

## “Thresholds”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Luke 2:21-38

January 1, 2017

First Sunday of Christmas

I went to visit Marilyn Merkle — one of our homebound members — on Friday afternoon, and we were peacefully sitting and talking about her family, when suddenly an alarm went off throughout the facility. A voice in her kitchen began speaking loudly “Fire alarm activated! Remain where you are until further notice!”

“That’s quite the system!” I commented. “Yes,” Marilyn said, “except they usually forget to come back on to tell us that all is clear. So we just sit and wait, not sure of whether the building’s burning down or everything’s okay.” It was in that moment that I informed Marilyn that she was going to be a part of today’s sermon — that the unsure space she found herself in during these fire alarms fit really well with the text!

Anthropologists talk about “liminal spaces” and “liminal times” — those blurry areas and moments that we find ourselves in when we’re between two well-defined spaces or times. A liminal space is where you are when you’ve finished being in one place, but haven’t reached the next one yet. You’ve got your learner’s permit, but you’re not allowed to drive alone. You’re in an airport, but it’s a layover. You’re not where you’ve been, but you’re not home yet. You’ve graduated, but you haven’t found a job. It’s Christmas, but we’re leaning toward Epiphany. You’re dying, but you’re not yet dead.

It was late fall in Chicago and I was the on-call chaplain on a Sunday afternoon. Mr. Posnanski was very near death. He’d been declining for weeks on the cardiac unit and had slipped into a deep sleep four days earlier. His family was gathered, and they wanted a Catholic priest to come and administer the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick - known colloquially as the Last Rites. Now, finding a priest in Chicago on a Sunday afternoon is harder than finding an Illinois governor outside of federal prison. I explained to the family that unless they had their own priest, we were out of luck. But I’d be happy to come pray with them, and even to anoint the man and say the *rite* words. But I made it clear that Pope Benedict would not approve.

They decided to not tell the pope. I walked into the room, and it was about as liminal a space as you could find. Mr. Posnanski was there, but he wasn’t. The line between life and death was fuzzy. This space and time seemed set apart. It felt holy, even with the Bears game on the TV with the volume turned down. His kids and grandkids and a gaggle of others gathered near the bed. I prayed and made the sign of the cross on his head with oil. His family wept. Just as I finished, we heard Mr. Posnanski take a deep breath, and then he exclaimed, “This guy’s a Protestant!”

His family burst into laughter, and then he declared that he wanted to watch his beloved Bears. He made it to the end of the game — the Bears won! — and then fell asleep, and he died about an hour later.

Thank God for humor, because liminal spaces can be terrifying. “Liminal” comes from the Latin word for “threshold” — you’re not quite in one room, but you’re not in the next one either.

You’ve let go of something, and you don’t yet have something else to hold onto. You’re the Israelites, wandering in the desert, dreaming of a promised land, but also wondering as they’re wandering if they should just go back to Egypt. You’re wrapped up in grieving the end of one thing, but you’re also having to expend energy preparing for what’s coming your way. I wonder if anyone else feels that the turn from 2016 to 2017 is like that. There’s been so much awfulness and so much death and so much terror this past year. And some wonderful things as well, of course. But that year has gone, and we don’t know if we should be relieved or petrified. Is it a false alarm — is all clear? Or is the place burning down? What’s next?

I imagine the holy family knew something about this feeling. Like any male Jewish baby, Jesus was in a bit of a liminal time during the eight days between birth and the circumcision and naming. Mary had spent the better part of the last year having her space and time made blurry by angels, and I’m guessing Joseph didn’t expect there to be a bunch of shepherds in the labor and delivery room. Each of them walking threshold steps, the family goes up to the temple for purification. That whole childbirth thing caused impurity according to Levitical law — forty days if you had a boy, eighty for a girl. We hear “impurity” or “uncleanliness” and it’s easy to start thinking about sin and to wag our fingers at the Levitical codes for punishing people unnecessarily. But “impure” did not necessarily mean “sinful.” Sinfulness did lead to impurity, but not all impurity was because of sin.

