching calls out to you? How will you respond? What about his transfiguration excites you? These forty days are not an onerous trial. They are a call to find deeper faith, purpose, and the profound joy that only service to God can give.

The word Lent does not mean toil and suffering it is an ancient word for the season of spring. May your Lenten journey be a spring of new beginnings and

³ Genesis 35:7, Genesis 13:18, Exodus 17:15, and Joshua 8:30

⁴ Mark 9:35

⁵ From "Summer Day" by Mary Oliver

Gene LeCouteur
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, VA

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany
Celtic Morning Prayer 10:00 a.m.
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transformation. At the end may you shine forth transfigured in Christ for the
entire world to see.