

Hope—Seeing the Pandemic as Liminal Space

His reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic caught my attention: “I’ve never struggled with the issue of hope before. Looking around, I see so few things in the culture that give me hope.”

My friend summed up the insidious undercurrent threatening so many during the pandemic. Even more so if we add social and political unrest fomented as the specter of institutional racism again raises its ugly head.

When words of “hope” are offered, they are often couched in such terms as “when we get back to normal.”

However, I suggest that the hope we seek will not come by trying to “get back to the way things were before.” Nor will it be found in blithely looking ahead to “when it’s over and we can get on with life.” Like it or not, things will be *different*; and we have no idea what that “life” will be like. To think otherwise is naïve.

Instead, hope emerges when we focus our eyes neither behind nor ahead. It’s in the rich waters and fertile ground of the *present* moments as liminal time and space.

So, what does that mean? Are there any images can help us see our present times more clearly?

Among images found in literature and cinema that could do the job, three picture clearly the liminal time and space of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- One is the scene in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* when, as a result of Voldemort’s killing curse, Harry “wakes up” in a dreamlike location that resembles King’s Cross Station in London where he is greeted by his school’s dead headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. In that in-between place, Harry is given the choice to go back or go on.
- Another, loosely based on the true story of a man stuck in Paris’ Charles-de-Gaulle Airport for 18 years, is Steven Spielberg’s movie *The Terminal* follows the life of Viktor Navorski who gets stuck in JFK Airport in New York. Viktor is denied entry to the United States but is also unable to return home due to a military coup that took place in his home country during his flight. He is stuck in-between countries – neither here nor there.
- A third is that point in C. S. Lewis’ children’s tale *The Magician’s Nephew* Digory and Polly find themselves in “the quietist wood you could possibly imagine” littered with numerous pools through which one can enter worlds different from their own. Digory imagines it as akin to common attic space in a set of row homes. “It isn’t a room in any of the houses,” he says. “In a way, it isn’t really part of any of the houses. But once you’re in [there] you can go along it and come out into any of the houses in the row.” Polly dubs it: “The Wood Between the Worlds,”

Like a hospital waiting room, a dormitory stairwell, a hotel elevator, and the break room at one’s place of employment these are examples of *liminal* or “in-between” space.

Similarly, *liminal time* is “in-between time”, when we’re on the verge of something new, between ‘what was’ and ‘what will be.’ It’s when and where we’re waiting, not knowing what’s to come.

Richard Rohr calls liminal space:

“... an inner state and sometimes an outer situation where we can begin to think and act in new ways. It is where we are betwixt and between, having left one room or stage of life but not yet entered the next. We usually enter liminal space when our former way of being is challenged or changed—perhaps when we lose a job or a loved one, during illness, at the birth of a child, or a major relocation.

It is a graced time, but often does not feel “graced” in any way. In such space, we are not certain or in control” (*Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditations*, “Between Two Worlds”, 4/26/2020).

Nor does it matter whether we are drafted into or we volunteer to enter liminal time and space. One way or the other, we aren’t where or what we were before; and we don’t know where we will be or what we will be in the future.

It’s like my spiritual director once described transition when I was in the midst of significant life changes: “All transition begins with an ending, ends with a beginning, and is sheer chaos in-between.”

Liminal time and space is “the sheer chaos in-between.”

In anthropology, *liminality* (from the Latin word *limen*, meaning “threshold”) describes the ambiguity, uncertainty and disorientation that takes place in the midst of a rite of passage from one time in life to another; like passing from childhood to adolescence, or adolescence to adulthood. We might even consider adolescence to be an extended liminal season—and many parents would wholeheartedly agree!

It’s when an individual, or collective, stands on the threshold between a previous way of being and a new way, between how they hitherto structured identity, time and community and how it will be in the days to come. Reflecting on the present chaos, Rohr calls the COVID-19 pandemic “an example of an immense, collective liminal space.”

The anthropological concept of liminality as threshold time was first articulated by Arnold van Gennep, a French ethnographer and folklorist of the early twentieth century, best known for his studies of rites of passage in various cultures. Since then, the concept has been broadened to describe political and cultural changes in addition to those of individuals.

