

Liminal Space

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 8 November, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Karyn Burchell-Thomas,
Warren Talbot and Kent Rayson

Pentecost 23A

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Matthew 25:1-13

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Karyn

The word liminal comes from the Latin word 'limen', meaning threshold – that point when you stand in the doorway for example, where you are no longer in the previous room but have not yet entered the next room. It involves leaving the previous space with all it holds and entering the next with all it has to offer.

So, liminal spaces involve endings and beginnings and, while you stand in that in-between space, in the doorway itself, it is a time of preparation, of movement, of making ready, of letting go to some extent as you leave one room and prepare to take on something else as you enter another.

Of course a liminal space is not so much about doorways, although it holds all the same characteristics and calls on the same commitment. Rather liminal space is about the time between 'what was' and 'what is to be.' It is a place of transition, a time or season of waiting and not knowing. Liminal space is where transformation takes place, if we learn to wait and let it form us.

Now, every day we face liminal space - from cosily sleeping-in on a frosty morning to pushing ourselves into the world to face the day. From leaving work to coming home and taking on a different role and set of relationships. Retirement does it. Changing jobs does it. Leaving school does it. Moving house does it. Changed health situations does it. Indeed any change or alteration of perspective or practice or movement does it.

Mostly we attend to the liminal spaces in our day with little conscious thought. With some less familiar transitions however we wrestle, because they require us to engage with change even when we are not prepared for it and don't want to.

So, some liminal space experiences will bring with them angst, maybe confusion, scepticism, concern, fear, trauma; they might leave us numb or perhaps wanting to fight the change because it just demands too much of us. It's helpful to know any of these reactions are to be expected. Of course we could choose to ignore life's challenges completely, which I suggest is not particularly healthy, for that requires a whole different defensive mechanism that separates us from reality.

In the Joshua reading there have been a number of changes taking place in the lives of the people - and now they are challenged to claim the new space and situation in which they find themselves. Can they let go? Can they embrace the new? Will they lose who they are in the process or indeed, find their true selves? Are they ready to make the commitment?

What will it involve? What do they need to do to prepare themselves? No doubt questions we ask ourselves from time to time.

The Covid 19 Pandemic thrust us into a liminal space that is still here with us. It introduced a whole new concept of being in community while isolated, of working *in* isolation, of living *in* isolation. It is a liminal space that occupies a lot of time and affects every aspect of our lives. Over time it introduces us to new stages of liminality as conditions vary along the way and we need to attend to new challenges without having reached our hoped-for destination.

It's like entering a tunnel. We have left one side of the hill but have not emerged on the other side yet. And in-between, the tunnel takes us to new experiences of letting go, of making do, of checking our bearings, of losing connection with the past but not able to see what lies ahead; and looking.

Sometimes we will look back, hopeful of seeing something familiar - but alas we are well into the tunnel by now and the entrance is no longer visible. So we look ahead, searching, yearning to see something familiar, hopeful that what we find there will be comforting as we move toward the other side.

By its very nature, liminal space, however shared with others, is also a personal, intimate space, perhaps even a lonely space, as we search inwardly, come to terms with who we are on this journey, what life is about for us, what motivates us, what encourages us, what demoralises us.

We miss the familiar things that have helped us in the past, no longer quite accessible. We try to hold onto the things that we know we can link with, the things that hold us together and give us meaning and, in the process, realise we have more qualities and strengths than we might have imagined. Anyone who has experienced loss of any kind will immediately know what this is like.

Today we will hear some short but profound reflections from two of our people from the Pitt Street Uniting Church community. They were asked to reflect on their experience of living in liminal space brought on by the Covid19 Pandemic. The first reflection is from Warren.

Warren

Living with a pandemic involves lingering.
An in-between time. A time of transition.
A moment of waiting.

We wake up each day.
Once more, our dreaming self has departed.
We are not yet fully awake as we rub our eyes.
A moment of transition.

COVID 19 is confronting.
A single person, I live alone.
She used to have coffee on my balcony.
A moment of loss.

Physical spaces for communities to gather are closed.
A public health essential.
But I am barely numb. Adrift.
A moment of separation.

Connection is never easy.
Performing a phone call, just too hard.
A moment of giving in.

COVID didn't create aloneness.
COVID prefers company!
And where is that vaccine for loneliness?
A moment of questions.

Hope tells me a story.
Someone dies alone. Forsaken by their god.
But someone has birthed community.
A moment of renewal.

Words are written. Stories told. People care.
I hear the summons, however faint.
I see her face.
A moment ... to breathe again.

Karyn

Lingering is never a word we like to use much. It carries with it images of dreariness, purposelessness, unending waiting, fading dreams. Long periods of nothingness and endings that never seem to come. It carries a sense of unproductive time - of loss or sadness. It is a lonely space, a time of liminality. In his generous, courageous reflection Warren has shared with us a little of what it is like living in this liminal space from the inside.

And while the lingering time has not been enjoyable, has not been idle, he has kept himself occupied with purposeful study and writing that draws on his broad and rich experience of life and on his faith. He has committed his fine intelligence and extensive education to crafting a body of work that is meant to encourage and inform the future, a gift to people who live in the new space ahead; a new life perhaps not here yet but in the making.

