

Advent II December 6, 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11, 2 Peter 3:8-15a, Mark 1:1-8, Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

On this 2nd Sunday of Advent, we are standing in a Liminal space like never before. Personally, I've never liked or enjoyed liminal spaces or liminal times any more than I've ever enjoyed people reminding me that I need to be more patient or that "Patience is a Virtue."

"Liminal" comes from the word for threshold, an in-between space or time. I don't like being in-between. I suspect I was probably born late because I was comfortable in my mother's womb. It was warm, and safe, floating around. It was all I had ever known.

Now, I'm perfectly happy in this outside world as a grown man, again warm, loved, well fed, and relatively safe. But the transition from life in the womb to life in this world was liminal and I'm told I didn't like the transition of liminal childbirth and that I cried mightily, maybe better described as coming through the liminal transition kicking and screaming. I suspect my mother did too!

This morning on our Patronal Feast of S. Ambrose, and the 2nd Sunday of Advent, that liminal season of Advent between last year's ordinary time and Christ's birth at Christmas, we are surrounded by four men- Sorry ladies!

In one corner we have the prophet Isaiah living in a massive liminal time when the Israelites had been beaten by the Babylonians and were all kicked out of occupied Jerusalem. He's promising us that there is hope, that the insufferable time in between home and exile won't last forever.

While Isaiah will speak words of "comfort, comfort ye my people" on God's behalf, he'll also remind us that we have a lot of hard work to do during this liminal time, that there are a lot of things obstructing our view of God. There are high mountains that we need to lower so we can see the glory of God.

There is a highway to God that needs to be built, bringing the high and mighty down, raising up the lowly, making the rough places level and equal.

"Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people being equal shall see it together." The reading from Isaiah is a poem and it speaks in triplets – God as our King, judge and shepherd. Another triplet is deserts, valleys, and mountains. Yet another triplet speaks to the restlessness we feel in our liminal in-betweenness: comfort, speak, and cry.

It's a beautiful poem of great hope. Unfortunately, we only really need hope when things are bad, we only crave hope when we are in pain. How blessed we are standing on the threshold, that in the next room we will eventually cross into, kicking and screaming most likely, we will be received by God the Good Shepherd who will feed us and "gather us in his arms & carry us in his bosom like a mother holding her newborn.

In the second liminal corner this morning, we have St. Peter addressing feelings we all have when we are in-between-in transition. Namely that it can feel like its forever. It's lot easier to withstand pain when know it will have an end. Knowing that a vaccine is on the way will help us endure the pain of another lockdown.

A mother in childbirth usually reaches a point in delivery where she feels spent and is too exhausted, and in too much pain to push again. And the doctor or midwife must give her hope and patience in that all demanding transition. "I know it hurts, but you can do this, now give me one more big push."

St. Peter is our midwife telling us "I know God's time is weird, a thousand years are like a day to him, but this pain will pass. It will end, just be patient and you will see everything will be made new, a new Heaven and a new Earth. Be at peace, Be patient. It's almost here."

In our third corner this morning, we'll hear about John, the Baptist. Not one of my favorite biblical characters, eating grasshoppers and shouting at everyone that they need to repent of their sins. But he too is a liminal place of discomfort. Jesus the Messiah, the incarnation of God is close, very nearby and John knows how much needs to get done to prepare the way.

John stands with one foot in the old room of this world and the old prophets, and one foot in the new world of Jesus in-between waiting for the one more powerful than John who will baptize us with the life giving holy spirit and a totally new way of living life. John changes behavior, Jesus will change our hearts.

And finally in the 4th corner this morning, we acknowledge our parish's Patron Saint. The great Bishop of Ambrose of Milan, a secular Governor of the newly Christian Roman Empire. He too knew a lot about living in a liminal times. The former brutally pagan empire had converted to the way of Jesus but it was early days.

As a secular Governor, Mr. Ambrose was dealing with a major battle with the Arian Christians who didn't believe in the Incarnational Divinity of Jesus. Governor Ambrose handled the controversy. (masterfully that the crowd dragged him into a new transition he did not want. They called for him to become their Bishop, he who wasn't even a priest. But he didn't want to make that transition so he ran and hid. Eventually he was found and was dragged kicking and screaming to his ordination as a successor to the Great Apostles.

His new world was so full of the life of the holy spirit that we new count that mellifluous honey tongued Bishop Ambrose as one of the four major doctors of the Christian Church.

I deeply hope that as you sit there this morning listening to the words of these four great writers, you will relate to their experiences of what it means to be "in-between" an old life and a promised new existence, that they will inspire you to hope. Being impatient and liminal hurts, being isolated and alone and bored hurts, being afraid for our own lives and those we love is painful, but these great saints give us hope. They point to a new life which promises to be

better than ever before if we put in the hard work. Do that and we will certainly be amazed at the Glory of God among us. Help is on the Way! One more push!