Now we can speak of liminal periods as a time when social hierarchies may be reversed, convulsed or temporarily dissolved, or when the continuation of traditions becomes uncertain and expected outcomes, once taken for granted, are thrown into doubt. As an old order vanishes during liminal time, a more malleable and less solid state can enable new institutions and customs to take root and grow.

In building trades the threshold is a hardwood plank, stone, or piece of timber under a door; a doorsill. It’s the place in-between the outside and inside of a home. However, as Phil Cousineau points out in *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker’s Guide to Make Travel Sacred*, ...

“The threshold is more than an architectural detail; it is a mythological image that evokes the spirit of resistance we must pass through on our risky journey from all we’ve known to all that’s unknown. It’s the first step toward renewal. The truth of the image is compressed into the word. *Threshold* comes from *threshing*, what was done to separate the seed from the chaff right on the entrance to the farmhouses. Since at least Roman times, the threshold is ‘the slab or bar at the main doorway that prevents water or mud flowing into the house.’ The threshold divides the inside from the outside, the sacred from the profane, the past from the future.

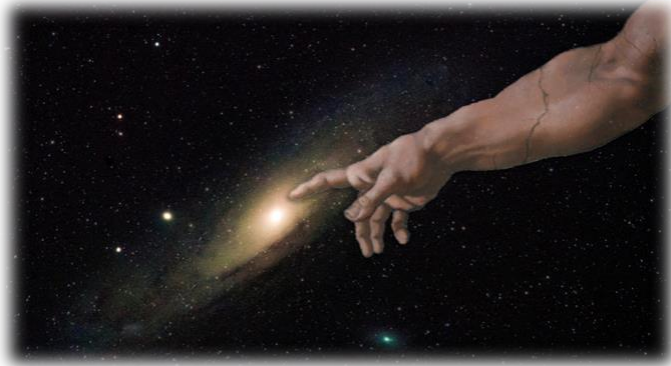


“Crossing over means confronting the guardian at the gate, the personification of the forces trying to keep us in the village, the ordinary world. The sheer ferociousness of those guardians, such as the ones at the Todai-ji Temple in Nara, Japan, are also personifications of our fear as we anticipate leaving on a meaningful journey. A vacation is easy to embark upon; everything has been laid out for us to have a predictable, comfortable, and reassuring holiday. But a pilgrimage is different; we are actually beckoning to the darkness in our lives. The fear is real” (pp. 83-84).

The real life most of us lead is more a pilgrimage than a vacation. In stepping over the threshold one moves *from* what **was** *into* what **will be**—and that is risky business. As Gandalf said to Frodo: “It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, walking out one’s front door. You step into the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to” (*The Fellowship of the Ring*).



Scripture, which reveals the story of God’s creative and redemptive working, indicates that God often designs His universe and often acts in it through liminal time and space. For instance, ...



God’s great story begins in the liminal time between eternity, when God was all there was, and the moment when creation came into being by His Word of power and life. Genesis starts off: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters* (1:1-2).

How long was God’s Spirit hovering, moving, stirring over formless chaos of the deep? We don’t know. However, that is the liminal moment in which God Himself stood on the threshold of time-before-time while creation yet-to-be was in the wings.

Another account of God’s shaping and forming His people in liminal time and liminal space is the Exodus story with its forty-years of liminal time spent in the in-between (*liminal*) space of wilderness.

Moses summarizes it in Deuteronomy 8:

Remember every road that God led you on for those forty years in the wilderness, pushing you to your limits, testing you so that he would know what you were made of, whether you would keep his commandments or not. He put you through hard times. He made you go hungry. Then he fed you with manna, something neither you nor your parents knew anything about, so you would learn that men and women don’t live by bread only; we live by every word that comes from God’s mouth. Your clothes didn’t wear out and your feet didn’t blister those forty years. You learned deep in your heart that God disciplines you in the same ways a father disciplines his child. (Deut. 8:2-5, *The Message*).



