

“DROOPS IN THE GARLAND”
A Sermon on John 13: 31-35
Lake Joseph Community Church
August 21, 2022
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Between two words, choose the quieter one.
Between word and silence, choose listening.
Between two books, choose the dustier one.
Between the earth and the sky, choose a bird.
Between two animals, choose the one who needs you more.
Between two children, choose both.
Between the lesser and the greater evil, choose neither.
Between hope and despair, choose hope. It will be harder to bear.¹

The Slovenian poet Boris Novak.

Do you feel like you're in between? Maybe between the proverbial rock and hard place?

For the last three months, I've been in between. After 18 years of full-time ministry, the church I serve thought it would be a good idea if I took a sabbatical leave. I'm not sure what their message was in that! "Michael, you need a break!" Or, "Michael, we've had enough of you and we need a break!" Probably a bit of both. So since mid-May I've been in between – between a long stretch of regular ministry, and looking forward to a return this fall. I've not had any of the ongoing responsibilities of being a pastor. People in our church have died and I haven't been involved with the funerals. Couples have been married and I haven't performed the weddings. And I haven't preached hardly at all. In fact, today is only the second time that I've preached since May 15th. I've often likened preaching to playing a sport or a musical instrument. If you don't practice, well, you can become rusty. So aren't you glad you invited me to come today! The good thing about summer cottage churches is that it'll be somebody different next week!

In any case, this in-between time has had me thinking about the in-between life of faith. I don't think I'd ever thought about that before. We preachers live off of the high holy days. The large crowds come at Christmas to admire the decorations and sing the carols and celebrate the birth of a baby. Who doesn't want that? And many of them come back at Easter, wearing the bonnets and listening to the brass ensemble. That feels good. Even the less religious see it as the kick-off to spring. And then there are the festivals of the church that don't draw the crowds but are celebrations in their own right: Epiphany – the season of light and God being made manifest in Christ. Ascension – the day when the Lordship of Jesus is confirmed – a big deal in some churches – not so much others. Pentecost is really one for the church, but almost unknown in the culture. And All Saints gets a nod in some traditions. Even a few people out there know it as the day after the costumes. So there are these banner days. But really, most of the life of the church and the faith is lived in between these. Indeed, it's the "ordinary time" that makes up the majority of the calendar.

¹ Boris Novak, "Decisions." <https://apoemaday.tumblr.com/post/184807317775/decisions>. Accessed July 20, 2022.

And it's the same for our lives, isn't it? We have the birthdays and the anniversaries and the annual cottage picnics and reunions – occasions to which we look forward and have sorely missed the last couple of years. But really, life is lived from day to day, in between the grand moments. I was thinking: It's sort of like hanging a long garland on railing. The span of the garland is the life journey. There are periodic pegs that hold the thing in place. They are the anchors. The celebrations. And the droops in the garland in between are where most of life is lived. The majority of the length of the garland is the droops. And the fewer pegs you have, the larger the droops become.

So has it felt like that in the last few years for you? Has life felt like one big droop? Have you been trying to reach for one of those anchor pegs to pull yourself up? And then, just when you think you've grasped one, it lets go. The stores are closed again. School is back on a screen. The family dinner is cancelled because somebody has COVID. Oh, how the garland has sagged.

Maybe you're in-between right now. Maybe time at the cottage is time in between the stresses and the strains of your life at home – the business, the kids, the ailing parents – it was all there last week and might still be there next week, but this weekend, at least, you get an in-between reprieve. Maybe that's where you're at today.

So many questions are being asked right now about the fall to come. Will people come back to church? To school? Does our business still need to lease expensive office space? It's an in-between time. Not long ago, a friend said to me, "I feel like I am an expert on gasoline engines. I can build them and maintain them really well. In fact, my whole life has been getting better with gasoline engines. My problem is that the world is going to electric." Have you found it so?

And then there are people whose own personal safety and survival lies in-between. Never mind the luxury of standing on our cottage decks on a beautiful August evening looking at the earth and the sky and trying to pick out a bird that's navigating the two spaces as Novak suggests. The United Nations Refugee Agency now estimates that about 90 million people world-wide have been forced to flee their homes. 42 percent of those are children.² The refugee sponsorship team at the church I serve back home brought a young man from Syria in December, 2015 – he was on the first plane – we were at the airport with the TV cameras to greet him. And our team has been working for seven years now to get his sister and his mother to Canada; they are living in between the peaceful life they once knew and the hope of life here, someday.

