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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2A18  
4 Easter (Year A) 11:00 a.m. Online Eucharist  
Sunday 3 May 2020 Good Shepherd Sunday

Acts 2:42-47  
Psalm 23  
1 Peter 2:19-25  
John 10:1-10

### The Wood Between the Worlds

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn. 10).

Many of us at home right now expect to sip a little wine or juice and to enjoy some bread as we pray together online. Is this real communion? In what sense are we celebrating the Eucharist? What are we all doing together right now anyway? My sermon this week comes in the form of three questions: Where are we? Who is God? And what are we learning?

1. Where are we? In C.S. Lewis' book *The Magician's Nephew* a middle-aged adult has discovered rings that will transport the wearer into other worlds. He tricks Polly, a young girl, into testing the rings and she disappears from our reality. Then he offers her friend Digory the chance to follow her with the rings that will bring the two home.

Digory valiantly agrees. Taking the ring, immediately our world vanishes and he finds himself, "in the quietest wood you could possibly imagine. There were no insects, no animals, and no wind. You could almost feel the trees growing...very much alive."

"When he tried to describe it afterward Digory always said, "It was a rich place: as rich as plumcake."<sup>1</sup>"

The story goes on, "The strangest thing was that, almost before he had looked about him, Digory had half forgotten how he had come there... He was not in the least frightened, or excited, or curious. If anyone had asked him, "Where did you come from? He would probably have said, "I've always been here." That was what it felt like – as if one had always been in that place and never been bored although nothing had ever happened."<sup>1</sup>

This wood between the worlds is a liminal place. The various pools of water in the landscape are each gates to different realities. We find ourselves in a similar place. Worshiping online with doors open to everywhere in the world. We are waiting with growing impatience in a place that is no place, where nothing really happens.

Of course, it might not be fair to put it in precisely this way. As the pandemic unfolds we have gone through various stages in our shared, spiritual unconscious. At each phase we never really leave the previous ones behind. First, we felt confused about the nature of the virus and what it would mean for us. We still don't know when we might go back and how normal it will really be.

Then, we were shocked by the severity of the disease and our measures to prevent it. We felt afraid for our loved ones and ourselves. We worried that the healthcare system or even our society would break down, that if things went really wrong there would be no one to help.

One might think of the economy as the shared activity that makes us feel our own dignity, worth and value. We panicked as we felt this part of ourselves threatened. Although theoretically we know that we will die, our society hides death. COVID19 draws the reality of our death closer to us.

So we've responded by hoarding, insider trading, price gouging, defying stay at home orders, buying more guns, protesting and suing the civil servants who are trying to protect us. But far, far more frequently we have been rushing into the face of danger to help, cheering hospital and other essential workers, looking out for our neighbors, giving blood and taking time with our families. We are giving money to churches and social service nonprofits. I think that this horrifying experience of death is mostly making us more humane.

So these earlier stages are still with us but mostly we feel in between worlds. We know we cannot go back to what was before but we feel impatient with how things are now. And we have questions. When the people of Israel were brutally defeated and sent faraway into exile they cried, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a new land" (Ps. 137:4)? And that is our question too.

2. Who is God? Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year we set aside a whole feast day dedicated to the simple idea that Jesus continues to be present in our life as the Good Shepherd and that at our best moments we can hear his voice. For homework this week I encourage you to memorize today's Psalm 23.

The twentieth century theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) regarded this short poem as the clearest example of what it feels like to be reconciled with God.<sup>2</sup> You might look at it as a summary of what Jesus refers to as "abundant life." When God is our shepherd we shall lack nothing, our souls shall be revived, we will be guided along the right paths. Even in the "valley of the shadow of death" God is with us (Ps. 23). We shall be comforted, even anointed. We will always have a home in God.

