

Standing at the Threshold

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Columbus, OH
December 31, 2023

*Here, on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes, and into
Your brother's face, your country
And say simply
Very simply
With hope—*

Good morning.

—Maya Angelou

Ancient Witness: Genesis 12:1-5a
 Hebrews 11:8

On the eve of this new year before us, and during our celebration of the new life being born among us, I'm reminded that a large portion of our lives, it seems, is spent *one the verge*, at the door, but not quite over the threshold, bound up to yesterday unable to grasp tomorrow.

In a letter to high school graduates, Will Willimon, then a professor at Duke Divinity School wrote:

You've spent you whole life standing at the door, learning how to say good-bye.

As a toddler, your parents left you at the door of the nursery. You fought back the tears, bravely trying to wave to them as they left you there.

Then there was that first day of school. They walked you as far as the school bus stop, hugged you, and you were gone.

Then there was your first time at summer camp, your first visit to far away friends on your own... and now this, leaving home after graduation.

We call it graduation or commencement, which are fancy words for that by now familiar experience of standing at the door and saying good-bye.

Life is continual graduation, continual standing at the door and saying "good-bye." There is always another doorway to walk through; there is always another threshold to cross. Which one are you approaching at this point in your life?

In my experience, it is easy to view our current threshold as the final or ultimate one: "If I can just hold on and graduate, then I'll be set. I'll have no other hurdles to jump." Or "If I can only get that job, everything will be O.K. It will be easy street, and I can glide through life." But the truth is there's always another threshold to cross. And the journey of faith and search for

meaning never stops no matter how old we are. We cannot retire from it. Abraham was 75, it says, when he and Sarah found another threshold to cross.

But we love clean endings—a couple is united in love, good triumphs over evil, there is a nice, clear resolution of the plot. And we know that life is rarely like this. In the real world there is unfinished business, there is a lot of unfulfillment. And so we must learn to *come to terms with incompleteness*. Life is incomplete; it is a work continually in progress; there are always loose ends.

There's a Sufi Story of when Mulla Nasrudin was an old man looking back on his life. He sat with friends in the tea shop telling his story.

When I was young I was fiery—I wanted to awaken everyone. I prayed to Allah to give me the strength to change the world.

In mid-life I awoke one day and realized my life was half over and I had changed no one. So I prayed to Allah to give me the strength to change those close around me who so much needed it.

Alas, now I am old and my prayer is simpler, “Allah,” I ask, “please give me the strength to at least change myself.”

There is incompleteness, and one must learn to come to terms with it within oneself.

Many of us are standing at a threshold right now—poised to cross over to a different life, a new world.

You could say that this whole congregation is standing at a threshold right now. A new era in its ministry is emerging. What will it look like? In which directions will this church move? What kinds of things is God calling us to do?

And this nation is standing at a threshold. For a generation of prosperity, Wall Street has set record after record, while Main Street has languished.

The gap between the rich and the poor continued to grow in spite of record earnings by corporations and low unemployment rates. They were “the best of times and the worst of times.” Meanwhile, most of us in the middle had wages that were stagnant or barely keeping pace with the cost of living. The top 1% came to own over 50% of the wealth, while the bottom 90% came to own only 30% of the wealth.

In a study by Emmanuel Saez at U.C. Berkeley it says that from 1980 to 2016 median while the GDP grew by 154%, after-tax corporate profits by 182% and the average top 1% income by 190%. The average income of the .1% rose by 322% while the average of the bottom 90% rose .03% or virtually not at all. After this study, it has gotten much worse during COVID when the 1% grabbed nearly two thirds of all new wealth. Since 2010, billionaire wealth grew from \$1.3 trillion to \$4.9 trillion.

A while ago (2008) I heard Bill Moyers read an excerpt from *The American Conservative* magazine about our growing inequality:

The holders of great wealth, especially if they are organized into a political lobby of similar holders of great wealth, can buy not only more goods, more capital and more people. They can also buy (through the vehicle of campaign contributions) more important people: politicians and other public official and therefore public policies.

“The result of great wealth buying public policies,” observed Moyers, “is a positive feedback loop, or perhaps a vicious cycle, which transfers ever greater wealth and power to the very rich and away from everyone else.”

Since Moyers had said this, it has only gotten worse with the Citizens United Supreme Court decision and trillions of dollars in tax breaks for billionaires and big corporations. And the only way to break this cycle and bring fairness back to America, he said, is to “break the stranglehold of private money over politics.”

Why am I telling you all this? Well, because in the midst of our captivity to the callous and selfish values of the day, we believe in a new beginning! We stand at the threshold as a nation and dare to hope that a new birth is possible. And we’ll call this birth, “Emmanuel, God with us.”

