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The uncertainty of in-between time


by Becca Ehrlich

When I was an intern at a congregation, I took part in an annual tradition called Confirmation Camp. For one week in the summer, the local Lutheran conference would take over half of a Christian camp in the Adirondack Mountains. The students prepared for confirmation by learning, growing spiritually, and spending time outdoors. I went as a teacher and chaperone, one of the adults in a sea of young teenagers.

During that week, we went hiking up Panther Mountain. Though the hike was short (less than a mile), it was steep. New to the whole hiking thing, I was unprepared for an intense mountain hike. While most teenagers around me hopped up the hill with no problem, I was winded and needed to stop frequently.

At first, the senior pastor from the congregation where I was an intern stayed with me, even as I rested. But then he got impatient with my frequent stops and went on ahead. The deacon from our congregation skipped the hike and was instead eating a turkey sandwich at a local restaurant. I was left on my own to struggle through the hike.

When I stopped for a rest during that hike, those moments were some of the hardest in my life. Almost always alone, gasping for breath, I watched as everyone else hiked up ahead of me. I looked back and saw where I had been, but the path ahead felt very long, and the mountain peak felt light-years away.



Eventually, slowly, I made it to the top of that mountain. But I never forgot those in-between times when I was struggling.

These in-between times are a real part of our lives. Scholars have named this in-between time liminal space: a place of transition, waiting, and uncertainty.

Occupying liminal space can be unpleasant, marked by confusion and struggle. We recognize that we aren't where we were before, but we also aren't where we are going. It's the tension of being in the in-between, an ambiguous and unclear existence.

If this sounds familiar, that's because we are living in a liminal space right now. The whole world is experiencing the in-between time as we live through the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are living in the liminal space between what life was like before the pandemic and what life will be like afterward. We have no idea what the future will look like once this pandemic is over, both in our own lives and in our local and global communities. It is an uncomfortable and painful place to be.

We know from stories in the Bible that living in liminal space is nothing new. It's been happening to humans for millennia. The story of Joseph in Genesis (Genesis 37-50) shows us some intense liminal space. Joseph, sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, serves at an officer's house for a short while before he is thrown in prison on false charges.

Genesis doesn't tell us how long Joseph was in prison. But based on the story's timeline, many scholars deduce that Joseph was in prison for about 10 years. Talk about liminal space—Joseph spent almost a decade in prison for something he didn't do. And he was never sure he would get out.

The biblical account of Joseph's story does not gloss over his time in prison. Throughout two chapters (Genesis 40-41), we hear about Joseph's imprisonment. During this time, he offers accurate God-given dream interpretations to some of his fellow inmates and to Pharaoh himself. Though Joseph was in liminal space, he was not standing still.

To an extent, our whole existence as Jesus' followers is liminal space. We can see glimpses of God's kingdom on earth, but Jesus has not returned to earth yet. We live in a world where God's kingdom is here but not yet realized. We live every day in the tension of "already, but not yet."

But even though we are living in liminal space, we are not standing still. Like Joseph, we can listen for God's guidance and serve God and others despite the future's uncertainty. This in-between time is not a time for inaction. God invites us to continue doing God's work in a world that desperately needs God's unconditional love and an awareness of God's presence.

God calls us to love God and love others through the struggles of liminal space. This is our shared humanity, our calling. We are each other's guiding light during the chaos of liminal space.

Discussion questions:

1. What emotions come to mind when you think of liminal space?
2. Describe a time when you were experiencing liminal space. What was it like? How could God have been guiding you during that time?
3. How is God calling you to serve during this liminal space of a global pandemic?

Closing prayer:

Loving God, we know that you are with us even when we live in uncertain times. We do not know what our future will look like; we are fearful and struggling. Guide us as we live in the in-between so that we can share your unconditional love with the world. In Jesus' name, we pray, amen.

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Learning from Genesis: Joseph and liminal space

by Becca Ehrlich

In my article in this month's issue, we looked at what it means to live in liminal space, that in-between, transitional time when waiting and uncertainty are the norm. We also looked at Joseph's story in Genesis and how he experienced liminal space.

We can learn a lot from Joseph's story and his in-between time. Below are some of the significant takeaways we can apply to our own lives as we deal with our own liminal space.

Liminal space happens. When we live in the in-between, it can feel as if we are alone and singled-out. But having transitional times in our lives is normal—it happens to us all.

Joseph was thrown in prison after being falsely accused, and that should not have happened. But it occurs more often in our judicial system than we would like to admit.

That Joseph experienced liminal space during his biblical lifetime illustrates transitional periods happen. We are not singled-out when we experience liminal space. We all will experience it at some point.

Liminal space is rarely enjoyable. Living in the in-between means that we can see where we have been, but the road ahead isn't clear. We don't know what's coming next, and that can make us anxious and afraid.

No doubt Joseph felt similar emotions while living many years (some scholars say 10) in prison. He had no idea if or when he would get out. He was anxious and scared, worried for his future.

When living in the in-between, it's okay to accept that we are not okay. In-between is not an easy place to be. So, we need to find ways to care for ourselves and each other. We must also recognize that some chapters in our lives are more difficult than others.

Liminal space can provide opportunities

Though transitional times in our lives can be tough, good things can still happen in that liminal space. We shouldn't sit down and wait for it to go away. Opportunities can present themselves during this time.

While in prison, Joseph uses the gifts God has given him to take care of his fellow inmates and interpret his cellmates' dreams. Those interpretations accurately describe their futures. When Joseph's former cellmate (the cupbearer of Pharaoh) hears that Pharaoh needs a dream interpreter, he suggests Joseph. He tells Pharaoh that Joseph gave him an accurate dream interpretation.

Pharaoh orders Joseph out of the dungeon to interpret his dream, which he does. Joseph tells Pharaoh to plan for a famine. Grateful for Joseph's help, Pharaoh frees Joseph and hires him as his second-in-command. Thanks to Joseph's foresight and planning, Egypt survives the famine. Joseph's gift of dream interpretation gets him out of prison and helps save lives.

Like God called Joseph, God calls us all to use our spiritual gifts even in liminal space. Sometimes using our gifts may help shorten our time in liminal space. Or it might make our in-between time more bearable for us and helpful to others.

Because living in liminal space can be difficult, it can often feel like God has abandoned us. But that is not the case. God is with us when we are in liminal space.

When Joseph's master threw him in prison, we read that God was with him:

"And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison. But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. The chief jailer committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper." (Genesis 39:21-23)

If God was with Joseph, God will be with us and show us steadfast love in our in-between times. Like with Joseph, God will continue to guide us and help us use the gifts God has given us to serve others.

Many of us are in liminal space during this pandemic. We do not know when it will end or what the future will be.

What we do know is that God is with us in the midst of this uncertainty and is inviting us to use our spiritual gifts to serve others.



Discussion questions:

1. How can you approach liminal space in the future, knowing that the in-between times happen to us all at some time?
2. What opportunities are present during your current liminal space?
3. What difference does it make knowing that God is with us in the in-between?

Closing prayer:

Ever-present God, help us remember that liminal space happens, is tough, and provides opportunities. Continue to be with us through our liminal space and guide us through the in-between. Show us what gifts you've given us to serve others during transitional times. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

Becca Ehrlich is an ELCA pastor serving as interim director for Evangelical Mission/assistant to the bishop in Allegheny and Upstate N.Y. Synods, ELCA. She blogs about minimalism from a Christian perspective at www.christianminimalism.com. Her book, Christian Minimalism: Simple Steps for Abundant Living, comes out May 17.



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