

## ***Then, Now and Next***

Text: Mark 13:1-8

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"Then, Now and Next" is a phrase I've heard often in the last months as a listener of National Public Radio (NPR) who are celebrating their milestone 50 years of broadcasting. When I heard that several days ago, it prompted me to change my sermon title. I was driving here to the church when I heard "then now and next" as I drove by Whole Foods. It suddenly clicked in my head that today's Gospel reading can be represented by those three words because they nearly capture another word: *liminal*. In case you were not aware, we are now living in liminal time. The word *liminal* comes from the Latin word *limens*, which means "limit or threshold." Author and theologian Richard Rohr defines liminal time in this way: "It is when you have left, or are about to leave, the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. If you are not trained in how to hold anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to entrust and wait, you will run...anything to flee this terrible cloud of unknowing." He goes on to say that ancient cultures referred to liminal space as "crazy time," because it is like nothing we have ever experienced before. Think of it as that space, that time, when a flying acrobat has let go of one swinging trapeze and is in mid-air, anxiously seeking the grasp of another who is swinging their way.

Each of us has most likely experienced a liminal time at some point in our lives. Liminal times can come into our lives as planned or unplanned. These are times when life is forever different - when life is divided between before and after the event. They include, but are certainly not limited to, the following: the loss of a loved one, the birth of a child, the loss of a job, retirement, moving, a health diagnosis/crisis, the beginning or end of a significant relationship, graduations, and military service.

There are three ways I think we're experiencing liminality right now. I imagine these in concentric circles. The inmost circle is here at First Church. We're experiencing a pastoral transition. It has been 22 months since our Pastor Emeritus, The Rev. C. Geordie Campbell retired, and 25 months since former Associate Pastor, The Rev. Elliott Munn moved to VT. There has been not just one, but two interim Senior Pastors. Add to that, our Director of Children and Family ministries has moved on as well.

The second circle is being in a time of pandemic. What is unique about the pandemic is that it is a liminal time that literally the entire world is going through together, all at the same time. Of course, some individuals are much more affected by Covid-19 than others, but everyone is affected in some way. I cannot think of a time in my life where billions of people all around the globe have faced the same challenge at the same time.

In her book *The Great Emergence*, author and religion professor Phyllis Tickle used the analogy of "The 500-Year Rummage Sale" to describe religious change over the years. Tickle said that historically, the church "cleans house" roughly every 500 years, holding what she calls a "giant rummage sale," deciding what to dispose of and what to keep, making room for new things. We are in the midst of that time right now, as the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant reformation

was just four years ago in 2017. This state of affairs for the church universal is what I imagine as the third concentric circle of liminality we're experiencing.

This liminal time is not just true for churches either. A recent Gallup poll revealed that Americans' membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year, dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup's eight-decade trend. In 2020, 47% of Americans said they belong to a church, synagogue or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999.<sup>1</sup>

These three concentric circles of liminality might lead us to feel like the disciples did when Jesus predicts the fall of the Temple. They want to know when it is going to happen and what signs to look for! It is our human nature to want to know what is going to happen, so we can prepare or maybe even more to the point, avoid what we fear will be a disaster. None of us wants to be hanging out there suspended in the air between one trapeze and the other; we prefer not to feel vulnerable; we don't like crazy time

Most scholars agree that Mark's gospel is written soon after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE (vv. 1-2). The Temple was so central to the way of life not only for Jews, but also for the early Jesus-followers. Mark was likely writing to guide them in making sense of that event. Theologians have long suggested that Mark is reorienting the early Christian community. He is perhaps decentering the community in relation to Temple rituals and re-centering in relationship to Jesus Christ. Perhaps this was Mark's way of fostering resilience.

Research on resilience has shown that there are two essential factors that people need when they find themselves living in a liminal time: spirituality and community. These two factors will provide direction and support in the midst of this vulnerable, "crazy" time.

Spirituality is what centers us all the time, but especially in times of change. It is what defines and grounds our core values and beliefs. As Christians, that means following in the way of Jesus. It is what inspires us and helps us choose love over fear. Spirituality is what gives us a bedrock of meaning, purpose, and hope, when so much around us is changing.

Jesus' conversation with his disciples reveals his concern with a poignant, all-to-relevant pastoral question. Knowing what lies ahead for his followers, how should they witness to hope when surrounded by so much change, fear and hardship?

Jesus is aware of the human tendency to lock in on more powerful forces and to become cowering and paralyzed by fear, even and especially fear of the unknown and the finitude of our existence. So, he offers three important spiritual disciplines for navigating such times of transition.

First, believers must engage in **discernment** in the face of threats from both without and within. Not simply overt threats, but subtler ones such as allowing the false security of a cultural, consumer-driven theology to creep into the community. It is important to continue to ask the important questions such as: Who is God calling us to be in this time and this place? What is God calling us to do now and next? The United Church of Christ, as a denomination has answered these questions with a bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. We have traditionally

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<sup>1</sup> (Jones 2021)

been a united and uniting church. We are now immersed in a postmodern world with those still longing for the comforts and familiarity of a modern world. We need to balance the “do you remember” conversations with the “can you imagine” conversations. At the same time, we don’t want to miss the present.

First Church has the distinct privilege of being a congregation connected to other area congregations through GHIAA, the Greater Hartford Interfaith Action Alliance. Together, at least 35 area churches, synagogues, mosques and Meetinghouses work on issues for which there is common ground theologically. The Center for Leadership and Justice (CLJ) and GHIAA member institutions are currently holding hundreds of house meetings. Ours at First Church will be taking place in January. Once issues have been identified, core team members form action research teams and launch actionable campaigns. Why do we do this? We do this because it allows us to be faithful Disciples of Christ in the here and now.

Second, believers must be **patient**. Birthing a new heaven and a new earth takes time. Just as Jesus referred to the “birth pangs” of his time, we are experiencing the birth pangs of a new age. With Phyllis Tickle’s image of the 500-year-rummage sale of the church in mind, I happen to know that several families in this church are currently moving or have recently moved from one home to another. They and anyone else who has gone through that process knows it takes time and patience deciding what to dispose of and what to keep, as we make room for what is to come.

*A House for Hermit Crab* is a children’s book written by Eric Carle. The story tells of a hermit crab needing to move from his shell, which has become too snug for him. He needs to move into a new, bigger shell. The new shell is very unfamiliar and strange at first, but he spends the next twelve months figuring out how to make it comfortable and cozy for himself – only to realize that it has become too snug once again, so he needs to once again find an even larger shell.

Trusting that God is transforming the world is a little like the story of *A House for Hermit Crab*. The task of the Christian life is to participate in God’s saving work. It involves continually reevaluating what no longer fits. In that task, believers are sustained by the third important reminder: for the Christian, there is always **hope**. There will be times when believers feel beleaguered and vulnerable. Growth, change, and the coming of new life are painful processes, but in suffering there is always hope and the promise of a new day. Hope sustains us through the birth pangs of change and the necessary struggle that leads to growth.

There you have it, Mark’s prescription for the church in transition: for our three concentric circles of liminality: discernment, patience and hope.

Christians living on this side of the resurrection have the benefit of recalling Jesus’ promise to his disciples that he would not leave them stranded after his ascension into heaven. God in the Holy Spirit is present with us always, even (and perhaps most importantly) in “crazy time,” when we’re between one trapeze and the next; when we have left the tried and true; when we are between our comfort zone and any possible new answer. Living in Spirit allows us to better stand in the midst of tension in the liminal time in which we find ourselves. I can hear Jesus’ words to his disciples then calling out to us, even now: “Do not be alarmed.” All will be well; all manner of things shall be well!

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