Listen to what Martin Luther King wrote (*Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*) that is even more relevant today:

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look at thousands of working people displaced from their jobs with reduced incomes as a result of automation while profits of the employers remain intact and say “This is not just...”

America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing to prevent us from paying adequate wages to schoolteachers... There is nothing but a lack of social vision to prevent us from paying an adequate to every American citizen whether he be a hospital worker, laundry worker, maid or day laborer. There is nothing except short-sightedness to prevent us from guaranteeing an annual minimum—and livable—income for every American family.

King wrote this over 50 years ago, but it easily could have been written yesterday. “A true revolution of values,” he said, “will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies.”

The beginning of a new year is before us. And we have thresholds waiting for us to cross over—thresholds for this congregation, for us individually and for this nation—separate, yet certainly all related.

It is a difficult and scary place to be, standing at a threshold. We say “good-bye” and turn. We then enter an unknown future and say, “Hello! Good morning!”

In the Letter to the Hebrews, it says, “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as his inheritance; and he set out, *not knowing where he was going.*”

Abraham and Sarah surely were apprehensive about what lay ahead for them in this strange, unknown land. Yet they journeyed in faith. They didn't know what the future held, yet they were somehow confident. And they believe in a new beginning, a new birth, was waiting for them.

It's been over three decades that I read a classic book by William Bridges called, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*. He said that transitions are a normal part of the human experience; we all experience them. And there are three basic movements to these major transitions in our lives.

First, there is an *Ending* where we experience a loss or separation of some kind. We say, "good-bye." As the poet, T. S. Eliot wrote,

*What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is make a beginning
The end is where we start from.*

And there is an internal, emotional process to this experience. We go through the stages of death that Elizabeth Kubler-Ross made famous: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, and Depression. When we say "good-bye" to a former way of living, it is like a mini-death. We lose a part of ourselves.

Sometimes we try to go right into a new beginning without fully experiencing the ending; we gloss over the loss. This is understandable. Things like disengagement and disorientation can be unpleasant, so it's tempting to ignore them. But it's important to acknowledge the loss to make a healthy transition. We must grieve or the transition will be incomplete. And the denial, anger and depression will not resolve. Rituals can help us with this important emotional process. The famous social historian, Mircea Eliade, wrote,

In no rite or myth do we find the initiatory death as something final, but always as the condition sine qua non of a transition to another mode of being, a trial indispensable to regeneration; that is, to the beginning of new life.

Many of our transitions we choose and some choose us. We move from one stage of life to another. We graduate from school, move away from home, maybe get married, retire, have a child, change jobs, move to a different place. Or we experience an illness or the death of a loved one. In every case, our lives will no longer be the same. We say "good-bye" to a former way of being.

This brings me to the next phase of the transition that Bridges called the *Neutral Zone*. This is the descent into a darkness and uncertainty. In the Christian resurrection myth, there is death and new life with *three days* in the tomb in between. This is the time of limbo, of wandering in the wilderness, that must come before we reach the new land, a new way of living. This is when things lie fallow, a time for germination. This can be the time to move to full acceptance that our lives will be different, that our old life is gone. It is a time of emptiness. And we begin to ask, "What do I want?" And we begin to take stock and discern. This can be a scary, lonely place!

We often become impatient and skip right past this. But it's a necessary part of a healthy transition and should not be short-circuited. It may not seem productive, but it is essential.

The third and last phase of a transition is the *New Beginning*. We take a risk and act. We take a step and begin to re-integrate and re-orient our lives. We incorporate the new reality into our lives and say “hello” to a new and different way of being.

Sometimes we may experience a painful ending and get stuck in the neutral zone, losing hope for a new beginning. And it can be helpful to recognize that a major transition has a characteristic shape, that discomfort and grief are normal, that it takes time, and that eventually a new beginning is possible.

It was the Dutch anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep, who coined the phrase, “rites of passage.” And he said such rites were the way in which traditional societies structured life transitions. Each ceremonial occasion was made into three phases: separation, transition, and incorporation. These cultures were remarkably sophisticated in their understanding of the inner process of transition.

And so find ourselves in this process of transition as individuals, as a spiritual community and as a nation.

Like all of life, there is a spiritual dimension to our transitions. The big questions: “Who am I? What am I being called to do? Where am I being called to go?” are deeply spiritual questions.

And because of this, transitions—standing at the threshold—can be times of discovery and spiritual growth. In this tender and vulnerable time, we can find the most profound comfort that we are not alone. And we can be surprised by a courage that we did not know we had to venture forth into the unknown, into a new land, into uncertainty, into endless beginning, into the loving Mystery we call “God.”