

What We Need Is Here: Practicing Resurrection in a Season of Social Distance

Among my favorite passages from the Hebrew Bible is Joshua 3: 1-5. The NRSV version reads like this:

3 Early in the morning Joshua rose and set out from Shittim with all the Israelites, and they came to the Jordan. They camped there before crossing over. 2 At the end of three days the officers went through the camp 3 and commanded the people, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God being carried by the levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place. Follow it, 4 so that you may know the way you should go, for you have not passed this way before. Yet there shall be a space between you and it, a distance of about two thousand cubits; do not come any nearer to it." 5 Then Joshua said to the people, "Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you."

"For you have not passed this way before..." We are indeed in new terrain, crossing a metaphorical Jordan River in this season of Covid-19 and the concomitant Social Distancing, itself ensconced in the liturgically liminal season of Lent. Indeed, perhaps the word "liminal" is instructive. In anthropology, for example, **liminality** (from the Latin word *limen*, meaning "a threshold") is the quality of *ambiguity or disorientation* that occurs in the middle stage of a rite of passage, when participants no longer hold their prior status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the ritual is complete. But what sustains us as we cross over or pass through such transitional spaces? What spiritual treasures do we carry with us, and what do we leave behind? How do we know whether and how to cross? What will sustain us on the journey?

When we think of liminal spaces in literature, examples such as the wardrobe, courtesy of C.S. Lewis, Middle Earth in Tolkien's novels, and 9 ¾ Victoria Station, come to mind as examples. Our worship spaces are filled with liminality, between the quotidian outside world and the Mystery of worship at the altar. Regardless, like the people of Israel in Joshua 3: 1-5 we are on a journey less Odyssean than Abrahamic. We do not know where this will lead us.

During any liminal stage, participants "stand at the threshold" between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and a new way, which remains open. In some ways we, too, are at a threshold. It can be disorienting, as all journeys are (orientation, disorientation, reorientation) and we need our rituals and one another to provide some measure of constancy in a season of change. As I write this, my own

parish, the Cathedral of St. Philip, is practicing the sacred art of engaging social distance liturgically, and practicing resurrection in new and life-giving ways. Tomorrow, observing safe practices, I will see any of my clients who show up at the Cathedral Counseling center, and I take comfort in the structure of the work I am called to do. Freud referred to counseling as “a cure through love.” Perhaps this is what another author meant, when he wrote this during a time similar to ours:

“Age has no reality except in the physical world. The essence of a human being is resistant to the passage of time. Our inner lives are eternal, which is to say that our spirits remain as youthful and vigorous as when we were in full bloom. Think of love as a state of grace, not the means to anything, but the alpha and omega. An end in itself.”

~ Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Love in the Time of Cholera)

But for us all, in one way or another, change can be difficult. Adapting to the “new normal” can be frightening. It can also be a time to discover something new about our call to be present to ourselves, and to one another. As Wendell Berry suggests in this lovely poem:

**Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here.**

How might we learn new ways of paying attention to the moment in this “new normal”? We know that even a few minutes of centering prayer, mindfulness practice, and other spiritual disciplines can change our neural pathways and neurochemistry, lowering anxiety in the meantime. We might seek a balance between being informed and practicing silence, especially when hyper-vigilance will only exacerbate fear. We are also learning that, when possible, getting outside can calm anxious fears and reduce anxiety. ¹ Pay attention to your own anxiety triggers, and with altered routines, remember that as the flight attendants say, we must put our own mask on before assisting others. Sometimes this involves facing our own shadow selves, our own demons, just as Jesus did in his 40-day wilderness sojourn. My short-hand

¹ <https://www.outsideonline.com/1870381/take-two-hours-pine-forest-and-call-me-morning>

understanding of that journey is that I must acknowledge my need to be in control, my need to have more power than I can have, and my need to be special. At times like these, each of these shadows become more active, and the challenge is to welcome them, call them by name, and integrate them into the larger whole.

So, we seek to be mindful of the difference between being lonely, and being alone. Solitude has its virtues, and so does reaching out in creative ways. Last week, Vicky and I visited Holy Family Episcopal Church, the parish that gave birth to my priesthood. We were reminded of the warm and loving circle of care emanating from that parish, some 20 years after moving on. This week, I am still reveling in the joy of that evening, though such gatherings are not possible for the foreseeable future. Even in this time of Social Distance, there are creative ways to widen the circle of care. Community occurs in relationships. Perhaps we can think of friends, family and others with whom we have not had recent contact. Reach out to them with support and encouragement, just to let them know you were thinking about them. And as my mentor and Professor of Pastoral Care at Vanderbilt Liston Mills once said, never underestimate the power of putting pen to paper, writing a note, putting a stamp on it, and putting it in the outgoing mail. Pray for others.



