

Sunday 29th December 2024

Written Service, written by Marc Williamson

“Liminal Spaces”

We're in a “Liminal Space.” The time between Christmas and the New Year can seem like a bit of a nothing time, in between what has been and what will be, with a disruption to our rhythms and routines, often to the point of not knowing what day it is. Today we're going to explore what it is to recognise the liminal spaces we live in, and what it means to be disciples in those places. This service might be a little bit different to what you want, and it might feel bitty, but I think it's an important journey for us to go on.

Christmas. I wonder what it held for you? I wonder who you shared it with and what emotions it brought? We perhaps spent more time than usual at church, or with families, queuing in supermarkets or in traffic, or perhaps longer hours alone whilst others seemed to be with their loved ones. But the busyness of Christmas is now largely over.

New Year. I wonder if you're ready for it or if you're looking forward to it? I wonder if you feel like you have accomplished everything in 2024 that you hoped to, or if you've already written your list of hopes and aspirations for 2025? Perhaps you'll be ringing in the New Year with friends and family, out on the town, or perhaps, like me, you might make it to 10.30pm before calling it a night and just greeting the New Year in the light of the new day. But we're not quite there yet.

In this liminal space and time between Christmas and New Year, particularly if you have experienced this time of year with children, perhaps you recognise the signs: new toys are already broken, batteries already dead, the bins are filled to overflowing, you're already planning resolutions, and maybe you're even fed up of family and desperate for “normality” to return!?

The word “liminal” comes from the Latin root, limen, which means “threshold.” The liminal space is the “crossing over” space – a space where you have left something behind, yet you are not yet fully in something else. It's a transition space. That transition will often take as long as it takes. The liminal space is a waiting space. Liminal spaces can bring us face-to-face with our inner fears about who we are, how we show up in the world, our strengths and vulnerabilities, and our successes and disappointments. It can cause us to question the very core of our beliefs, practices, and identities.

Whilst this period between Christmas and New Year is a tangible and measurable liminal space, it's also an example of where we can find ourselves in the everyday, and in our journeys with God. And sometimes that's not a comfortable place! Sometimes we can find ourselves in between points of knowing with God. In those spaces we have choices to make about how we wait. That's what we're going to think about this morning.

As we come to worship, let's start by considering our first hymn:

Be still, for the presence of the Lord - STF 20 (David J. Evans)

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| 1. Be still, for the presence of the Lord
the Holy One, is here;
come bow before him now
with reverence and fear:
in him no sin is found --
we stand on holy ground.
Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
the Holy One, is here. | 2. Be still, for the glory of the Lord
is shining all around;
he burns with holy fire,
with splendour he is crowned:
how awesome is the sight --
our radiant King of light!
Be still, for the glory of the Lord
is shining all around. |
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3. Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place;
 he comes to cleanse and heal, to minister his grace:
 no work too hard for him — in faith receive from him.
 Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.

I like to get other people to do my work for me (since starting at Queen's I've discovered that this process is called "Round Table Preaching" and fully endorsed!), so I got some of my Facebook friends to suggest illustrations of "Liminal Spaces" - times or places where we find ourself "in between" things, places or events. I've put them together with a few of my own to create a journey for us today:

Not Yet Awake:

The start of every day is when we wake up, whether that's by the joys of our alarm clock, our bladders, our children jumping on us, (or countless other rude interruptions,) our loved ones bringing us breakfast in bed, or the slow and natural awakening that I miss so dearly... or maybe, best of all, you wake up to the smell of Bacon! In those moments before we wake fully, we find ourselves in this semi-conscious space, aware that something is happening, but not fully aware of the consequences or details of it. Have you ever felt like that with God?

Maybe it's at the start of something new, where He's tried to waken you up to something, and you're either fighting to stay asleep, or you're just not quite with it yet, but slowly what is going on begins to make sense. Maybe you had that feeling once upon a time when you were first introduced to who God is, and you began to make sense of who God is.

As liminal spaces go, it can be quite an exciting one, especially if we wake up to good news, to a bright day, and to the possibilities of the day.