There is light at the end of the tunnel and even if there are times we can't actually see it, we know, we know it is there and faithfully keep following the path with purpose to reach it.

It is true, Covid did not create aloneness and from my own experience, one does not need to be alone in order to feel alone. One can be alone in a crowded room - indeed some of my most achingly alone times have been in crowded rooms. It took some deep soul searching and being open to discovery that helped me break out. It was a long, liminal tunnel that one!

For the bridesmaids waiting with their lamps burning and stores of oil ready for the next stage, the waiting was purposeful and filled with anticipation, even excitement. For them it was a time of active waiting. Yes they were in liminal space, but they were already imagining the future and were preparing for it, committing themselves to the new time ahead.

For those who had not made preparations to collect extra oil, it was more of an unproductive, lingering time.

These ones were not quite prepared, not quite committed to involve themselves. Rather they were waiting for something to happen that would take them there, sweep them off their feet and carry them into the new space all prepared and ready without much effort on their own behalf. We shouldn't be too hard on them, many of our fairy stories tell such tales - all the more reason to re-write them I say!

Throughout the Pandemic and the changed practices and isolation it has brought, another member of Pitt Street, Kent, has continued working. His working conditions have needed to change.

Kent works in a situation that exposes him to the public each day. And each day he needs to take the necessary precautions. And, like all of us, many other changes have been needed as each of us live in a more compact world for a while, limited in what we can do. Here is Kent's reflection.

Kent

Hello everybody. I got this email just the other day asking would I would I like to reflect on living and working in liminal space, waiting, and hope.

And I thought straight away: *what is luminal?* So, guess what? It's not in here! To look it up online - apparently liminal space is that space of crossing over. The transitional space.

Crossing over. Straight away my thoughts went to the ferryman Charon, taking people across the river, because sometimes I relate to that image. In a way a train guard is perhaps a latter day ferryman, taking people from here to there. Of course I take them back as well at the end of the day, hopefully.

Anyway, living in a time of waiting. What are we waiting for? Are we waiting for regathering? Are we waiting for advent or Christmas?

Are we waiting for a vaccine? Are we waiting for normal life to resume? Are we waiting for justice and peace to reign on earth? Maybe this day is all we have!

I think of Matthew. In Matthew, I'm asked to think about the birds and the lilies and not be worrying about tomorrow. That today has enough troubles of its own. Well that's for sure!

Those of you who know me will not be at all surprised to learn that I end up with Ecclesiastes. I always go back to Ecclesiastes, you know. And what is that it is saying there?

It says we might as well enjoy today because it's the only pleasure we'll have. You know, that eat and be merry thing. None of us knows what tomorrow will bring.

Of course if we wait around for the perfect conditions, we'll never get anything done, you know. And we're all going to the same place anyway! So what are you waiting for today, because I don't have much.

That's again Ecclesiastes. You know, spent years and years searching for all these dancers - came up with nothing! So yeah there you have it.

Thank you

Karyn

There you have it! We have today and pretty much like every day, it is a liminal space. We are no longer in yesterday and we cannot yet reach tomorrow, but we do have today! And this is true of every day, Covid Pandemic, isolation, or not.

For some the liminal space of the Pandemic has brought great hardship as jobs have been lost, incomes diminished, lives uprooted. This is when community, however formed and expressed, is most needed. It helps us find context and gives us purpose and meaning - in the giving and the receiving of hospitality in whatever form that may be expressed. It links us with life beyond our current predicament.

An assurance that what we, personally, are experiencing right now is not all there is. We can look ahead and find some light at the end of the tunnel, even if right now we feel we are right in the middle of it, unsure of our footing. All is not lost.

For some we know it has been a time of new beginnings. Of planning ahead and getting ready for a tomorrow, to which they are already committed. My nephew, my Godson, proposed to his girlfriend just a few months ago. They plan to marry in April. In the middle of a world-wide Pandemic they are making plans and are very active indeed in getting ready for their new life together. They are not going to wait till conditions are pristine.

Yet, they don't ignore the presence of Covid either. They wear masks when necessary and do all they can to keep well and their family well - so that their dream, their future can be the best it can be. Every day is full. Every day is filled with purpose and promise. And all their effort is not lost. Indeed it is contagious. Their energy and enthusiasm grows in those around them as they involve as many as they possibly can in their plans and their dream for the future in which we all play a part.

God is with us all every day. God's love never diminishes. God's creative, inspiring presence is never withheld from us. Sometimes it is hard to see in the darkness of the tunnel. Sometimes we do need to wait, but wait in such a way that we do not lose today - for this at any time is all we have. We are neither living in yesterday nor can we live in tomorrow.

We have today. And today we can commit ourselves to life, life in all its expressions, in the middle of a Pandemic, even when we know our familiar practices of yesterday may well be gone, even when today is not all we might want right now.

Even then, we have lives to live, dreams to dream and futures to build and there is never any time like the present to commit to the dream and of course share it in as many ways we can.

God bless you.