We might seek to find a middle way between letting go and holding on. This prayer is a lovely example:

~Assist us, Lord, in living hopefully into the future. In the face of change, help us to set unnecessary fears aside and to recognize our potential for creative response. Help us to develop a reasonable optimism when confronted by “the new” and to guard against our own defensiveness. Be with us as we remember and celebrate former times, and keep us from unreasonable yearning for them, which takes us from the work you have set before us in our time. All this we ask in the name of your Child, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

“For times of change” by the Rev. Linda C. Smith-Criddle in *Women's Uncommon Prayers: Our Lives Revealed, Nurtured, Celebrated*; eds., Elizabeth Rankin Geitz, Marjorie A. Burke, Ann Smith, Kathryn McCormick, p. 362.

We might also seek to remember that psychological health is not so much the absence of psychological challenge, distress or illness as the capacity for resilience. Resilience is the dynamic process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, change, and/or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors, or times of pandemic. It means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences and/or times of significant change. It is also the ability to continually grow, adapt and pursue health with perseverance, hope and gratitude as a life-long journey. Times such as these can have the silver lining of learning new coping and adapting skills, new ways of being and doing church, and new forms of commitment to contribute to the common good. We may learn things about ourselves we did not know in part because we are forced out of our comfort zones.

As James Hollis suggests, *"Learning to live with ambiguity is learning to live with how life really is, full of complexities and strange surprises. Doubt is a profound and effective spiritual motivation. Without doubt, no truism is transcended, no new knowledge found, no expansion of the imagination possible. Doubt is unsettling to the ego and those who are drawn to ideologies that promise the dispelling of doubt by preferring certainties never grow."* (James Hollis, *Living an Examined Life*).

Above all, experience and research show that resilience is grounded in positive connections with God, oneself (body, mind and spirit) and others. It can give us new opportunities to be present to our advocate, the Holy Spirit. As Rowan Williams has written:

"When the Holy Spirit sweeps over us it gives us something of Jesus' capacity to hear what is really being said by human beings...and the courage not to screen out those bits of the human world that are difficult, unpleasant, and unedifying. It opens our eyes and our ears and our hearts to the full range of what being human means. So that instead of being somebody who needs to be sheltered from the rough truth of the world, the Christian is someone who should be more open and more vulnerable to that great range of human experience. We feel the edge, the ache in human suffering, and we recognize that it can be taken into Christ...it can be healed. It can

be transformed.” Rowan Williams ~ *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons*



Resilience, bouncing back from change, adversity, and adapting and flourishing through thoughts, behaviors, and actions *can be learned, cultivated, and developed*. It is an alternative to “pathology based” assessments and theory. Cultivating resilience can change our neural pathways and neurochemistry (neuroplasticity). Resilience transcends disciplines, and has applications in engineering, ecology, medicine, finance, leadership, and religion. Cultivating resilience can change mind, body, and spirit. Indeed, the “Flourishing in Ministry” project² at Notre Dame encourages us to enhance clergy “recovery experiences”:

- (a) Restorative niches” such as hobbies, etc..
- (b) Relaxation and detachment having nothing to do with work.
- (c) Contemplative and meditative practices, e.g. mindfulness, centering prayer, et
- (d) Experiencing congruence and authenticity in one’s roles...integrity as “wholeness.”

² <https://wellbeing.nd.edu/flourishing-in-ministry/>



How might you be more intentional about finding “sanctuary” in this season of change and uncertainty? Listen to this good word from Carrie Newcomer about the importance of finding sanctuary for ourselves, and providing it for those for whom we care:

https://www.google.com/search?source=hp&ei=5CxuXt36B86YtgWq8ZJQ&q=sanctuary+carrie+newcomer&oq=sanctuary+carrie&gs_l=psy-ab.1.0.0l4j0i22i30l5.1974.8988..11929...4.0..0.108.1659.18j2.....0....1.gws-wiz.....0i131j0i22i10i30j0i10.obdb8viPfBo#spf=1584278769059