Let's pray that we have a moment like that today, and that they become more frequent in our lives:

God of yesterday, today and tomorrow, we recognise your unchanging presence. You meet us in this liminal season. We have worshipped you in the manger with the shepherds, and soon we will worship you in the house with the wise men. For now we are in the in-between, in a further advent season of waiting for the new. Make us more aware of your presence that we might worship you today. Continue to comfort us with your hope, peace, joy and love. Speak to us by your Spirit in this time of worship. In the name of Jesus, **AMEN**

We approach this new day and all it holds:

10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord) *(Matt Redman)*

Chorus

Bless the Lord oh my soul, Oh my soul
 Worship His Holy name
 Sing like never before, Oh my soul
 I'll worship Your Holy name

1. The sun comes up, it's a new day dawning
 It's time to sing Your song again
 Whatever may pass
 and whatever lies before me
 Let me be singing when the evening comes
[Chorus]

2. You're rich in love and You're slow to anger
 Your name is great and Your heart is kind
 For all Your goodness I will keep on singing
 Ten thousand reasons for my heart to find
[Chorus]

3. And on that day when my strength is failing
 The end draws near and my time has come
 Still my soul will sing your praise unending
 Ten thousand years and then forevermore
[Chorus]

Halfway Down:

“Whatever may pass, and whatever lies before me.” From the start of the day we begin to see the possibilities of what lies before us, whilst remembering those things that we put of yesterday and promised ourselves we would do today.

(This next liminal space won't work for you if you live in a bungalow) Once we've woken up, and we've greeted the day, once we've done all we need to do upstairs, we begin to go down... Until we reach that stair in the middle, where we might stop like in this poem by AA Milne:

*Halfway down the stairs is a stair where I sit.
There isn't any other stair quite like it.
I'm not at the bottom, I'm not at the top;
So this is the stair where I always stop.
Halfway up the stairs isn't up and isn't down.
It isn't in the nursery, it isn't in the town.
And all sorts of funny thoughts run round my head:
"It isn't really anywhere! It's somewhere else instead!"*

Now we might stop there because we have forgotten what we were doing (a particularly scary liminal space which we won't focus on this morning is where you stand on the threshold of doing something but completely forget what you're doing... like when you go up the stairs but forget what for...) or maybe the middle of the stairs is that place where we prepare for what is to come, whether we know what is coming or not. We are preparing ourselves to face the upcoming challenges, and to take stock of where we are.

But halfway down the stairs isn't a place you can stay, comfortable as it might be for a while. When I used to sit on the stairs my mum used to tell me I was in the way. It was the convenient place to sit to talk on the phone, but it wasn't convenient for everyone who wanted to get past. This liminal space is a place of preparation. The place we pause to perhaps do as the Psalmist suggests: Be still and know that I am God.

We're not called to stay still in that place. We're called to movement. And there's often a doorway somewhere near the bottom of the stairs.

Standing at the door:

I run the risk of either making my mum sound bad or like I gave her plenty of reason to moan, but I often remember my mum using phrases akin to “Are you in or are you out?” when I would open the door and stand halfway into a room, letting the heat out or the cold in, or whichever way it worked. The Threshold of the door is the place where you have a choice to make: Are you in or are you out?

One of my favourite films is the Lord of the Rings. In it (and the book) Bilbo is speaking to Frodo about crossing the threshold, telling him that if we choose to step over the threshold and embrace the adventure, it's a dangerous thing to do. In the Lord of the Rings, JRR Tolkien writes:

“It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, & if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to.”

At the end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, there is a verse that involves a door. Jesus says: “Look! I'm standing here, knocking at the door. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to them and eat with them, and they with me.” At the threshold we are to make a decision. Do we let God in, or do we follow him out? Where might we be swept off to in our adventure of faith and discipleship?

It's important to know that however far we get from what we've always known, we don't go alone.