The four decades (Dt. 2:7; 29:5) in-between four centuries of bondage in Egypt (Ex. 12:40-41) and entry into God’s gift of a homeland was not wasted. The desert in-between was not fruitless but rather a place of spiritual formation and tempering. That’s when and where God did some of His most important (and difficult) work. For He often uses liminal desert-times to forge and temper His people.

There are also liminal threads woven into the warp-and-woof of the Paschal Mystery story of Christ’s life, death, burial, resurrection and ascension, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Here is where we see our lives most clearly in liminal time. For, as a past mentor of mine used to say: “all of us are living somewhere in Holy Week.”

Seen through a Gospel lens, can detect sacred patterns in the fabric of our present time being woven on God's liminal loom. Once more the Spirit of the God hovers over chaos, confusion and darkness to create new life.

The Paschal Mystery contains at least two liminal times and spaces, one of which many Christians skip on the way from Good Friday to Easter. What do we do with the liminal time of "Holy Saturday"?

We've been able to figure out what's so good about "Good Friday;" and we certainly enjoy shouting "He is Risen ... He is Risen Indeed" on Resurrection Sunday. But what do we do with the time in-between? Mostly scratch our heads in confusion and ignore it.

Our creeds and confessions acknowledge it:

- The Apostle's Creed: He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, *and was buried; he descended to hell.*
- The Athanasian Creed: ... God and Man is one Christ: *Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell ...*
- The 39 Articles of the Anglican/Episcopal Communion: As Christ *died for us, and was buried; so also it is to be believed, that he went down into Hell.*
- The Westminster Confession: ... the Lord Jesus ... was crucified, and died; *was buried, and remained under the power of death, yet saw no corruption.*



The creeds tell us what happened with Jesus; but what happened with His followers during that time? What was Holy Saturday like *for them*? What did *they* do? Where did *they* go? That's what I'd like to know, since I am not Jesus but just one of His followers.

While neither the biblical text nor the creeds report in detail the disciples' words and actions in those hours, there are hints as to what happened with them.

For example, since it was the Sabbath from sundown on Friday to sunset on Saturday. Given that it was associated with Passover, it must've been a particularly sacred Sabbath in which they did *nothing*. The Law that guided their custom demanded in Exodus that they:

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (20:8-11).

And in Deuteronomy 5, it says they were to:

"Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt

and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day” (5:12-15).

The command was to *rest* – everybody. No work. Do nothing. *And* the command to keep the Sabbath mirrored two of God’s own liminal times: *creation* (Genesis) and *deliverance* (Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy).

In his gospel, Luke says that since Friday was *the day of preparation and the Sabbath was about to begin, the women who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph, noted the tomb and the position of the body, and then went home to prepare spices and perfumes. On the Sabbath they rested, in obedience to the commandment* (Luke 23:54-56).

Following Jesus’ crucifixion and death, the women stuck around long enough to see exactly where He was buried. Then, they hustled home to prepare to return *after the Sabbath* to show their love for the Master by anointing His dead body. Before the Sabbath began at sundown, the women prepared for what they anticipated to be love’s next and last step. Then, they rested and waited.

But, as those aware of how the story ends know, they prepared for the wrong thing. They never got to use their spices and perfumes. Even though love rightly motivated them, what they prepared turned out to be useless.

We have no real word about the rest of Jesus’ followers. It seems that they simply hid in fear or were shut-up in discouragement and grief.

Sometimes that’s all we can do in a liminal moment – rest ... do what we think may be love’s next right thing ... or feel the depth of our sorrow, confusion and fear. Surprisingly, that may be enough. For when resurrection occurs, Jesus shames no-one for their Holy Saturday actions, inactions or feelings. He may call us to greater faith—but no shaming for our human struggles. Liminal moments often call us to just be who we are and how we are—no pretense, no pretending, nothing more, nothing less.

But while we wait – God’s on the move. That’s what the creeds tell us about Holy Saturday when they affirm that *Christ descended into hell*, which meant little to me for a long time.

However, once while on retreat at an Episcopal Benedictine monastery, I found myself transfixed by an icon of the Cross mounted on the wall behind the chapel altar. While a crucifix, it beamed with the glory of victory, pointing to the one who overcame death by dying.

