

Sermon
The Blessings In-Between
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About 18 months ago, before COVID took hold of the world and rearranged all the ways we move and act and have our being, I stood beside the bed of a loved one in an assisted living facility in Minneapolis.

My Dad and I had traveled to Minnesota for a family wedding, but before the ceremony and reception, we took an Uber to the suburbs to visit Uncle Bob, my Dad's uncle – his father's brother – my great uncle. A few months before this visit, Bob made the choice to stop treating his cancer, and his body had grown weak and fragile. He wouldn't be able to attend the wedding, so we went to be at his bedside for a bit. This was only the fifth or sixth time I met my Great Uncle Bob, but I knew him as a kindred spirit. Like me, and my Dad and my Dad's Dad, Uncle Bob was an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church. He spent his working days shepherding churches and overseeing Presbyterian nursing homes, and in retirement he focused on the everyday miracles of life: watching grandchildren and great-grandchildren grow up, paying attention to the loons and the pelicans on the lake, and noting the comings and goings of the ducks.

We did a little catching up, and Dad and Bob reminisced on shared family memories. But mostly we were saying goodbye – dwelling in the liminal space between life and death, all of us knowing that this time together would be our last.

Bob gifted me with the family Bible, hefty, ornate, and all in German. And he promised to have the family send his 1932 Presbyterian hymnal our way to be enjoyed by my music director husband who Bob never met. But the greatest gift he gave was his blessing – my Dad knelt down to hug him in his bed, laying his head on Bob's chest. I offered my hand for a squeeze and a kiss. Bob blessed us both – he blessed my ministry, and he gave us a benediction to cherish just over a month before he died.

I hope you have known the beauty of liminal space – the in-between space. I hope you have been able to slow down in those moments of transition and hear the blessings that come between life and death, in times of change and grief. I hope you have felt overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit in the midst of uncertainty.

And if you haven't, or if you need a reminder of the beauty of liminality, I invite you to hear this scripture anew.

The book of Acts is filled with liminal moments, starting in the very first chapter. The apostles have endured the trauma of Jesus's crucifixion – living for three days in the depths of despair – only to be overwhelmed by the confusing and earth-shattering reality of the resurrection, a truth that takes some time to sink in.

Only forty days later, these same apostles gather with the resurrected Jesus in great anticipation, only to be left staring into the skies as Jesus ascends into heaven. The ascension marks the beginning of a new chapter in God's story, a story that will soon center on Saul who becomes Paul, a man marked by his own encounters with in-between-ness.

By the time we reach the 20th chapter of Acts, we have witnessed Paul's voyages of evangelism all over the ancient world. We have held our breath in anxiousness as Paul's message of the good news of Jesus Christ is met with violence and death threats. We have wondered at the miraculous growth of the early church through Paul's preaching and teaching. And now, we meet Paul on his way toward the end, preparing for the journey beyond life and into death, in the liminal space before entering the great unknown.

Most of Paul's sermons in Acts are evangelistic in nature: they are laden with scriptural references from the Old Testament, passionately persuasive, and written to an audience in need of convincing. They are meant to bring people into the church, into God's household.

This speech is something else entirely. This is a love letter to those who have been persuaded, to the elders of the church of Ephesus who have long been working alongside Paul to share the good news. This is a confessional and a legacy-building speech all rolled into one – Paul is externally processing, making

sense of his own life and work, reckoning with the ways in which he feels he has fallen short and proudly remembering the times when he got it right. This conversation is not performative nor agenda-driven, because no one in this audience needs convincing. And in this moment, we see real vulnerability in this community that has had to be so strong and stoic – as Paul finishes speaking, he kneels, he prays, and they all weep and embrace each other.

There was a little bit of catching up, and some reminiscing between Paul and the elders in Ephesus, but mostly they were saying goodbye – dwelling in the liminal space between life and death, all of them knowing that this time together would be their last.

Paul notes, “I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.” Like Jesus, Paul is on his way toward an uncertain future, and inevitably toward death. Paul cannot make out the details of the road ahead; uncertainty is the only certainty.

Which is not unlike where we find ourselves in this moment. We hope that death is not imminent, but we know full well that our future together is uncertain.