Let us pray. As we pray we'll be confessing our weaknesses and recognising God's faithfulness. We'll also be asking for grace and courage for the journey ahead:

Jesus you stand at the door and knock. You invite us to open the door to you that we might see you face to face. Sometimes we are guilty of not hearing you knock, or of pretending we're out. Sometimes we create or find reasons to not open the door. Sometimes our sin and baggage gets in the way and we're reluctant to let you in because we're aware of the mess. The irony is that your interest in us is, at least in part, in wanting to help us deal with the mess. We recognise your faithfulness in your persistence in knocking and loving us. In this moment we open the door and let you in. We claim your forgiveness and help in sorting out our lives, making us clean in your eyes.

As forgiven people we stand with you at the threshold of a new moment. You call us not just to live an inward life and faith, but to live an outward expression with you in love and service of others. May you grant us the courage to take your hand and journey out of ourselves, out of our churches, and into your world. May the reassurance of your faithfulness to us and with us enable us to step into the unknown. **AMEN**

Let's continue those thoughts by considering the words of this oft-sung primary school classic: **One more step along the world I go - STF 476** (Sydney Carter)

1. One more step along the world I go,
one more step along the world I go;
from the old things to the new
keep me travelling along with you:

Chorus
and it's from the old I travel to the new;
keep me travelling along with you.

2. Round the corners of the world I turn,
more and more about the world I learn;
all the new things that I see
you'll be looking at along with me:

3. As I travel through the bad and good,
keep me travelling the way I should;
where I see no way to go
you'll be telling me the way, I know:

[Chorus]

[Chorus]

4. Give me courage when the world is rough,
keep me loving though the world is tough;
leap and sing in all I do,
keep me travelling along with you:

5. You are older than the world can be,
you are younger than the life in me;
ever old and ever new,
keep me travelling along with you:

[Chorus]

[Chorus]

We're moving into the middle part of our journey, and at times each of us will find ourselves at each of the following places, not all one after the other, but we will be able to recognise them when we're there.

No-Man's Land:

This is perhaps the scariest of all liminal spaces... being in between two warring parties, trying to walk without being caught in the crossfire.

Maybe we're trying to find a way towards peace between two ideas or arguing factions. Maybe we're trying to make sense of what it is to be a Christian in this world. Maybe we're lost and confused when it comes to politics or the future of the things we thought we knew around us. Maybe we're scared of change, and what might be coming towards us next. Maybe we feel like we're in the middle of a battle and that God has left us in between things to either fight or die. That we are alone and desperate just to survive.

What might being in "No-Man's Land" look like to you?

Pooh Stick Bridge:

More A.A. Milne... Maybe your journey has led you somewhere else at the moment. Maybe you're on a bridge, literally between two places. Look back and you can see where you've come from, and look ahead and you can see the other side.

The beauty of this space the quiet. The reflection. The space to spend time with friends and enjoy the wait. From the bridge you can drop your Pooh Sticks into the water and try things out. You can test what God might want from you before you make a choice as to which way to go. You can see in all directions (until the next turn in the road, or bend in the river), and you can appreciate the beauty of it all. There is no need to rush, no need to fret or worry. It is just a space to be yourself, and maybe even dare to have a little fun.

What might being on "Pooh Stick Bridge" look like to you?

Tide Line:

Or maybe it feels like you have walked as far as you can. Maybe it feels like everything has stopped, and there's nowhere else to go.

Where the sea meets the sand is a curious place because of the unpredictability of the waves, the expanse of the sea before you, the countless grains of sand under your feet, and the hidden depths beneath the water's surface. When we reach the tide we have to wait to ascertain whether it is coming in or going out, and when we work that out, we find ourselves trying to decide whether we carry on to the horizon, or we turn back to find another route. The weather when you get to the sea is another factor isn't it? The cold, the wind, the chill factor, the spray of the waves: So many distractions from what is ahead, dragging your attention from what is important, perhaps welcome distractions from the vastness of it all.

What might arriving at the "Tide Line" look like to you?

