

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Liminal Spaces

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is a whole lot of liminality going on in our Gospel reading today. Some of which is readily apparent, and some of which is only apparent with some knowledge of cultural and literary context. But before we begin to explore this theme, a definition would likely be helpful. A liminal space is a space between other locations. So, liminality has to do with transitions, with change, with complexity, with borders and thresholds, and even sometimes with paradox.

The most obvious liminality in our text today has to do with theology, Christology more specifically, the nature of Christ. Jesus' transfiguration is a profound expression of both his human nature and his divine one. The text describes Jesus' appearance as shining like the sun and suddenly two monumental and historic figures, who many Israelites at the time believed had ascended bodily into heaven, Moses and Elijah join him. Then, in further proof of Christ's liminal nature, somehow both fully divine and fully human, God's voice booms out, calling Jesus Beloved Son and urging his followers to listen to him.

Then there's the cultural/geographic liminality in this scene. For the Israelites of that time, mountains were places where the boundary between earth and heaven was thinner. They were understood to be liminal spaces between our reality and the reality of heaven. If you note the location of various places of worship in the Hebrew Bible, you will find that many of them were located on mountains or the "high places" of the region. As an example of this tendency, one of the biggest sources of conflict between the Israelites and Samaritans was where to worship. The Israelites believed that true worship only occurred at the Temple, located on the highest hill in Jerusalem. While the Samaritans worshipped mostly at Mount Gerizim, one of the higher mountains near their capital.

Literary context makes evident that this is also a liminal time in Christ's ministry too. If we look closely at the details of the Transfiguration, we will see elements from the start of his ministry as well as foreshadowing of its end. First, we find foreshadowing of the crucifixion with the text drawing our attention to two others with Jesus; in this case Moses and Elijah, but it will be two criminals instead at the end. Then the voice from the cloud repeats what the voice from the heavens stated at Christ's Baptism, calling Jesus Beloved Son whose actions are pleasing.¹ From a purely literary perspective, we also find ourselves close to the middle of Matthew's Gospel, so a liminal point of transition should be no surprise.

This acknowledgement of liminality is one of the things I most appreciate about the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus Christ. The Way of Christ does not promise simple or easy answers. Rather, it recognizes the complexities of human existence. We just heard the teaching from Christ last week that even angry or lustful thoughts are as sinful as the actions that those thoughts can cause. That is a point of complexity! That teaching illustrates how our perspective toward others impacts our actions towards them...those perspectives can lead us to the temptation of dehumanizing others, or they can lead us to loving and serving them instead.

Easy answers and binary thinking have no place on the Way of Christ. Again and again and again in Scripture Jesus promises challenge and difficulty, so why do we keep looking for the easy way? This temptation of ours to look for the simple and easy is a useful tool for all sorts of evil forces and broken powers in our world today. So please heed this warning! If anyone comes to you promising easy answers or simple solutions be very wary!

And those forces **will** come, and they will come offering ease and comfort. They will come as politicians, as CEOs, as bankers, as advertisers, and certainly as priests and pastors too! But the messages they offer: buy this thing to be whole...look down on that group to feel better about yourself...the poor deserve their lot...hard work is more important than family or community...the bottom line is more important than people...give enough and God will reward you; all of those messages are false...they are life-destroying and anti-Christ.

The Way of Christ, the way to God's kingdom, means taking the time to go deeper and reflect on complexity. The Way of Christ means placing

¹ Matthew 3:17 (NRSVUE)

connection and community over and above the binary thinking that so often leads to the exclusion or oppression of others. It means dealing with the messiness of human life in community.

I glossed over one detail earlier when I spoke about the liminality of Christ's nature that I'd like to go back to now. The Transfiguration makes clear that Christ is somehow both fully human and fully divine. What that means is mostly a mystery to us. I mean, how can that which is human even exist alongside a fully divine nature? The witness of Scripture suggests that the human even looking upon the fully divine means death.² So there's just not much we can understand about Christology, the inner nature of Christ. But we can learn from how that mysterious nature interacts with the world.

What is the main action in this scene? Sure, there's some talking going on, but what's the main **action**? I think we see that in verse 7, "But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.'" Jesus, revealed now as both fully human and fully divine, sees his disciples cowering down in fear and his response is to join them with both a comforting touch and words of reassurance.

I suspect it would have been so much easier for Jesus to thunder out an echo of the voice from heaven instead. "Listen to me!" the shout could have gone out. "Follow my Way or else" might have finally sunk into those block-headed disciples' brains after what they had just seen and heard. But that is not Christ's Way, that would just be more binary thinking...more easy answers...more falsehood. Instead, Jesus meets them where they are, in the messiness of fear and awe. And rather than using their fear and driving them towards simple and easy, Jesus offers comfort instead. Jesus always pursues connection and relationship rather than power and control.

That is the work of the Way, to forgo easy answers and binary thinking and simply meet people where they are. That is where the complexity of the divine and human come together, in loving service and connection to one another. Meet people in the messiness of their lives, join them in their pain, sorrow, and fear...and love them. Love them completely, love them the way they are. This is ministry at the margins. Ministry without easy answers. This is the Way of Love. And it's all messy and complex and in-between. And it is also so, so beautiful! Amen.

² c.f. Exodus 33:20, Judges 13:22