“The Cross is the Icon of Christ’s glorious victory and love,” said the descriptive brochure I picked up by the chapel door. “It is foolishness to some, but to us who live in Christ it is the power of God. The cross is the concrete expression of the Christian mystery of victory by defeat, of glory by humiliation, of life by death.”

At the bottom of the Icon, was a rendering of The Descent into Hell, mentioned in that enigmatic phrase in the Apostle’s Creed – “He was crucified, dead and buried. *He descended into Hell*”; weakened by some who simply say, “He descended into death,” while some others eliminate it all together.



When contemplating this image at the bottom of the Icon, I was struck by the liberating power of Christ crucified, descended and risen. Peter calls attention to the same in his second letter reminding us that *Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits—to those who were disobedient long ago ...*” (2 Peter 3:18-20). I.e., Jesus set the prisoners free, like He said He would when quoting Isaiah in the Nazareth synagogue in Luke 4 ~ “*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and ... to let the oppressed go free*” (4:18).

The Icon’s descriptive brochure interprets the Descent image this way:

The Descent into Hell expresses the spiritual transcendental reality of the Resurrection and reveals the purpose and results of this descent. The action takes place in the very depths of the earth in hell, as shown by the gaping black abyss. Christ appears not as captive but as Conqueror of hell, the Deliverer of those imprisoned there. By freeing the old Adam, and with him the whole of humankind from slavery to Satan, who is the incarnation of sin, darkness and death, Christ has laid the foundation of a new life for those united with him into a new reborn humanity. The spiritual raising of Adam is the symbol of the coming resurrection of the body, the first fruit of which is the Resurrection of Christ.



Before the stone was rolled away as evidence of God’s action and while the disciples and the women rested on their liminal Sabbath, Jesus the Victorious Liberator was already actively setting other captives free. The Spirit of God again was at work in the darkness creating new life.

These liminal moments are the threshold of new, unexpected and, perhaps, startling things. Marvelous and good ... but surprising. Think again of the next act in the Paschal Mystery play. No one anticipated such an incredible twist in the plot as resurrection.



Luke continues the story.

Very early on Sunday morning the women went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. They found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. So, they went in but they didn’t find the body of the Lord Jesus. As they stood there puzzled, two men suddenly appeared to them, clothed in dazzling robes.

The women were terrified and bowed with their faces to the ground. Then the men asked, “Why are you looking among the dead for someone who is alive? He isn’t here! He is risen from the dead!” (24:1-6a)

When the women ran to report what they found to the apostles and the rest of Jesus’ disciples, “*the story sounded like nonsense to the men, so they didn’t believe it,*” Luke says (v. 11).

Nevertheless, Peter rushed to the tomb to see for himself. When he looked inside and saw the empty linen wrappings, he was amazed and left wondering what happened there.

The next scene in Luke’s account takes place that afternoon, as two disciples were walking to the little town of Emmaus after staying in Jerusalem until the Sabbath was over. Having lived with their grief,

hopelessness and despair for a couple of days, they trudged along discouraged and confused. When Jesus came from behind to fall in step with them, they didn't recognize Him. They didn't identify his gait or know His voice – even when Jesus *took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself* (v. 27). So extraordinary and unexpected was what happened that they didn't see it until Jesus broke the bread during dinner in their home when, “their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (Lk. 24:31).

That's the general narrative throughout. Surprisingly Jesus shows up risen from the dead, and no-one gets it at first. They had no inkling that this was coming. Immediately after the Emmaus disciples ran back Jerusalem to tell the apostles what happened, Luke says that, *Jesus himself was suddenly standing there among them. “Peace be with you,” he said. But the whole group was startled and frightened, thinking they were seeing a ghost!* (24:36, 37)

Even after he showed them His hands and feet, and they touched Him to see that He was real, *they still stood there in disbelief, filled with joy and wonder* (v. 41).

In other words, when Jesus' followers must step off the threshold of liminal space and time that was Holy Saturday into Easter (Resurrection Day) they are *puzzled, terrified, startled, frightened, wide-eyed in disbelief, joy and wonder*.