In all of these places, it's important to come back to the word of God. It's important to reclaim the promises that He makes to journey with us. If there's nothing else we can cling to, we can cling to **Psalm 23**. Let's read, pray and claim those famous words, often remembered at points of transition or at endings, now:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. **He makes me lie down in green pastures.**

He leads me beside still waters. **He restores my soul.**

He leads me in paths of righteousness **for his name's sake.**

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil; **my cup overflows.**

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Let us pause to pray again. This time we will include our prayers for the world we are called into, for the whole of creation who are also welcomed to trust God, and for those who need to know God's presence in their own liminal spaces:

Prince of Peace and Lord of all faithfulness, shepherd of our hearts:

We come to you in our own liminal spaces:

Where there is need, bless us; Where there is weariness, grant rest;

Where there is fear, fill us with peace; Where we feel lost, guide us.

We bring our friends, families, those we know and love, and those we are yet to know and yet to love to you, in each of their liminal spaces:

Where there is need, bless them; Where there is weariness, grant rest;
Where there is fear, fill them with peace; Where we feel lost, guide them.

We bring our churches, our communities and our leaders before you, particularly in those places where we stand in the gap. Open our ears and hearts to the cries of all people:

Where we see need, help us to meet them;
Where there is weariness, may we offer places of rest;
Where there is fear, may we usher in peace;
Where people feel lost, may we be lights guide them;
Where there is power, may it be used well for the glory of your name and the building of your kingdom.

We bring the wider more-than-human creation that you have blessed us with before you. Open our eyes and hearts to the groans of creation:

As we put our trust in you will you show us the world that you love and the potential it has to be all you want it to be, call us, and others, to trust in you and your promise for creation towards restoring and redeeming all you have made; May our trust in your provisions see us living within our means and in a sustainable way that allows all of creation to breathe; May we shepherd your earth as you shepherd us.

And we pray together with the saints across the world and through time using the words Jesus gave his early disciples:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever.

AMEN

Wherever we find ourself we are not defined by our situation or our surroundings, but how we choose to respond in faithfulness, worship and service as we trust in the faithfulness of God. May we have the strength to sing "Blessed be your name":

Blessed be your name - STF 41 *(Matt Redman and Beth Redman)*

1. Blessed be your name
in the land that is plentiful,
where your streams of abundance flow,
blessed be your name.
And blessed be your name
when I'm found in the desert place,
though I walk through the wilderness,
blessed be your name.

Pre-chorus

Every blessing you pour out
I'll turn back to praise.
And when the darkness closes in, Lord,
still I will say:

Chorus

Blessed be the name of the Lord,
blessed be your name.
Blessed be the name of the Lord,
blessed be your glorious name.

2. Blessed be your name when the sun's shining down on me,
when the world's 'all as it should be,' blessed be your name.
And blessed be your name on the road marked with suffering,
though there's pain in the offering, blessed be your name.

Pre Chorus and Chorus

Bookmark:

I have piles of books at home that have a bookmark in them. Over the years I've started books, then bought new ones and put the old ones down, or forgotten to take one somewhere and started a new one instead. I've stopped some because they were frustrating, others because I got bored, some because they just didn't scratch the itch I had at that point. Some didn't live up to the expectation. Some were ruined by the film. Some there was nothing wrong with, but time just gets in the way of me carrying on from where I left off.

The characters in those books are in a liminal space at the moment! They are stuck as characters at a point in their story that hasn't seen them conquer their foes, or reach their potential, or work out whodunnit. They have stopped growing, and developing, and living because I have opted to close the book.

This service is one I've dug out on this Sunday a few times now, and revisiting it I realise that after my last time through I deliberately went back and finished the book I used as the illustration! So in that vein, there is one that I want to finish... and hopefully this will be my incentive to finish it!

Currently on my shelf is "We Solve Murders" by Richard Osman, in which Amy and her father-in-law Steve are trying to figure out who is using a marketing company to recruit minor social media influencers for money laundering and then killing them off... I've been introduced to several characters and I don't yet know which one it is that's doing it! Last I remember they were on a plane flying to Dubai with an octogenarian author in order to solve the next clue! But that's where the bookmark sits, and has sat for a while.

