

Living in Between
Genesis 2:4-9; Genesis 4:19
Ash Wednesday, (Feb. 17) 2021
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Gertrude Stein came back to her home in Oakland, California after years of living in Europe, and could find no trace of her childhood home, no durable and familiar landmarks, and nothing marking the uniqueness of the place. Someone asked her if she might come back, settle down, and write, she remarked that she could not write in Oakland, for “there is no there there,” (cited in Scott Russell Sanders, *A Conservationist Manifesto*, “The Geography of Somewhere,” p. 93).

“There is no there there” is a classic line. These days many of us can relate to her feelings over realizing there is no there there. The old familiar places, the landmarks, our reliable reference points, the sense of knowing where you are – are all gone. Everything is now different. Not necessarily bad but different. What we considered normal and constant are no longer. Stability had been replaced by instability and change.

In Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, before the pilgrim enters Hell proper, there is Limbo. Limbo is a kind of ethereal in-between place full of the spirits of virtuous pagans like the great poets of classical antiquity. In the afterlife they are not in hell, but they are not in heaven and not in purgatory. It’s a decent place but it has no substance. There is no there there. It’s in between.

In her poem, *After Divorce*, Luci Shaw wrote: *The in-between is hard,/ the mid-air, the limbo/ between bank/ and bank,/ the long leap (legs/ flailing, body un-/*

grounded, askew in space)/ the scare/ of alien air/ the interval of being/ in no place,/ having no where...

Often these days I feel like I live in the in between. Not like it used to be and unsure of what the future will be. It's a liminal place. Liminal shares the same Latin root as limbo – meaning threshold, marginal, border, the juncture between two different kinds of places. To live in the liminal is to live in ambiguity and flux, instability and disorientation. Kierkegaard called it “a state of unrest.”

Theologian and psychologist Paul Tournier said that most of us live our lives “in between,” in a permanent state of unrest. We are always in transition leaving something behind and/or looking forward. We are not safe and secure and stable; we have to be light on our feet able and learn to improvise. We are constantly learning new skills, new ways, and learning how to go in new directions, where we're unsettled and on the move. To live in between often is full of anxiety and we would prefer to have our place. Be secure. Be settled. (*A Place for You: Psychology and Religion*).

Please hear Tournier and hear me. There is nothing wrong with wanting security and seeking to be settled. In an unsettled world of everything from climate change to Covid to cancer and more, we want normalcy. Added to that for White people, especially White Males like me, we're also learning to give up our Whiteness or White privilege and learning to confront and repent of our racism which we previously did not see. It is tiring work and sometimes we simply wish for the stability of how it used to be.

So we are to beware and be careful. God calls us onward toward new creation, not backward toward old empire.

Now I know and you know, there are many people who prefer to circle the wagons, batten down the hatches, build walls, get guns, raise the drawbridges, hunker down, bunker up, make America great again, and have a faith which becomes certitude in a never changing God who gives an inerrant Bible full of facts. Furthermore, some of these same people are ready to use violence to recover what they define as certitude and order.

There was a story on *Politico* a few years ago on how conservatives prefer the book of Proverbs in the Bible, especially in quotes and tweets. Part of it, of course, is that Proverbs are made for tweeting – short, concise, snappy. But the larger question is why do conservatives like Proverbs so much? The reason is that Proverbs assumes a settled view of the world where there are clear lines between good and evil, where there is a clear cause and effect between good behavior and rewards and bad behavior and punishment, and those who are successful in life are successful because they have lived good and righteous lives while those who struggle or who are poor or who have bad health, have those things as a result of unrighteousness (see July 9, 2017, politico.com).

In contrast, the stories of the Bible come at faith from a different place. The Old Testament prophets challenged this settled, stable world of wealth and power, from the perspective of outsiders, from the perspective of people who were in poverty, and whose lives were not all settled and nice. They challenged the settled and stable presumption on God. It is not that Proverbs are wrong. It's that Proverbs were and are easily turned into little aphorisms of abstract morality without the

Living God known to us in the flesh and blood of real life. These Old Testament stories but also the stories of Jesus and the very parables Jesus tell, are about changes that come through discontinuity, displacement, and disjunction. They are full of real life, not smooth, simplistic transitions and static moralism. The overarching narratives of the Bible are the ones of enslavement and exodus, destruction of the Temple and exile and return, and of crucifixion, death, and resurrection. In the Bible, God's name is a verb, not a noun, and God's people in the New Testament are known as "people of the Way." This is the same God who leads slaves out of Pharaoh's empire of certitude into a wilderness where everything is uncertain except God. The biblical world of faith is not a stable world where everyone knows his or her place, but a world into which God intrudes and turns everything upside down – if you're Pharaoh or a king. And turns everything right side up – if you're a slave or a simple fisherman or a poor widow.

The great biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann says, "Biblical literature focuses precisely on the move from one place to another. This literature knows that the move is neither smooth nor explicable, but is characteristically disjunctive, painful, and hidden... focused on the wrenching transitions" (*Hope within History*, p. 8).

Which brings us to Lent and Ash Wednesday. As much as we yearn for normalcy and stability, God calls us let go and leave behind and join the Way of the living Jesus Christ. What we discover on the Way, is that what we held on to so dearly, really was holding us back and holding us down. Ash Wednesday and Lent is a time when we pilgrims on the journey give up baggage so we can know God and experience God in new ways.

We are at the threshold, the liminal place of the forty-day journey called Lent. Ash Wednesday is the threshold for all of us. It is that place and time when we have to confront our fears about who we really are and who God is and lean into who God is calling us to be.

So today we invite you to get up and join the God Movement; follow Christ on the Way. Start the journey toward the new creation. Today we remember that we are from the dust and dirt and ashes (humus) and we are humans who will return to the dust and dirt and ashes. For the next forty days we go into the wilderness with Jesus. It is an intimidating and we tend to keep looking back over our shoulder for normalcy and stability.

But God in Jesus Christ is in front of us, not behind us. I don't know about you, but I think I'll take my chances with Christ.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.