



A Liminal Space

by The Reverend Philip Cochrane
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"No one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him."
Isaiah 64:4

This week, I want to introduce a 'fancy' word – *liminal*. 'Liminal' comes from the Latin word 'limen' meaning 'threshold'. This is a place of not knowing, a place of waiting. So, it feels very appropriate in this season of Advent and speaks to our current COVID fatigued context.

Richard Rohr describes this place most vividly: *"Liminal spaces, therefore, are "a unique spiritual position where human beings hate to be but where the biblical God is always leading them. It is when you have left the "tried and true" but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are finally out of the way. It is when you are in between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. It is no fun."*

Words of cheer, then! However, it is also the place where significant transformation happens. Of course, that deep transformation is not easy and rarely quick – think of the long years Israel was in Egypt, in the wilderness...or in exile. Or the years Joseph; David, Anna and Simeon had to wait.

Advent summons us to an alert form of waiting – the individuals mentioned above did not 'do nothing'. Whatever they did, their characters were formed as a result. It seems to me that each of us is called to practice the various spiritual disciplines as individuals and as a community of faith. However, I want to caution that we are not selective in this – it is easy for these to become inward looking which would be a massive imbalance. Dallas Willard groups spiritual disciplines into categories of abstinence and engagement - times of silence and solitude, for example, lead into forms of engagement, as seen in the life of Jesus.

The attitude in which we enter into the disciplines is also important. In our present individualistic society, a great challenge we face to worry about ourselves, seeking to shape our life in a way that addresses only our concerns and fears about our life. Even a trivial example is that people debate the merits of face masks because 'it won't protect me from getting the virus' – true, but it might just protect others and vice versa! The communal dimension constantly needs to be reinforced, not least in the church. Belonging to any community is not just about what we get out of it (*an individualistic mindset*) but the fact that the community is enriched by your active participation in it. We are all diminished when we are not learning, growing and serving together.

So, in this liminal time of Advent, in the context of COVID, we need to embrace this moment and not despair of it. Of course, it may feel like a tussle between our desire to be comfortable and at ease and so keeping ourselves open to God's transforming presence. Every fibre of our being may want to find comfort and familiarity but, despite this, there is a holy discontent, yearning to be transformed into all

that God wants us to become. Once again, practicing spiritual disciplines helps us to ‘abide’ in God and bear fruit that will last.

Questions can be formed for us individually and as a community. It is not just ourselves, St Paul’s and the wider church that has been forever affected by this pandemic, it is also our context of Vancouver. St Paul’s was already grappling with a changing demographic in downtown Vancouver, now we are all in this liminal time, not sure what the future will look like.

Sarah Beaumont¹ references some of the sorts of questions that are interesting to reflect on beginning with grieving over an ending. Some things must come to an end before we can explore a new beginning. We resist this because of the grief in the ending and we are anxious to move onto action, which feels more productive.

- **What were we on the verge of discovering or accomplishing before the onset of the pandemic? What needs to move forward in different ways now?**
- **What was possible before that may not be possible for some time—if ever?**
- **What seemed important before that feels superfluous now?**

“In a liminal season, many of our old assumptions no longer hold true. If we do not acknowledge the truth of this, we will make decisions that are inappropriate for the next season. We need good questions to unfreeze some of our old assumptions and expand our consciousness.

- **What was undervalued before that may hold greater value now?**
- **What mattered about geography before that no longer matters?**
- **What margin or lack of margin was built into our old model of doing church? What new abundance are we experiencing now? Where are we experiencing scarcity now that was not evident before?**

In liminal organizations, a new status quo emerges naturally over time as groups interact under conditions of upheaval, disturbance, or dissonance. Eventually, new structures arise in response to a changed environment. Organizations gravitate toward order over chaos.

If we remain protective of the old status quo during the emergence process, our new order will look remarkably like the old normal—not much adaptation will occur.

When we ask better questions, we invite innovation into the new order. We can be led by the future itself into something fresh and exciting. We begin noticing what wants to emerge through us.

- **What is our greatest asset now?**
- **What relationships will we need to build on or strengthen in the months ahead?**
- **What unique role might our congregation play in local, national, and even global recovery?**
- **What long term changes in the bigger picture would we like to be part of bringing to fruition?”**

In conclusion, liminality is our experience. These questions invite us to pay close attention to our past and present to embrace the growth of this season (which may be unseen for a while and only visible

¹ <https://susanbeaumont.com/2020/06/19/10-questions-to-ask-now/>

looking back). I suspect we are on the threshold of something very profound, so in this moment, let us ground ourselves in God and ask the deep questions demanded of us in this time.

*Don't surrender your loneliness
So quickly.
Let it cut more deep.*

*Let it ferment and season you
As few humans
Or even divine ingredients can.*

*Something missing in my heart tonight
Has made my eyes so soft,
My voice
So tender,*

*My need of God
Absolutely
Clear.
– Hafiz –*