

Transfiguration: Where Heaven and Earth Meet

Mark 1:29-39

Thanks to the Chancel Guild!

As you know, God has not given me artistic talent, but God has given me a wonderful Chancel Guild at Asbury. The Chancel Guild decorates the altar and narthex each Sunday creatively and beautifully. Sometimes, they decorate the entire sanctuary in terms of liturgical theme. It takes a lot of energy to plan and execute it effectively. Thank you Chancel Guild members for your wonderful work! Whether you realize it or not, the Chancel Guild changes the color of the altar in terms of the liturgical season. The change of colors on the altar reminds us of the flow of the seasons. Do you remember the color of the altar cloths last Sunday? It was green. Do you know the altar cloth color for the Lenten season? It's purple. Changing altar cloths requires time and energy. So when Transfiguration Sunday approaches, I feel sorry for the Chancel Guild because the color of Transfiguration Sunday is white and we use it for only one day between the season of Epiphany and Lent.

This one-day-white color stands out between the green of Epiphany and the purple of Lent. It reminds us that we are moving from the bright season of Epiphany to the somber time of Lent. Transfiguration Sunday does not belong to either the season of Epiphany or Lent. It is in the liminal space between two.

The Liminal Space: Between Two Worlds

[ppt] Please see the screen. Where in this picture is a liminal space? It's a small triangle at the center. The liminal space is a very unique place to be. If you stood at the center of that triangle, how would you feel? Uncomfortable. The liminal space is where we are in between, having left one stage of life, but not yet in the next. Think of the early time of the global pandemic. Our old way of life had to change because of a virus, but a new way of life had not yet arrived. Stay at home orders were in place. Restaurants were closed. We couldn't gather at the church. Out of fear, people hoarded toilet paper and canned goods. We knew that we had to accept a new normal, but didn't know what to do yet in this new normal. That was the liminal space or the liminal time we went through. Did you like it? Not really. We usually enter liminal space when our former way of life is challenged or changed. Of course, we generally avoid liminal space because it is often characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty. We feel insecure, vulnerable and sense a loss of control, so we don't like it. However, the liminal space is also a place where something genuinely new happens. Nowadays, you can worship at home if necessary because we livestream our worship. However, we would not have this wonderful live streaming equipment or use Zoom for the church council meetings, if we didn't go through the time of the pandemic. Why do I keep talking about the liminal space? Because Jesus stands in the liminal space in today's reading.

The Transfiguration marks a pivot point in the gospel narratives. After his Galilean ministry, Jesus knew he should go to Jerusalem and what awaited him there. So he taught his disciples that "the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again." (8:31) How would Jesus have felt? I am sure that he wasn't excited about what was coming. In this liminal time, before he moved to the next stage of his ministry, Jesus wanted to get closer to God.

So, he takes three of his disciples, Peter, James, and John, up a high mountain. For the Israelites, the mountain is a sacred space where prophets like Moses and Elijah heard the voice

of the Lord. The mountaintop is land, but it is also a threshold to heaven and thus, it is the liminal space where heaven and earth meet. So what happened? Suddenly Jesus' appearance changed. He started gleaming gloriously bright. His clothes became radiant, gloriously white—as white “as no one on earth could bleach them,” the Bible says. Mark wanted his readers to know that this was no mere earthly glory that Jesus was manifesting. This was heavenly glory, the light of divine majesty! The veil between heaven and earth became so thin in this liminal place that not only Jesus but also his disciples could hear and see God's affirmation of the true identity of Jesus, “This is my Son, the Beloved.” In this liminal space where heaven and earth met, Jesus heard who he really was, God's beloved, and he was able to begin his journey toward Jerusalem, a place of suffering and death, to fulfill his mission.

Entering into a Liminal Place

I believe that we all have been in liminal spaces more than once. Think of the big transitions in your life like the birth of a child, illness, the loss of loved ones or a major relocation. We have been there. A liminal space, though painful, is a place for spiritual growth. It is a place where we can be free from false illusions of control and security and honestly stand before God and face who we are.

When I was first accepted to Boston University School of Theology for my doctoral study about a decade ago, I was very excited, but, at the same time, I was anxious about moving to a new city that is notorious for insanely high rent. I had already received a full-time job offer from a church where I had served... if I stayed at Atlanta, it seemed to me that my life would be much more stable and comfortable than my life in Boston. I knew that God was leading me in a new direction, but I hesitated to follow God because I feared an uncertain future. I didn't like the feeling of losing control of my life. But would my life be secure and stable if I stayed in Atlanta? Not really. That was a false illusion I had. I couldn't stay at that church forever and eventually, I would have to move. Nothing is secure in this world but we seek for security. As I struggled in that liminal space, God helped me realize through a television show that my sense of stability and security itself was an illusion.

As you know, I like traveling and so I often watch the travel channel. I happened to see a beautiful river in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. It was a simple scene: a picturesque river flowing through the majestic Canadian Rockies. Yet, amidst this beauty, it was not the grandeur of the landscape that captured my attention, but rather, the sight of logs drifting along in the river's current. In that moment, I found myself drawn to the image of those logs, each one seemingly offering stability in the midst of the rushing waters. It was as if I saw myself clinging to one of those logs, finding a false sense of security in its fleeting stability. Yet, deep down, I knew that this illusion of safety was only temporary. The log was still moving with the current so I needed to get out of the river. Since I can't swim well, I didn't want to let go.

Then, I felt like I heard a voice from the riverbank, calling out to me, offering a path to safety. "Let go of your current anchor," it said. "There is another log nearby, one that will bring you closer to solid ground. Trust in its stability, and I will guide you to safety." In that moment, I faced a choice: to continue clinging to my false sense of security or to trust in the unseen promise of God. It was a choice between stagnation and growth, between comfort and courage. And so, with trembling hands and a leap of faith, I released my grip on the old log and reached out for the new. And here I am now with my Asbury family.

I believe that you have had similar experiences. When we are sick or struggling with illness, the first thing we learn is that we don't even have control over our bodies. In those

liminal moments, we become humbled, and our ego is broken and open to God. In this liminal space, where heaven and earth meet, God meets us and we see the divine light of God that reveals who we really are. God's beloved. You are God's beloved. That's enough to get through all the challenges and changes of life. Right?

I am sure that we will enter liminal spaces again and again over time, even though we don't like them. But we can also enter liminal space to encounter God and our true selves for our spiritual growth. Richard Rohr wrote, "Much of the work of authentic spirituality and human development is to get people into liminal space and to keep them there long enough that they can learn something essential and new." The Lenten season is a time for intentionally seeking this liminal space for our spiritual growth. Asbury UMC has prepared meaningful worship and a book study to help us to stay in this liminal space. I pray that we can walk together in this time and place where heaven and earth meet and are transformed by the divine light of God. Amen.