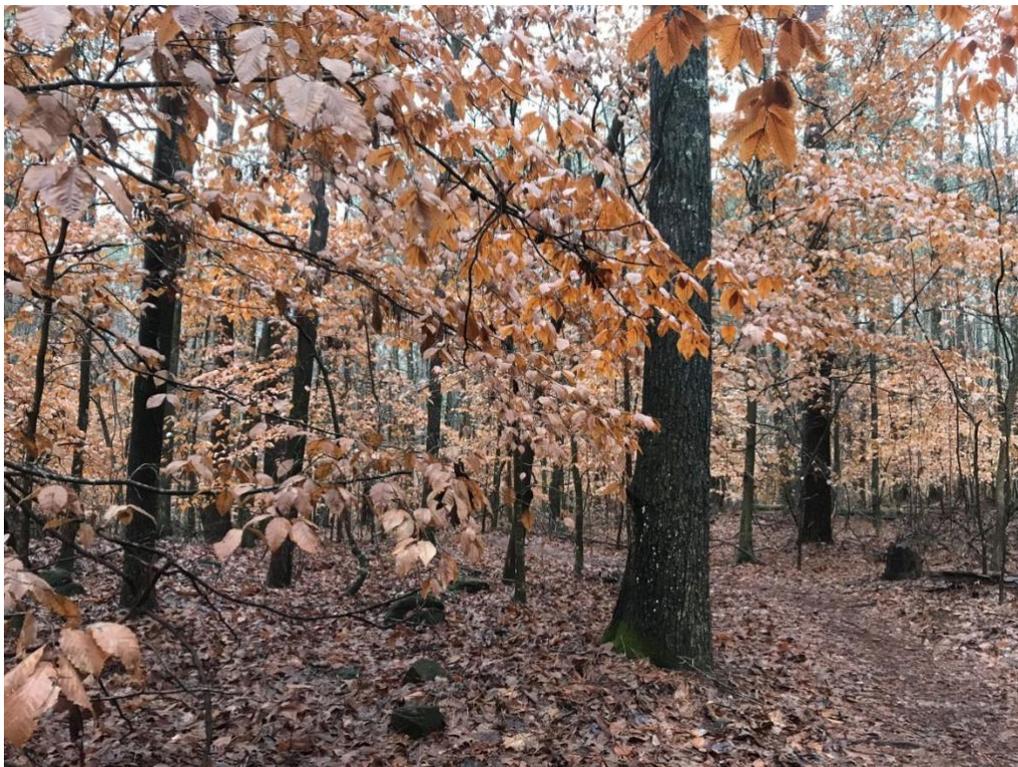
In similar fashion we recall the words of pastoral theologian Howard Thurman:

All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and life is being born. The fruit ripens on the tree, the roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth against a time when there shall be new lives, fresh blossoms, green fruit. Such is the growing edge! It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung, the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor. This is the basis of hope in moments of despair, the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint and men have lost their reason, the source of confidence when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash. The birth of a child — life's most dramatic answer to death — this is the growing edge incarnate.

Look well to the growing edge!
—Howard Thurman

So, where might your sanctuaries and growing edges be in this *liminal* season when, perhaps in unprecedented ways, we have not passed this way before? What have been your restorative niches, and how might you rediscover old ones, and cultivate new ones? How might you find ways to reach out? No matter our Enneagram number, even our “shadow selves” once integrated can teach something new.

Yesterday on my ritual Saturday trail run I noticed the leaves of the American Beech are beginning to let go, after holding on all winter. For me, it is a lovely kind of “second autumn” here in the middle of March:



This is known as the liminal season between *marcescence* and *abscission*. It is such a joy to run in the late winter woods. These early mornings, with changing light, aspects of the woods come to life as the day unfolds. The photo of American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) demonstrates "marcescence." Complete leaf drop (abscission) may not occur on some trees until spring. This is *foliar marcescence*, which comes from the Latin, *marcescere*, and means “to fade.” On windy winter nights, running in the woods

through "Beech Cove," one hears the lovely sound of the marcescent leaves singing on their branches. And, if one is lucky, the sounds of snow and sleet on the dry, parchment-like surfaces. Abscission, on the other hand, means "letting go," as is happening now. In this season what might we learn to hold on to and what might we let go of, as spiritual disciplines? As our friend Mary Oliver has said, "Attention is the beginning of devotion." Perhaps we can learn something from the barred owl about waiting, and watching:

<https://www.wbu.com/owl-cam/>

And, paying attention to gifts we might typically miss:



I pray blessings upon you all. Remember that it is relationships that heal us. As Wendell Berry has said, practice resurrection, and times and places of transition are the perfect ways to do this. Let us endeavor to remember to laugh, and to practice gratitude. We may not have passed this way before, but together we will cross over, walking each other home:

Hello, sun in my face.
Hello, you who made the morning
and spread it over the fields
and into the faces of the tulips
and the nodding morning glories,
and into the windows of, even, the
miserable and the crotchety –
best preacher that ever was,
dear star, that just happens

to be where you are in the universe
to keep us from ever-darkness,
to ease us with warm touching,
to hold us in the great hands of light -
good morning, good morning, good morning.
Watch, now, how I start the day
in happiness, in kindness.

~ **Why I Wake Early** by **Mary Oliver**

Lenten blessings,

Bill Harkins

PS- Here are a few tips from the CDC on managing stress and anxiety in this season of fear and uncertainty:

https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/managing-stress-anxiety.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fabout%2F coping.html