

Again and Again, God Meets Us

These are unprecedented times as we hear all the time these days. While it's not unusual to go through a period of personal uncertainty, we don't normally traverse the unknown all at the same time. The COVID-19 crisis has disrupted lives for every one of us. Children home from school. College classes moved on line. Sporting events, theater productions, concerns, even graduations were cancelled. Many people are working from home. We can't gather together at church. Restaurants are barely opened. Visitors to elderly care homes are banned. Travel is strongly discouraged.

Each of us is trying to figure out how to get through this – one eye glued to our newsfeed and the other trying to carry on in whatever ways we can.

The Old Testament is surprisingly relevant to our current crisis. To see how, let me first talk about the word "liminality." Its from the Latin word *limen* which means threshold. Imagine yourself standing in the entryway to a building, neither inside nor outside. That's the liminal space. An airport is a liminal space. Nobody lives there. We're all just passing through on our way to somewhere else.

The first people to start talking about liminality were anthropologists. They used it to describe a stage in rituals that change someone's status or identity. Sociologically speaking, a liminal space is a transitional space where a person undergoes a change in status. Every human ritual around the world includes an element of liminality, from coming of age rituals to funerals.

A young man is sent into the wilderness to fend for himself for a set period of time, or to complete a quest. He leaves as a child and returns as a man. During his time away he occupies liminal space. The concept of liminality has proved useful beyond sociology to psychology, politics, popular culture and religion.

When a woman becomes pregnant, she enters liminality. She is officially on the threshold of motherhood and yet she has not yet experienced most of its aspects – nighttime feedings, diapering, discipline, pushing a stroller, singing the ABCs. She is in between.

Our scripture for this morning comes from Mark's gospel that serves as a source for both Matthew and Luke in their gospel material. Mark is the shortest and rushes through the story faster than the other gospels. In just seven verses, we learn of three significant events in the life of Jesus as he began his ministry. The first is his baptism, where God claims him as God's own beloved son. The second is his experience in the wilderness, where God sends angels to attend to him as he faces the Accuser. Lastly, after John the Baptist's arrest, Jesus begins proclaiming God's proximity and reign while calling for repentance.

I want you to see the common thread in each account is God's closeness. In pivotal moments, God is extraordinarily present with Jesus and those around him, and for good reason. In the Black church tradition, they sing of how God picks us up, turns us around, and places our feet "on solid ground." God's proximity informs our trajectory. God approaches us to claim us, to equip us and to send us out to do God's will.

We are living in the now and the not yet. That's where Jesus was between his baptism and his temptation. The now and the not yet. The threshold of something new.

In his book, "The Children" David Halberstam writes of a liminal moment in this history of our country. He tells how eight young black college students played pivotal roles in changing our nation by confronting segregation laws in the 1960s.

One of those students was Diane Nash, a young woman who grew up in Chicago and attended Fisk University in Nashville. During her freshman year, a date took her to the Tennessee State Fair where she encountered for the first time, a sign that read WHITE ONLY. Then another that read COLORED. The signs for segregated rest rooms hit her like a slap in the face. The shame she felt was immediate and it was quickly followed by anger.

Within days she experienced other humiliations. Growing up in Chicago, she had enjoyed going downtown with her friends. They would shop at the large department stores and then eat lunch at a restaurant in one of the stores. When she tried to do this in Nashville, she discovered that the store owners would gladly take her money for any purchase she made, but she was barred from eating in their lunchrooms.

Soon after those demeaning experiences, a fellow student mentioned that a minister was holding workshops designed to challenge the local segregation laws at downtown lunch counters and she decided to sit in on one of the sessions. Initially, she thought this was out of character for her, but soon it became obvious that she was a powerhouse among this small group of students and they asked her to be one of their leaders. The young men were impressed by her confidence and her courage. She was the slightest among them and a female, but she appeared to be fearless.

If they only knew. Years later, she recounted sitting in Professor Hayden's English class and all she could remember was how terrified she was. It was the last class of the afternoon before gathering with the others at the church and heading downtown to challenge the segregation laws at the lunch counters. She vividly remembers the large clock on the wall of her English class slowly ticking off the minutes that put her ever closer to danger. She remembers being unable to process what the professor was saying and she remembers her hands being so soaked with sweat that by the end of class she left wet handprints on her wooden desk. No matter how much she believed in their cause, the anticipatory fear was always there.