And I think sometimes I (dare I say "we"?) put a bookmark in our faith journey and story with God. I think we try and pause it, maybe with every intention of picking it back up at a later date, but life gets in the way. We forget part of the important love story of our narrative with God. We think that our story isn't as good as someone else's. We remember the boring bits and are put off having to plough through another chapter... This liminal space is the most disappointing, because we stop growing. Our stories are incomplete, our potential is unfulfilled, our purposes undefined.

Maybe that's struck a chord with someone. Maybe you realise that you need to blow the dust off and reopen the story of your narrative with God. Maybe you need to stop reading stories through other people, and explore your own. That's what God is calling us to.

Which brings us to our last and most exciting liminal space... the place where the invitation is to trust God.

Do You Trust Me?

Trailers for films are an invitation to the mystery, and a calling to adventure. They speak of potential and invite us into the rest of the journey. When I was 6, Disney was at it's best, and I remember one such trailer luring me in. There was an animated film that they released which was full of wonder and magic and a host of unforgettable songs. The story was one of rags to riches, but in a rather unorthodox manner. Not a new story, but one that had been told for generations. And Robin Williams made anything possible. In 2019 it was released again, this time in live action and with Will Smith as the Genie.

In the 1992 version (worked out my age yet?!) Aladdin uses a line with Jasmine that gives away his identity. It's at that point that she realises the prince before her was the street rat from earlier on in the film. Perhaps you remember the scene and the line?

Aladdin jumps off Jasmine's balcony, much to her surprise. All of a sudden he reappears on his magic carpet. They have a conversation and he invites her to join him in a flight round the world. He holds out his hand and says "Do you trust me?" As they fly they sing together: "I can show you the world".

It almost brings us back full circle to Bilbo and Frodo and that dangerous business of stepping out your front door. I believe God reaches out to us and says “Do you trust me?” and we have a choice as to whether or not to step forwards, to cross the threshold into the something new before us, into a world of love, and promises, into companionship with him in it all. I believe there is an invitation from God to adventure and to being able to see the fulness of the world. I believe that takes us from the liminal spaces we find ourselves into the fulness of life. I believe that won’t always be light and fun, but I believe it is worth getting out of bed for, worth stepping into whatever lies before us.

May we trust the one who reaches out to us, and step out in faith with a willingness to worship and to follow the God who is revealed in Jesus:

Light of the world - STF 175 (*Tim Hughes*)

1. Light of the world,
you stepped down into darkness,
opened my eyes, let me see
beauty that made this heart adore you,
hope of a life spent with you.

Chorus

So here I am to worship,
here I am to bow down,
here I am to say that you're my God,
and you're altogether lovely,
altogether worthy,
altogether wonderful to me.

2. King of all days oh so highly exalted,
glorious in heaven above.
Humbly you came to the earth you created,
all for love's sake became poor. **[Chorus]**

Bridge

And I'll never know how much it cost
to see my sin upon that cross.

[Chorus]

Final Thought

Whichever space we find ourselves in, and whatever our feelings about the presence of God with us, however we traverse our “Liminal Space”, I want to point you towards one last transforming liminal space, where one thing enters, and another emerges more beautiful than the first: A Chrysalis.

The Caterpillar enters, whether knowingly or unknowingly that change and hardship are immanent, and emerges after a period as a butterfly, given beauty and wings, freedom from the leaf, and the capacity for more. The end of the world for a Caterpillar is a butterfly.

That is the transforming nature of God in our lives too. when we journey through the liminal spaces we’ve thought about today God journeys with us bringing freedom, beauty and life. To step into the rest of today and what is to come tomorrow, we call upon God’s Spirit to fill us:

Spirit of the living God - STF 395 (*Daniel Iverson*)

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Blessing

May we be guided through the liminal into the adventure or faith; When we are in the uncomfortable liminal spaces, may we know the strength and comfort of the God who is there with us; When the time comes, may we step into what is to come full of life, hope and trust; And may we be transformed by God and God’s Spirit as we journey.