Rather, scholars think that this kind of impurity was associated with having come into contact with the fuzzy line between life and death. Preparing a body for burial — an important and necessary and loving task — left a Jew in need of purification. Bringing new life into the world did the same. Especially at that time, new life mingled with death — for the infant or the mother. The place where a child was born was a liminal space. So Mary and Joseph bring a sacrifice. And you’re supposed to notice that they’re bringing a couple of birds: the sacrifice that you could bring if you were too poor to be able to buy a sheep. There is liminality in poverty, of course — living a week-to-week or day-to-day existence.

All of this reminds us that Jesus was Jewish. In the Gospel of Luke, as we’ll see, Christ has come for all. But Jesus is undoubtedly Jewish, part of a religion and culture living between its glory days of the monarchy and a future freedom hoped and longed for. The Jewish people had been in threshold space for centuries. Particularly in Luke, the world that Jesus enters is one that is ready and aching for his arrival.

Enter Simeon, a seriously devout dude who’d been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not face death until he had seen the Christ. He takes the child and says what I imagine must have been an incredibly satisfying prayer: “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

Simeon is freed to cross the threshold now, for he has witnessed salvation. But just when it seems the liminal tension might be released just a bit, Simeon has more to say: “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” And we’re back in a space of uneasiness again.

This salvation will not come without conflict. And it will not come without suffering. Of course, we the readers know what lies ahead. Jesus will not come to bring a swift end to discomfort. He will not draw clear lines. He will relish the in-between places: touching those near death, embracing those on the edge of society, and calling for everything to be turned upside-down. He won't lead an army bounding into the next era. He will hold the sacred space between life and death and he will transform it so that those who follow him will no longer speak about life and death, but instead of the sacred space between death and life.

Let's not forget Anna, the prophet. We have all known Annas. Heck, some of us *are* Annas! Annas practically live at the church — or the school, or the senior center, or the library. She is faithful and wise and she finds the family and praises God and tells anyone who's looking for redemption about the child she met at the temple.

Much later in the Gospel of Luke, we'll encounter a couple of disciples walking on the road to Emmaus. It is the ultimate liminal time. Their Lord has been crucified. Two nights and a day have passed. What they thought was true about him — what Anna proclaimed loudly — all that seems to have vanished. They don't know what is next. And then there is this *rumor*, started by the women. And they walk and talk and they meet a stranger and tell him all about it. And, later that night, he took bread, and gave thanks, and broke it, and gave it to them, and their eyes were opened. All of a sudden, they could see what Anna saw. They recognized Jesus. And they went and told about how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

We've completed, more or less, another trip around the sun. Perhaps it's arbitrary to celebrate that. But when we are on a threshold between *what-the-heck-was -that* and *I'm-afraid-to-peek- 'round-the-corner*, sometimes it's helpful to have some way to anchor ourselves. We barely have time to make sense — if there's any to be made — of 2016. And we simply can't know what this year has in store for us. (Except, obviously, for some amazing football to get us ready for the start of the baseball season.)

We don't know what is ahead. But even in this space, we do know some things. We do know that the best in people doesn't usually make it into the news. We know that there are more loving people in the world than villains. We know that our hands are small, but they aren't tied when it comes to pushing kindness and hope and compassion into the world. We know that the world is more open and more educated and more able to provide help to those in need than at any point in human history. We know that we will each receive a blessing today - from a beloved one or from a stranger, in church or in a book or in an email. We know that if we have eyes to see these and the wisdom to keep track of them, we might feel better at the end of this year than we do at its beginning. We know that we have a community of faith that loves us. And we know that this blurry space and time is held by our God, who breathes holiness for us to discover, and who seeks redemption for a broken world, and who offers light and salvation. Amen.