



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Reverend Denise Weaver
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Betwixt, Between, and Beloved

Scripture verses from New Revised Standard Version, Isaiah 43:1b, Isaiah 66:13, John 14: 15b, Philippians 1:6.

A liminal space is the time between the 'what was' and the 'next.' It is a place of transition, waiting, and not knowing. Liminal space is where all transformation takes place, if we learn to wait and let it form us. The words liminal and liminality are both derived from the Latin *limen*, meaning a threshold; that bottom part of the door that must be crossed when entering a building.

All significant liminal experiences follow a three-part process. First, something comes to an end and a person, group, or social order is stripped of the identity and status that previously defined it.

What follows next is a liminal space, the space between an ending and a new beginning. A liminal space is characterized by disorientation as one does not yet know who one will become as one is being shaped into something new.

Finally, after a long, painful struggle, a new being, a new identity emerges that is substantially different from what was left behind.

Liminal experiences happen throughout our lives. Some liminal experiences are brought on by loss; the loss of identity that occurs as a result of divorce or death of a spouse/partner, the death of any significant loved one, retirement, the loss of independence or health. Other liminal experiences are chosen such as moving to a new job or city, and the decision to become parents.

A liminal space contains both opportunity and danger. It can be a challenging time as who one has been is no longer adequate and who one will become, the next self, and the next step is not yet known. It can also be a freeing experience as one leaves old constraints behind, exploring new identities and possibilities until the new being emerges. The journey from childhood to adulthood illustrates both the anxiety and freedom inherent in a liminal space. Who will this child become? As a child becomes an adult, there may well be a parallel liminal space of anxiety and freedom experienced by the parent, come to think of it.

Liminal experiences applies to individuals, communities of faith, organizations, institutions, a place – anything in that middle space between an ending and a new beginning. Much speculation these days is focused on the universal, Christian Church being in a liminal time; that the church is being transformed into the next church when no one yet knows what *that* church will look like.

The natural human response is to resist liminality, to want to move backward to the old familiar identity, or forward to the unknown identity. Anything to escape the disorientation of that in-between time! Remember the Israelites in the wilderness? They alternated between begging Moses to go back to Egypt and demanding to move forward quickly to the Promised Land.

The Old and New Testaments are filled with stories of liminal experiences. Biblical characters move in and out of liminal times and space, all the while being further shaped into the likeness of God. This process can accurately be called transformation.

Adam and Eve's fall from grace in the Garden of Eden sets up the biblical story as one large liminal experience. Humankind leaves the garden and begins an ongoing journey toward redemption and salvation.

Abraham and Sarah, Job, and the Apostle Paul each have a liminal experience. Each of them experience an ending, followed by a disorienting season of transition, and, finally, a reorientation to something new that is substantially different from who they were before. Human beings are transformed and brought into deeper relationship with God through liminal experiences. Clearly, God works with liminality.

The Christian story is, by design, an invitation into liminality. The reign of God is already inaugurated in Jesus Christ, but not yet complete. We have been redeemed, but the fulfillment of that redemption will not be complete until Christ returns. Christian theology places all believers in a space of semi-permanent liminality.

Closer to home, Westminster Church began a liminal season when Laurie Davis left and I was hired. My departure date has arrived and Anna Owens has been called to be the next pastor for Spiritual Growth. You will continue a time of liminality as you and Anna journey together toward the new identity and new life God has planned for Westminster Church. I will experience my own liminal season as I discern my next call.

Discernment, also known as spiritual listening, goes hand-in-hand with liminal spaces. It has been written, "*Spiritual listening is not listening to words, to arguments, to pros and cons, to positions and opinions. It involves listening to the delicate intersection of the human heart, with its desires and dreams, and the vast and silent mystery that is God.*"¹

The work of the liminal experience is defined by three questions.

Who am I? Who is God calling me to be? Who am I to serve?

These questions provide context for our lives and also anchor us in our identity as the children of God in relationship to God. Richard Rohr describes God's use of liminal experience in this way:

"All transformation takes place here. We have to allow ourselves to be drawn out of "business as usual" and remain patiently on the "threshold" (limen, in Latin) where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. There alone is our old world left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence. That's a good space where

*genuine newness can begin. Get there often and stay as long as you can by whatever means possible. Its' the realm where God can best get at us because our false certitudes are finally out of the way. This is the sacred space where the old world is able to fall apart, and a bigger world is revealed. If we don't encounter liminal space in our lives, we start idealizing normalcy. The threshold is God's waiting room. Here we are taught openness and patience as we come to expect an appointment with the divine Doctor."*²

In the Gospels, we see Jesus enter a liminal experience at the beginning of his public ministry. He is baptized by John, descended upon by the Holy Spirit, named and claimed "Son" and "Beloved" by God. Then Jesus disappears into the desert wilderness and begins to pray for forty days and nights. The *very Son of God*, here at the outset of his ministry, needs this liminal space, this in-between place, to deepen his clarity and to prepare him for what lies ahead.

Scripture does not tell us precisely what Jesus learns or comes to know about himself there but it does make clear that when Satan shows up, Jesus is ready with clarity. During Jesus' liminal experience he has come to "know what he knows he knows"; who he is, who God is calling him to be, and what God is calling him to do. Jesus leaves the wilderness beginning his new life as teacher, healer, Savior.

Sometimes it takes going into the wilderness to learn who we are and what we need. From time to time, God draws us toward a liminal space where the familiar contours of our lives disappear and where we let go of the people, patterns and possessions that orient us. It does not usually require entering a literal wilderness as Jesus did. But his example reminds us there is wisdom in entering into liminal spaces that can help us see what we cannot always see under our own power.

Wendell Berry acknowledges the power of a liminal space in this way;
*"It may be that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work and when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our real journey."*³

A liminal space is about letting God lead us into a landscape where we do not know everything, do not *have* to know everything, indeed may be emptied of nearly everything we think we know. Surrendering ourselves to that betwixt and between space frees us to receive the wisdom, the word, and the clarity about who we are, who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do.

During such times, the invitation is to quiet ourselves so that we may hear that still, small voice. We can also hold fast to God's promises in scripture that anchor us in faith in the midst of ambiguity and not knowing;

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; says the Lord.

. . . and God will give you another Advocate to be with you forever.

. . . the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

After an indeterminate amount of time in that liminal space, we will have gained a clearer

vision of who we are and God's next step for our lives. And having received some measure of clarity, comfort, and courage, we will be ready to embrace the new as we hear Jesus' invitation yet again, "*Follow me, come, follow me.*" Amen.

1. Wendy M. Wright, "Desert Listening," in John S. Mogavbgab, ed., *Communion, Community, Commonweal: Readings for Spiritual Leadership* (Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 1995), p. 125).
2. Richard Rohr, "Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer".
3. Wendell Berry quote, reference unknown.