They didn't know what to expect; and they certainly didn't expect what actually happened. As wonderful as it was, they weren't prepared for a resurrection. So, when it happened, they were both dumbfounded and excited.



However, that's not all the liminal space and time contained in the Paschal Mystery story. For the Mystery doesn't embrace only Maundy Thursday and the Last Supper, Good Friday and Jesus' Crucifixion and Burial, Holy Saturday/Sabbath and Easter/Resurrection Day. The Paschal Mystery also includes the forty days from Christ's Resurrection up until His Ascension, and those from Ascension Day to Pentecost ten days later. These, too, are “in-between times.”

Luke ends his gospel with what happened after the resurrection: Jesus appeared to the women, came to disciples hiding in Jerusalem and met two others on the Road to Emmaus. He concludes saying that ...
“... [Jesus] *opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high”* (24:45-49).

Then, he picks up the ongoing story in Acts 1:

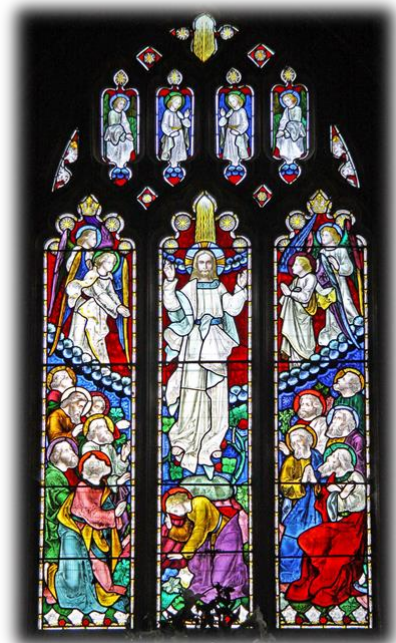
“*In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water but, in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 1:1-5).

Then those wondrous forty days concluded as Jesus led them out to a place near the village of Bethany on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives, 2 miles east of Jerusalem. Gathering around Jesus, the disciples asked, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

“You don’t get to know the time. Timing is the Father’s business. What you’ll get is the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be able to be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:7,8 *The Message*).

Then, Jesus lifted His hands, blessed them and was taken up into heaven into a cloud as they watched. With His words still echoing in their hearts, the disciples stood there, staring into the empty sky.

Suddenly, two men dressed in white stood beside them and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you just stand here looking up at an empty sky? This very Jesus who was taken up from among you to heaven will come as certainly—and mysteriously—in just the same way as you’ve seen Him go.”



Awed by it all, they worshiped the Lord on the spot and then joyfully returned to Jerusalem where they were often at the temple, praising God, and in the upstairs room, devoted themselves to prayer. (See: Lk. 24:45-53; Acts 1:1-14.)

In the liminal time between Jesus’ resurrection and His ascension, it’s pretty clear that Jesus’ followers gave themselves to several different activities. It wasn’t just forty days of doing nothing, like waiting for a pizza to be delivered.

What did they do?

First, they *attended to the Scriptures* as Jesus led them in an extensive Bible study of what Torah and the Prophets had to say about Messiah. He wanted them to understand fully who He was and what He was about as detailed in their Bible. It was a time for *learning*; which only makes sense as the word used for “disciple” (μαθητής [*mathétes*]) actually means “learner,” “student” or “pupil.”

Paul tells Timothy that,

All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching the faith and correcting error, for re-setting the direction of a person’s life and training them in good living. The scriptures are the comprehensive equipment of the man or woman of God and fit them fully for all branches of their work (2 Tim. 3:16-17, J. B. Phillips NT).

The time to “gear up” for what’s ahead is *before* the storm hits and we find ourselves in the thick of it. The best time to become familiar with and get fitted with the “comprehensive equipment” for all we will be called upon to do is before we have to do it—i.e., in liminal time.