And while life is always uncertain to some degree, the uncertainty of this time is overwhelming in a way that many of us have never faced before. Like Paul, we see the glowing eyes of savage wolves who threaten to come in among us, continuing to divide and alienate us from one another. Like the community of elders, we are alert, aware of the dangers that might await us in the uncertainty of these days. Like the whole early church, we know that our community is fragile, teetering on the brink of collapse or total polarization.

At the time of recording this sermon, the results of the presidential election are still uncertain.

And I cannot say honestly that the country will be the same no matter who wins. I simply do not believe that to be true. The visions and plans of these candidates are very different and will shape very different futures.

At this point, it’s even hard to say with certainty when we will know for sure what the future of our governance looks like. Even the timeline for certainty is

uncertain. This, on top of the nearly nine months of uncertainty we've already endured this year – days filled with anxiety, weeks of wondering and waiting, a season marked by a total loss of control.

I don't know about you, but I prefer my liminal spaces to be, well, limited. I am grateful for the changing of seasons and the marking of important transitions like graduations and marriages. I have relished the predictable in-between seasons of life, like the summer before college. But the combination of a global pandemic and a highly divisive presidential election have given me an entirely new perspective on liminal spaces.

It's become clear that when facing an uncertain future, humans do not share a common response. It's become clear that we are not good at sitting in the unknown. We want certainty, we want solutions, and we want to get on with it already.

We are not well-practiced in waiting, nor are we good at engaging with mystery. And ultimately, we don't do vulnerability very well. Even in moments that demand our emotional energy, like sitting with a loved one in hospice, or listening to a friend share difficult news, we are often guarded, uncomfortable, and impatient.

For as often as the Bible points to liminal spaces as places where God shows up, it's surprising how little time we spend in them ourselves, how quickly we rush through them. Which is really our loss, as people of faith. Because in pushing fast forward on liminality, we miss out on richness and the growth that these seasons offer. We miss the lessons, and we miss the blessings.

It's clear from the beginning of this passage that Paul is saying goodbye forever to the elders in Ephesus. But it takes him awhile to tell them what he really wants to say – to give them his blessing and commendation. And I imagine that as Paul was reminiscing and speaking frankly about his imminent death, that some of the elders got a little antsy, overcome by the nervous energy of liminality and change. But imagine that these nerves got the best of the elders – that they couldn't handle the vulnerability of the space and so they stood up, clapped Paul on the back, saying "so good to see you, bud! Hope to see you back here again soon" and hurriedly left the space. If we leave these moments

too early, if we rush these seasons along too quickly, if we move on from our grief and our anger and our frustration too soon, we miss the lessons, and we miss the blessings.

The elders of Ephesus managed to push through their nervous energy and stay present with Paul, and in doing so, they heard these words: “And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. I coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothing. You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

The lessons: don’t covet, work hard to support yourselves and your companions, support the weak. And above all, give. Give more than you receive.

Give more than you receive and you will continue to be blessed, Paul says. This is a blessing that contains the instructions for further blessing. Sealed with weeping and embracing, Paul gives the community a final Benediction that is also a call to action. It’s a starting point in a season of uncertainty, an action step that they can take even as they wander in the unknown.

And so it is for us today. Jesus has given us this same call to action – to give more than we receive, to give our knowledge, our time, our energy, our resources, and our lives – even in the midst of uncertainty.

To give, and not to hoard. To give, and not to stockpile. To give, and not to expect a return on investment. To give, and not to withhold what we’ve been given.

This is our eternal calling in this world as people of faith, but it is ever the more important in these liminal spaces, in which fear discourages anything that is not self-serving.

I hope you have known the beauty of liminal space – the in-between space. I hope you have been able to slow down in those moments of transition and

hear the blessings that come between life and death, in times of change and grief. I hope you have felt overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit in the midst of uncertainty.

And I hope you have chosen to act in liminal spaces by giving generously. I hope you will continue to give foolishly and abundantly, even in the in-between times, even amidst uncertainty.

If you've ever sat at a bedside with one who was journeying into the great beyond, you know that very few people talk about material possessions on their deathbeds. Very few people reach the end of their lives and want to focus on what they've acquired. It's in the liminal spaces that we realize the truth all over again:

It is more blessed to give than to receive. May we know that today, and may we be blessed in remembering it all over again. All thanks be to God. Amen.