The night before the first sit-in, she sat alone in her dorm room and was overwhelmed with anxiety. She chastised herself. What had she gotten herself into? She was supposed to march downtown the next day and challenge the existing white power structure. She, Diane Nash, in her own mind a coward of the first degree, was going with a group of young black college students and ministers to take on the most important people in a big, very white, very Southern City. She and her friends were going to go up against white business men who were rich and powerful and connected. They had the police force, the judges and the politicians on their side. Diane Nash did not know one single powerful person in the whole country. She was 21 and way in over her head. The others looked up to her, but they had no idea how frightened she was. If there was any way she could have disappeared from the movement without causing great shame to herself and letting down the others, she would have done it. But something inside kept pushing her forward.

She remembered that she had become a part of the group for serious reasons. She had committed to a non-violent way of changing America. She had found a spiritual home in the group that gathered in the basement of First Baptist Church. She had been impressed with the

Rev. Jim Lawson and how he instructed them in the teachings of Jesus about love and forgiveness and standing strong for what is right and just.

It was a liminal time for Diane Nash and others. They stood at the crossroad of the known past and the unknown future. Despite their fear, despite having coffee poured on them, despite having cigarettes extinguished on their heads, despite being pummeled and threatened with their life, they kept going. Their journey started with the segregated lunch counters in Nashville, but they could not begin and end their quest with nothing grander than the right to eat lunch counter burgers. Each victory, they gained demanded a further step. They were on an escalating spiral in which they kept pursuing ever more dangerous challenges to the forces of segregation in ever more dangerous venues.

Few people actually enjoy liminality. We have this inborn desire to seek order and belonging and predictability.

Right now, just about all of us are experiencing liminality. Our schedules are in limbo. Our roles have shifted. Our routines disrupted. We're not sure what's next. Nobody planned for this. And nobody knows for sure when it will all be over. That's the hardest part of all – the not knowing.

We are in a liminal time in the life of the church. A time of Pre-development of knowing our church building and not knowing what it will look like as we move forward through this process.

We have ministries now but how much more will God lead us to do in the future when we have a building that will support the mission.

COVID-19 is an inconvenience and a tragedy and quite frankly, even though I am sick of the word it is “unprecedented.” A pandemic may seem only to bring death. But there is a gift for each of us in it. Isolation opens up new opportunities for us to hear the voice of God – at least if we pause Netflix long enough to listen. As our schedules and activities grinded to a halt or took on new forms, our vulnerability positions us to experience God in new ways. COVID-19 can transform us, if we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit. We are in the midst of the now and not yet for which we didn't plan and it exposes ways that we have misplaced our priorities and anchored our identity to shifting sands.

Stripped of our routines, we can rediscover the precious truth that God is with us in the now and the not yet. No quarantine deprives us of God's presence. We are reminded in very mundane ways how we need God's grace.

Each of us will experience this liminal season in different ways. Some will love time alone. Others grieve the loss of face to face relationships. Some will discover new sources of anxiety. Will there be enough toilet paper? Will my loved one be strong enough to beat this if they get exposed.

Other's will find joy in discovering that the world keeps turning, even without our fast pace of life. Some families with children at home from school will re-connect and make memories. Other families will find themselves stretched to the breaking point.

God meets us at the edge of things – in suffering, uncertainty, reluctance. God meets us at the edge and promises to stay with us, watching over us through the wilderness of our lives.

Let me close with this poem by Rev. Sarah Are entitled "Remember When?"

God never beings letters with the words,
I hope this finds you well.
For those words imply distance.

Instead, God begins God's letters to you with the words,
"Remember when?"

Beloved child,
Remember when we dipped our toes into the water?
Remember when we dove right in?
Remember when the ice cream dripped down our hands
And the cicadas sang their song.
And the seasons changed,
And the days were long?
Remember when we fell in love and the world was new?
Remember when our heart was broken?
Remember the tears?
Remember the long nights?
Remember when we laughed again and the sound surprised us?
Remember when we marched in the street?
Remember when we cast our vote?
Remember when we believed in hope?
Remember when?
I do.

That's what God's letters say.
So on this day, and every day to come.
Remember, God is meeting you.
If you look back, you might remember when.

Again and Again God meets us. Amen.