

Hearing Voices

August 23, 2020

As we begin today, I'll share with you that I'm going to be giving you the opportunity to do something a little different this week, a bit of guided meditation for which having paper and something to write with will come in handy. If it's not easy to find a pen and paper quickly, you might simply want to listen to the exercise right now, and come back to either the audio or transcript of today's reflection on our website. These are usually posted by midweek.

With those pragmatic instructions out of the way, let us center our hearts and minds in prayer:

Liminality. Are you familiar with the idea of "liminal time" or "liminality?" Liminality refers to being in-between. Think of the times that we're in-between phases of life, such as the summer before college, or the months before and after a divorce.

Think, too, of places that are in-between. Here in Wisconsin, with our hot, sunny summers and harsh winters, breezeways might come to mind. They're spaces that are protected from the heat and sun and wind, but that aren't quite indoor living space.

Another liminal space might be an airport. For very few people is the airport the destination. Most often, it is a connecting point between one place and another.

In liminality, we are crossing over from one thing into another, and in doing that, there is a predictable three-part process: 1) separation, or what is being left behind, 2) the in-between, and 3) reorientation.

As one might imagine, each part of the liminal process also has some typical dynamics and characteristics. Again, think of my breezeway example. In the winter, it is typical to take off your coat, scarf, hat, gloves, and perhaps even more, in the breezeway, in the liminal space. So, too, liminal times and spaces are marked by non-structure or anti-structure that open us up to new possibilities.

All of this comes to mind as we're now firmly in our fifth month of experiencing pandemic, as we struggle with the prospects of schools and churches figuring out how to serve their populations well, as we continue to engage in the critical anti-racism work that our Christianity calls us to, as so many of the ways that things have worked in the past for so many of us just don't seem to work anymore. So much of life right now is marked by non-structure, anti-structure, or dismantling of past structures. In this context, I offer you this framework of liminality, liminal space and time, in-between space, in-between time, in order to help make sense of the disorientation with which so many are struggling.

To quote Susan Beaumont who wrote a book last year on liminality:

“The liminal period can be an incredibly freeing season in which old structures are released, new identities and possibilities are explored, and power is reassigned. It is also a troubling time during which people are subject to the lure of tricksters. (We are often) tempted down false pathways that serve no useful purpose.”

In short, pandemic has put all of us into an extended experience of being in-between. There are things - ideas, behaviors, structures - that we are going to find we need to shed because they don't serve us well anymore, and in order to make way for what will be. Just as truly as time cannot go backward, life is not going to return to the way it was before March. And so, one of the spiritual tasks of this season is to do as Susan Beaumont suggests: release old structures, explore new possibilities, and reassign power.

Today, our focus will be on releasing the old, but first, let's take a look at how this experience of liminality is informed by our scripture readings. Our Hebrew Bible passage today from Exodus – which Liz read for us – is one of my favorites (I say that a lot, don't I?). Most often, I reflect on how it is a glorious record of a feminist response to injustice. It's the story of two minority women engaging in civil disobedience which ends up setting the stage for revolution and numerous experiences of God and the sacred.

But today, I'd like to lift up the liminality of what they did. Shipra and Puah were in a terrible situation in Hebrew history, a time in which the Pharaoh, the head of state, had commanded them to engage in despicable acts, a time that was marked by famine and deep social disparity, an extended time of trouble in the land, a liminal time, an in-between time, exacerbated by the old power elites trying to grasp at power that was slipping out of their fingers. In the passage we heard today, these two minority midwives decided to throw off the old power hierarchies, they chose not to follow the law of the land, and in doing so lived for some time in the disorienting, non-structure or anti-structure of having Moses' own mother serve as his nursemaid while he was being raised in the palace.

Everything about that story must have been disorienting and scary and fraught. The midwives and Moses' mother were in an in-between time - setting aside former values, power dynamics, and social structures, while not yet knowing what their future would look like.

Similarly, in our Gospel today, we hear Jesus asking the disciples “Who do people say that I am?” Their answer is, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Then Jesus asks, “But who do you say that I am?”

Rather than focusing on Peter's answer, where I'd like us to spend the rest of our time today is around Jesus' question. Remember Susan Beaumont's caveat earlier that, liminal times are often times in which, "people are subject to the lure of tricksters. People may be tempted down false pathways that serve no useful purpose?"

Today, I invite you to ponder how your life experiences intersect with this experience the disciples have of competing voices leading them to all sorts of false conclusions. In particular, when we're in situations of anxiety, struggle, or disorientation - that is liminal situations - we are often tempted by voices that aren't leading us to Godly depth and spirituality, but rather into falseness. Very often, they can be characterized as the voice of judgment, the voice of cynicism, and the voice of fear.