So as I've been sitting with God on sabbatical, this is where my inner life has been dwelling these last few months, asking questions about liminal time – in-between space. And I've been thinking about some of the in-between times in the biblical story. There are many Old Testament characters wandering in and out of liminal times and spaces. We think of Noah and the experience of losing all of humanity except for his own family. His in-between season is confined to an ark before life is reoriented. What a long 40 days and 40 nights that must have been. Or there are those who forgo identity – leaving it behind and dwelling in-between the old self and a new identity yet known. Ruth, for example. No longer a Moabite, moving to Judah, not belonging, and living in-between – trying to

² <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>. Accessed July 20, 2022.

make a go of it as a woman in a man's world. And Joseph thrown into a liminal pit until his new identity as an interpreter of dreams becomes clear.³

And then, of course, there is the in-between time of our Lord Jesus. The gospel accounts shed some light on Jesus' liminal space. There is the grand narrative that Jesus' very existence is about the space between heaven and earth, and about how Jesus' coming in human form is to bridge that gap for us. But if we take the more specific accounts of Jesus' earthly life, we find there are many times that Jesus seems to live in-between. There are the times when he goes off to pray and reflect. The most notable being right after he is baptized and he is plunged into the wilderness for 40 days of temptation, sorting out what sin and separation and brokenness means for him and the disciples and all of us. But I realized that it's the Gospel of John that deals most extensively with Jesus' in-between-ness, if you will. The disciples are faced with their first major crisis. Jesus starts talking about leaving them. He's still there, but he's talking about a time when he will not be there. What a disorienting experience it must have been for them, and for him.

And in these five short verses that we read today, Jesus sets up the whole farewell narrative. He provides a three-part summary of how it will all play out: First, Jesus announces that he will be glorified – exalted – lifted up in the presence of God. That's what will happen to him. A foreshadowing of the Ascension, perhaps? John doesn't really record the Ascension narrative like we find in Luke-Acts, but I wonder if it's intimated here in the farewell words. Then, secondly, Jesus speaks about what this means for the disciples – that he will no longer be with them as they have known him. He's preparing them for the loss. And then, finally, some practical instruction for their enduring life together. When I am no longer with you as you have known me, love one another. It's all about love. That's what will sustain things. This three-point summary Jesus speaks is how the farewell discourse begins. And really, the rest of what follows for the next four chapters of John opens up these three points. Christ glorified. Preparation for the departure. And instruction on how to live into the new reality. It's an extended period of in-between living for both Jesus and the disciples. It's one big droop in the garland.

Now if we read ahead through the farewell discourse, we find places where Jesus is reminding them and preparing them in ways that honour where they've come from together on this journey, and the great unknown toward which they are all travelling. Here are just a few I found: First off, near the end of Chapter 14 – those famous words that we so often hear at funerals: "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Well near the end of 14, Jesus says to them: "I am going away, and I am coming to you." There's the in-between language, you see. And he goes on: "If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to my Father, because the Father is greater than I. I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe." They're square in-between – waiting for the big event. And Jesus is right there with them at every step, preparing their hearts and their spirits for faith and belief.

And then a little later in chapter 15 we find another in-between statement. It's the one we explored a bit with the children: "You did not choose me but I chose you, and I appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last." You see, the call to discipleship is our response to the call of Christ to follow. "Come, follow me and I will make you fish for people." Yet, Jesus says here, "I chose you." It's living in-between call and response, choosing and being chosen – the in-between space faith and belief occupy.

³ Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 3-4.

And finally, just a few verses later in chapter 15: “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.” Again – that in-between dichotomy. “If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore, the world hates you.” We’ve heard that cliché before: “Christians should be in the world and not of the world.” Is this not living as though you have one foot in both places? In between what we are called to be and where we are called to serve? Flesh and spirit. The life of faith is about bridging that in-between gap.

So it seems to me that much of the Gospel of John is about in-between time – anticipating it, preparing for it. And then, it actually becomes the lived reality. The farewell discourse of John ultimately ends with the farewell itself at the cross on Good Friday. And then, the final victory – the promise of life eternal fulfilled at Easter. But there is one peg on the garland that’s barely visible, yet is helping to hold up the whole thing. It’s hidden in the leaves. It’s not a banner day like Christmas or Easter. They are the prominent, visible pegs. It’s the day in between. And if it wasn’t there, then the whole story would not have meaning, and the garland would fall. Because Jesus wasn’t immediately resurrected. There was a day of waiting, a day of mourning, a day of reflecting.