Secondly, as James Montgomery Boice points out, in the days after Jesus ascended the disciples *continued to practice obedience*. Like we would be, they were tempted to *do* a lot of things other than wait. We don’t wait well—we’d rather “seize the day” and *do* something! But Jesus said, “Stay and wait!” (Acts 1:4-5 & 1:12-14) So they stayed in Jerusalem and waited just as Jesus told them to ... which was not as easy as we might think.

When Jesus didn’t drive out the Romans, as far as they were concerned, the dream ended. The Emmaus disciples went back to Emmaus as others started back to Galilee. They could’ve gone home and back to their previous lines of work.

Some had been fishermen, one a tax collector. During the prior forty days some of them already went back to Galilee to take up fishing again. They could’ve said, “Jesus is gone. He said he’s coming back. When? We don’t know. So, for right now, we’ve got to get on with life and making a living.”

Or, if they were more “spiritual,” they might have decided: “There’s work to do, people to be won and cities to be evangelized. Let’s get crackin’.” It may have felt pointless to wait inactively in Jerusalem.

Like the disciples, we learn the most about obedience when we can’t see *why* we’re to do what we’re called to do. As Boice says, “if we can give a reason for what we are doing, then we are not necessarily learning obedience, at least not simple obedience. What we are really doing is trusting our ability to reason things out. We are doing what we are doing because we think it is the best thing to do. There is nothing wrong with thinking things out, of course. But it is quite another thing to learn obedience when the proscribed course does not seem the best option” (Boice, *An Expositional Commentary on Acts*, p.33).

Liminal time is for waiting. Liminal space is for staying put.

Third, they also gave themselves *to fellowship* and *to corporate worship* both in the Temple and in their homes; or, as we might say, in public worship and in small groups.

As his gospel ends, Luke says that after Jesus was taken up into heaven, the disciples went back to Jerusalem and *stayed continually at the temple, praising God* (Luke 24:53). However, he then begins Acts with them returning to the house *where they were staying* in the upper room—sometimes identified as the room of the Last Supper (Luke 22:11) and/or the house of Mary, John Mark’s mother (12:12). While the definite article suggests that the room was a well-known place, we don’t know which room it was. In any event, it was a good place for prayer above the tumult of crowded streets and beyond the prying eyes of passersby.

Several decades later, the writer of Hebrews again calls scattered Christians to find ways to be together, to stay in touch with one another and to worship corporately. Apparently, it wasn’t an easy thing to do so he charges them to get creative and figure it out saying, *let us consider how to spur one another to love and to good works. Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but let us exhort one another, especially as you see the Day approaching* (10:24,25, MEV).

In liminal times, we have to *consider*, to get creative, throw out the old “rules” and categories. They no longer apply in the same way. This is the chaos in-between.

While the main activity when gathered in the Temple was *praise and worship* (Luke 24:53), the main activity among the company of the 120 disciples in the upper room was *prayer* (Acts 1:14-15).

Prayer was another activity to which they gave themselves in this liminal time of waiting for what was next – even though they hardly had any idea of exactly what was coming.

Jesus told them “to wait for the promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4). Since the Old Testament often linked “waiting” on God with prayer, it’s likely they were praying mainly that the promised Spirit would come.

Although Luke says they were *constantly* united in prayer this need not imply uninterrupted prayer, although it does give us a picture of committed, devoted prayer that was more than usual daily prayers.

If the Holy Spirit is the divine gift to empower and guide the church, the corresponding human attitude towards God is *prayer*. It is as the church prays that it receives the Spirit. So, at the outset Luke emphasizes that the disciples spent the time of waiting for the Spirit in an attitude of continuous and united prayer.

Prayer is weakness
leaning on
omnipotence.
~ W. S. Bowden

Prayer begins to emerge as a mark of the early church. When they were fearful, they prayed. When they were confused, they prayed. When they were waiting for God to fulfill his promise to them, they prayed. When they needed an answer to a question (such as who was to be the twelfth apostle), they prayed!

They devoted themselves to praying earnestly and persistently. Knowing their own weakness, they prayed for the power Jesus promised; after all they had no idea when the Spirit would come.

This was not a time to be alone rather it was a special season for looking to the Lord and leaning on one another, whether in public worship or small group prayer.



