

Jesus in the Gap

John 6:1-21

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, (July 28) 2024

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*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.*

Luci Shaw, *After Divorce*

“A large crowd kept following him,” says John (v. 2). Can there be a surer sign of success than this? Who can argue with numbers? Look at the bottom line - a large crowd. Jesus has become popular. He is successful. The disciples are pumped. “We’re finally making an impact. We’re making a difference. The movement is growing.”

But as the crowd grows, the disciples realize that success is not all they had anticipated it being. With a crowd there are problems – organization, training, managing them so the crowd does not turn into a mob, and then Jesus brings up something that no one had thought about: food. Jesus says to Philip, “How much money do you think it would cost to Door Dash this crowd?”

Philip is overwhelmed and in a near panic. “None of us have or carry that kind of cash plus our credit cards are all maxed-out, those of us who have credit. What are we going to do? We’ve never faced such a dilemma!”

Andrew runs up, “Here’s a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish!” Andrew is trying to do what he can in the middle of such an unprecedented

challenge. But standing up on the hillside with Jesus he looks around at the size of the crowd gathering and reality hits him. Philip's fear rubs off on Andrew and the rest of the disciples. And he asks, "But what are they among so many people?"

New Testament scholar Alyce MacKenzie suggests that Andrew's hope is like a synapse trying to leap from a signal-transmitting cell (neuron) to the next cell. The signal is interrupted by pessimism and the hope falls between the cracks. A synapse (from the Greek "to clasp together": *syn* [together] and *haptēin* [to clasp]) is what allows a signal, either chemical or electrical, to be passed from one cell to another. The channel between cells is called a "gap junction."

When Jane and the girls and I were in England on sabbatical several years ago, we got used to the woman's voice that gave instructions for exiting the subway before each new stop. "Mind the gap," she would say. In other words, pay attention to the gap between the edge of the stable platform and the edge of the perhaps still moving train. Look where you are stepping because there is an in-between, and it is easy to stumble, stump your toe, or fall.

The gap is that liminal, in-between space where there is no firm footing. Where there is nothing and we don't know what to do.

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.// With love left behind,/ an uncertain landing waits./ Suspended,/ mind/ anticipates,/ feels the fall—feet first/ on firm sod, or (upended,/ unbalanced, off-guard)/ slipping on a cruel/ gravel. Yes./ It is the in-between/ that is hard.*

The in-between, the gap. The disciples in John 6 are in the gap between initial enthusiasm to panic and fear and dilemma. In the gap their hopes have fallen. They are facing challenges they've never seen before and are in uncharted territory.

Jesus says, "Make the people sit down." With that command, he reminds the disciples of what their job description is. Part of minding the gap is to take this a step at a time. "Philip, Andrew don't 'awfulize.' Don't go from we have five barley loaves and two fish to 'But what are they among so many?!' And "Oh no! It's going to be a catastrophe! People will get mad, they'll storm off, we'll become a laughingstock, no one will ever pay attention to us again, and meanwhile, the Romans, the Powers of Death and Despair win again, just like they always do!"

Like the disciples in this story, we are so accustomed to having our hopes dashed that it is easy to fall into despair. I remind you there is a difference in depression, which is a clinical term having to do with brain chemistry, and despair which is a moral and theological term. Despair is to give up hope. Despair is mistrust. Despair means minding the gap with fear that since we've never been in this in-between space before, then it will always be bad.

Our job, our vocation, our calling is to mind the gap one step at a time. Take a deep breath-prayer and think through this. Pray through this because there is a factor, we tend not to consider in our awfulizing. In the gap between "But what are they among so many people?" and the conclusion, which we don't know yet "Here are the 12 baskets of leftovers" is a factor we might not have considered.

In the gap is Jesus. Christ Jesus, who teaches us further in this very same chapter, is the very "Bread of Life." Jesus, the Living God, the Bread of Life, the Living Word made flesh and living among us, is in the gap.

Of course, minding the gap is perhaps the pervasive issue of our lives these days. From our own personal transitions and moves from one thing to another, job changes, relationship changes, moving to a new place, coming to terms with health changes, moving into retirement, and facing unknowns we've never thought about before. To minding the gaps in church – a pastor who has been a stable shepherd for 35 years is moving toward retirement. We don't know when specifically, and the pastor does not know specifically but we all know it will likely be in the next two or three years, give or take. And the world of young pastors, seminary, job expectations, salaries, and such are changing rapidly and have change dramatically since Covid. And of course, all of that is compounded by societal changes and a changing world and climate and all that goes along with it.

In other words, we have plenty of fear, anxiety, discouragement, and confusion in the gaps we're minding these days.

Nevertheless, the Bible itself was written in the midst of gaps and transitions and the unknown. 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. Biblical literature focuses on the wrenching transitions, not on the stages" (*Hope within History*, p. 8).

When we're minding the gap of the unknown, we can bunker up and hunker down. We can try to regain control or refuse to let go of old certainties. We can try to turn in mid-air and go backwards to the old days where our selective memory tells us that things were stable and good and reliable, sort of like the cartoons of Wile E. Coyote running off a cliff, turning in mid-air, trying to scramble back to firm ground, but plummeting to the bottom of the canyon instead.

Or we can live into the transition as biblical people, mind the gap of the unknown with trust and faith that the Living God is found in these very gaps and cracks and in-between places. Emmanuel, God with us is the God found in slave quarters in Egypt, in jails in Philippi, in hospital rooms, in the wilderness, and in exile. And even though the Powers of Death and Domination try to pin this God down, even nailing him to a cross, the God known to us in Jesus cannot be pinned down but is resurrected and plunges back to be with people minding the gap, living in-between, in mid-air.

With Jesus minding the gap becomes “Here are the 12 baskets of leftovers.” What we feared was going to be a disaster becomes another opportunity for God to work. And grace upon grace everyone is fed with more than plenty left over.

Interestingly, a result is the crowds try to make Jesus the king. He declines and slips away to another unknown place to pray.

Meanwhile, the disciples get in the boat to go back home to Capernaum, and sure enough, there is always something. It gets dark and a storm comes up. Once more the disciples are disoriented, the boat is taking on water, and the wind is whipping them this way and that.

But the God who is with us shows up again. Jesus walks on the water to them and calms the storm and gets into the boat beside them. The disciples, who have been afraid of the storm are now afraid of Jesus. Matthew and Mark’s version of this same story remember the disciples saying, “Who is this that even the wind and the waves obey him?!”

Folks there are always going to be storms. Something else. A new challenge, a set-back, and a gap to mind across the unknown will always be in front of us. The

question is will we trust God to lead us forward or will we give into despair and try to go backwards. Will we try to regain control or be a people of patience who give up control? Will we learn to let go, relinquish, and trust God? The gospel is that the Living Jesus Christ is always with us and when Jesus is with us, who knows what might happen. What looked like a disaster with a hungry crowd became a challenge of picking up and cleaning up so much left-over food that it filled twelve giant trash bags.

Thirty-five years ago, Jane and I were making the move from Louisville to here. We were excited but we also did not know what to expect. We sensed deeply that God was calling us to come here but we also knew there were no guarantees. Ruth Carroll, who was on the Pastor Search Committee, gave us a realistic and honest assessment when she said, “There is enough money in the bank to pay you for six months. But after that we don’t know. You might be on your own and have to find another job. I hear that Kroger is hiring.”

Which is a reminder to me as I face retirement, I wonder if Kroger is still hiring.

No. I’m just joking.

But here is what I know. We can trust God to be with us in the gaps.

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