Scholars have long discussed and debated what that little peg in the garland – that Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday represents. Asian Christians call it “Black Saturday,” while for Coptics it’s “Joyous Saturday” or “The Saturday of Light.” In Eastern Orthodoxy it is the “Great Sabbath,” since it’s the day when Christ rests, literally.⁴ And in the Protestant church it is mostly called “Holy Saturday” because we recognize something very sacred is happening, even if it’s a mystery. But regardless of the name – whether it stresses death or anticipated life or both – Holy Saturday is the ultimate in-between day of the faith. Jesus lies in the tomb. Waiting. In-between death, and life.

So how shall we live in the space in between? Our tendency, of course, is to want to jump ahead. Let’s live every day as Easter. Well, we know that’s simply not reality. Even the rhythm of a week suggests that Easter comes on Sunday, and there are six other in-between days. But this doesn’t mean it can’t be good news! It doesn’t mean there aren’t glimpses of good news in the smaller pegs, and even in the droops. Indeed, God is present as much in the ordinary grind as in the extraordinary thrill. God is present as much in the everyday journal entries we make as in the best-selling biography of the highlights of one’s life.

Many of us have memorable stories of how we’ve seen and heard and found God in between. I learned this most profoundly nearly 20 years ago from a young man named Ken. His family was part of the church I served at the time. So to close today, I want to share Ken’s story with you – a story of good news in-between:

Ken was serving time in the local jail. He had been picked up for possession. This had become a pattern. And his mother was growing weary of it all. So she asked me if I would go and see Ken in jail. It was a small city jail attached to the courthouse – an old building with barbed wire fence curling along the top of the high, stone walls. I’d only seen it from the outside. Inside was a mystery to me. I didn’t quite know what to expect. Well when I arrived to visit, I pushed the intercom button and explained who I was and why I was there. The door opened. It was a solid, steel door with one small window,

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Saturday. Accessed July 20, 2022.

bars across it. I went in, and that door closed behind me. Click! And then there was a tinted glass window behind which I could vaguely see the outline of a prison guard. He said in a gruff voice, “Two pieces of ID!” I complied. And as I waited for him to confirm I was good to go, I noticed just ahead of me another solid, steel door with one small window, bars across it. And I realized that, even for a moment, I was locked in between these two doors. As I stood there, waiting for my ID to be confirmed, it occurred to me that I was at the mercy of that man behind the glass who had locked the door behind me, and whose job it was to open the inner door and let me in. For a moment, there was no way in, and no way out. In that moment of waiting, I felt very vulnerable.

There’s a name for it. The sally door. The outer door closes before the inner door has opened. It’s a security measure. There I was. In between the doors. The outside world from which I had come, and the unknown mystery beyond. The sally door.

Well, handing my ID back to me, the guard opened the door and I went in to visit Ken. And during our visit, I shared with him my experience of the sally door. And in response, Ken said to me, “Michael, that’s how I live most of my life. I’ve been in and out of jail numerous times, in between jobs and crime sprees, in between relationships, in between various drugs, struggling with addictions, trying to find something that will give me the lift I think I need. I feel like I’ve been somewhere I don’t want to go back to, but I can’t envision something better ahead.” I listened to this lament for a while. And then, Ken said something that really speaks to how we could live in-between. It wasn’t profound at the time. But it has rang true all these years later. Ken said, “I just try to take one day – one hour at a time – and I look for something good in that day and that hour. And even on the darkest days, I can always find something – something – for which to be thankful.”

And while none of us would choose what Ken lived, God is present nonetheless in the liminal, in-between times in which we all find ourselves – those droops in the garland.

The Franciscan priest Richard Rohr puts it beautifully: “All transformation takes place here,” he says. “We have to allow ourselves to be drawn out of ‘business as usual’ and remain patiently on the ‘threshold’ where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. There alone is our old world left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence. That’s a good space where genuine newness can begin. It’s the realm where God can best get at us. This is the sacred space where the old world is able to fall apart, and a bigger world is revealed. If we don’t encounter liminal space in our lives, we start idolizing normalcy. The threshold is God’s waiting room.”⁵

So at the risk of offending a great poet, let me add one more line to Boris Novak’s masterpiece: Between death and life, choose life. That’s how we shall live in such in-between times.

⁵ Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 155-56.