Several years ago, marriage and family therapist, spiritual director and author Jacci Turner wrote a brief article which began with an honest observation about waiting rooms. Nobody likes them. Maybe they're OK for a few minutes while we catch up on an old issue of a favorite magazine, but it doesn't take long for us to get antsy and impatient; and we begin to think uncharitable thoughts about the office staff or the person we're waiting to see.

Even more disconcerting is finding ourselves in a "spiritual waiting room" when we find ourselves in the liminal time and space between one thing and the next. That's when we have no recourse but to wait on the Lord. Turner says, "It can be disconcerting—but it can also grow your faith and character in a way few things can."

While all our instincts are to run when we're in liminal spaces, she exhorts us to stick it out, to hang-in there, to stay put. Someone once told her that "often the best intercession we can do is just to stay in a situation." She's come to see, that it's also the best waiting we can do as well.

Yet, in her article, Turner doesn't just admonish us to wait. What I like is that she also provides some counsel in *six actions* that can help us endure while living through liminal times and seasons.

1. **Find someone to wait with you.** As Pooh says to Piglet, "It's so much friendlier with two." Of course, no one can fully share the pain of our waiting, but having a trusted friend, mentor, therapist, or spiritual director along with us in the journey can help tremendously.
2. **Keep a journal.** We don't want to miss the lessons of this time, and journaling can help us sort out our thoughts.
3. **Be kind to yourself.** Eat right, sleep well, exercise. It's easy to feel sorry for ourselves when these times come but falling into bad health habits will not help anyone weather the storm. We must think of the liminal waiting as a spiritual marathon in which we must keep up our training.
4. **Stay in the Word and in prayer.** It's easy to believe the enemy's accusations during a waiting time. Instead of listening to his lies, we can let Scripture wash our minds with truth; and we can honestly pray out our pain and frustration. God's neither surprised nor offended when we express the depths of our hurts in prayer.
5. **Don't be a turtle.** Sometimes, when things are hard, pulling away from others and into a protective shell is a natural instinct. But what we really need when waiting is community. It's then we must reach out to friends and be honest with our small group. The journey will be lighter with the support and encouragement of friends to help us.
6. **Find some heroes who have endured difficult times.** Interview parents and relatives about what they've learned during trials. Study the life of Job, Abraham, or Ruth. Read books on waiting itself and on ordinary people who have grown through waiting, like Elizabeth Lesser's *Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow*.

Jacci Turner, "Embrace the Space: Tips for Waiting Well" at <https://intervarsity.org/blog/embrace-space-tips-waiting-well>



I suggest that we see the COVID-19 pandemic as *liminal space and time* in which the Spirit of God is again at work in the darkness creating new life. That brings hope to me and others for this time. After all, God does some of his best work in darkness, deserts, cocoons, waiting rooms, upper rooms and tombs. We need not fear the liminal time and space that we are in at the moment.

We know there is no going back—like it or not, no one and nothing is going to put Jesus back in the grave. And, like it or not, things will not be the same when the virus loosens its fearful grip on the world. Like it or not—we don't know when that will be or what things will like when it does.

For now, the only action to take is to wait. The only way out is through. The only way to move is slowly forward; even when we don't know what to expect. All we know is that God works in such liminal moments and when He is at work, it's good! After all, *we do know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son* (Rom. 8:28, 29). I.e., nothing is wasted with God. He will be about His purpose—to conform us to the image of His Son, and to answer the prayer “Thy Kingdom Come.”

What are we to do at such a threshold moment? . . . In moments of transition, we are simply to be. We are to pause and acknowledge that a transition is taking place. Instead of seeking to abruptly pass through a threshold, we are to tarry. . . . A new reality is emerging, but we cannot see beyond the threshold. All we know is that we exist in this moment, where everything is in transition. We may experience a new way of being, but we cannot yet sense what it will look like. ~ Brandan J. Robertson

(in “On the Threshold of Tomorrow,” “Liminal Space,” *Oneing*, vol. 8, no. 1 (CAC Publishing: 2020), 58—59)

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
he makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil;
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
thou anointest my head with oil,
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Psalm 23 (RSV)