The voice of judgment is often certain. It finds its power in facts. It tries to keep us in a stance of knowing. And, it shuts down an open mind. Often, much of what the voice of judgment says is accurate, but it spins things in such a way that there is little hope of finding a solution. The antidote to the voice of judgment is a stance of wonder.

The voice of cynicism is "sharp, snarky, and inclined to believe that others are only motivated by their own personal self-interest." (Beaumont) This voice in our heads is often skeptical, mistrusting, and shuts down an open heart. It protects us from ideas that would damage our egos. The voice of cynicism is often pejorative, and belittling, and antidote to the voice of judgment is cultivating a stance of vulnerability.

The last voice we'll talk about today is the voice of fear. The voice of fear seeks to protect us from loss. It is rooted in a scarcity mentality, that the status quo is the extent of what will be. It keeps us in a striving stance and shuts down our open will. It reminds us of the ways our self-interest may be damaged by the unknown. Conversely, releasing the voice of fear releases our desire for control. The antidote to the voice of fear is a yielding to the inevitability of the unknown.

Now here's where that pen and paper could come in handy if you were able to grab them. I'd like you to think of a time or situation in your life that was particularly challenging. Maybe it is your experience of pandemic, or maybe it's a particularly painful break up, or an experience of addiction. Really, think of any time that has been challenging for you. In a sentence or two, try to describe that challenge. It really doesn't work to do this exercise without having a specific challenge in mind.

What we're going to do is take a few minutes to go through a guided meditation. Now that you have that challenge in mind and hopefully on paper, we're going to let each of these three voices speak to us about that challenge. What we're going to do in the silence is let each of the voices, one at a time, have free reign in our head in which to express itself. As it does, we're not going to judge it or restrict it in any way. We're just

going to let that voice speak, and everything it speaks to us is going to come out on our paper.

And so, we begin with the voice of judgment. With regard to the challenge you brought to mind, how does the voice of judgment speak to you? Remember, the voice of judgment is the know-it-all, condescending voice. It has lots of data and lots of opinions about that data. Let the voice of judgment speak to you about your challenge, and write down what that voice is saying. (pause)

Let's thank the voice of judgment for all of the ways it has been protecting us from getting into trouble, protected us from doing something untoward.

Next, we'll let the voice of cynicism speak. How does the voice of cynicism resonate with the challenge you named? Remember, the voice of cynicism is the mistrusting voice. It is snarky in character and tone. It has lots of judgy kinds of opinions about who is trying to do what to you, and how you might need to protect yourself from that. Let's take some time to let the voice of cynicism speak, relative to the challenge you brought to mind. (pause)

Let's thank the voice of cynicism for protecting our hearts, for protecting us from being too vulnerable in this challenge and risk.

Last to speak is the voice of fear. How does the voice of fear resonate with the challenge you named? The voice of fear is heavily invested in not wanting you to lose anything more than you may have already lost. It's very scarcity based. Let the voice of fear speak to you about your challenge, and write down what it is saying to you. (pause)

Now, we'll take some time to thank the voice of fear for protecting us from loss.

Now, we'll go ahead and set down our pens. Imagine yourself somewhere at the edge of a stream, somewhere peaceful and safe. Picture the water flowing gently past you.

Let's begin by attending to our stance, our breathing. Be neutral and comfortable, perhaps close your eyes. As you sit, begin to know your breath deepening.

Allow your body to relax. Let all of those messages from the three voices just randomly surface for you again. Don't worry about reading them or getting them all. One at a time, as they surface for you, observe them, and draw them out of your mind, like a long silver strand, and then drop them in the water. Let the water carry them away. One thought at a time. Let the water carry them away until you have released those ideas with which the voices of judgment, cynicism, and fear keep trying to monopolize your mind. Keep letting them go one at a time.

Gracious and holy one, help us sit with minds open to wonder, free from the voices of judgment and cynicism, and fear, that we might hear your true voice, leading our each next step, as we seek to navigate this liminal time. Amen.

Exercises like this are called “shedding” exercises. They free us to stand in the unknowing, free us from our biases and help us to stand in awe of what God is birthing and gestating in our time of disorientation.

I hope you take the time after our video and transcript are posted to the church website midweek to take a longer time processing and shedding these distracting voices.

Friends, the midwives in our Hebrew Scripture, the disciples in Jesus’ time, and all of us experience competing voices amidst the disorienting experiences of life. My prayer this week is that, amidst those voices, you will engage in practices like this, or any others, that help you to shed the voices of judgment, cynicism, and fear, that you might hear the voice of God who not only calls you beloved, but who also says, “see, I am doing something new.” And “come to me, and I will give you rest.”

Alleluia, and amen.

*Today’s sermon is deeply rooted in Susan Beaumont’s “How To Lead When You Don’t Know Where You Are Going” and Otto Scharmer’s “Theory U: Leading from the Future As It Emerges.”

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