Jesus says "amēn, amēn, lego humin hoti ego eimi hē thura." "Very truly I say to you that I am the gate for the sheep" (Jn. 10).<sup>3</sup> Our situation in the wood between the worlds gives his statement a new meaning for us. Jesus is the threshold, the place in between that we pass through on our way out for nourishment and on our way back to safety.<sup>4</sup>

The word liminal comes from the Latin word limen and means threshold. Jesus occupies the space and time of the liminal. All human cultures use ritual to make space to move us between different worlds. I have many conversations with wedding couples about how we have so few rites of passage that we hardly know what to do with the ones we have. Baptisms, graduation, weddings, retirement parties, prayers at the time of death help us to gracefully enter a new form of being.

When church works well we do this every day. Among our other ministries we create and modify rituals that draw people into places like the wood between the worlds. And sometimes this is not comfortable.

Let me return to my initial question about how we receive communion at home. There is a widening church divide in opinion about what happens in online worship. Some

say because of the situation that has been forced on us we must observe a kind of fast from the sacraments, by simply not having communion. In fact, if ordinary people at home can't receive bread and wine, no one should. Many of these people want to protect the purity of the Eucharist and the traditions around it. They worry that the authority structure is too far away from people's homes to oversee what used to be the primary rituals of common or public worship.

Others though believe that the spirit is calling forth something new in the church. Safe in-person Eucharist practices may even be two years away and people are finding that they are experiencing, with others online, Jesus in the bread and wine at home.

You can see the tension between these two understandings even in our prayers at Grace Cathedral. The first prayer after communion seems to gently remind people that they cannot really have communion outside of church. It says "since we cannot receive you sacramentally, come spiritually into our hearts." The second option says simply, "Come spiritually into our hearts, and unite our entire selves to you." It leaves open the question of what a sacrament is and what happens when we have bread and wine at home in this context.<sup>5</sup>

My forum guest this week the former Harvard Divinity School professor Margaret Miles says that these times are even changing what we mean by bodies and being together. She goes on to say that in response to terrible religious wars, Richard Hooker proposed a solution. Rather than asking everyone to share exactly the same beliefs we should gather on the basis of being willing to participate. Instead of asking, "do we believe the same things," we should be more inclined to ask simply "shall we worship together?" Perhaps this is the question we should be asking today.

3. What are we learning? In the world we are learning that it is possible to have air clean enough for people in India to see the Himalayas again, that people can stop fighting in Yemen and Ukraine, that we are capable of making dramatic positive changes to our environment.<sup>6</sup> We are learning that our leaders can work together to pass stimulus plans, house the homeless and feed the hungry. Most of all we are realizing that we are one human family and that each one of us has a role in a unified effort to overcome the coronavirus.

More particularly at this church we are learning that we should offer something more online than just a video of what we usually do in person. We are learning that as a species, a church and individuals we are capable of massively more change than we realized before. We understand in a far more profound way why in-person connection matters so much. And finally we are learning that when we pray together online, God is really present with us.

Brothers and sisters to be modern is to insist on an explanation for everything. But we are more than modern. Before closing I want to share one fragment from a Wendell Berry poem called "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front."

"So, friends, every day do something / that won't compute. Love the Lord, / Love the world. Work for nothing. / Take all that you have and be poor. / Love someone who does not deserve it... / Expect the end of the world. Laugh / Laughter is immeasurable.

Be joyful / though you have considered all the facts... Be like the fox / who makes more tracks than necessary, / some in the wrong direction. / Practice resurrection."<sup>7</sup>

Welcome to this liminal place out of space and time with doorways into new realities. Welcome to this cathedral however you might be experiencing it right now. Welcome to the place where we lack nothing because we experience the Good Shepherd's abundant life, where we hear his voice reminding us that we were made to love and be loved.

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (NY: Harper, 1955) 32.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV:1 The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, tr. G.W. Bromiley (NY: T&T Clark, 2004) 608.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen Clark-King has a prayer about the gate through which our words pass. We have come to love it: "Between the words that are spoken and the words that are heard may God's spirit be present."

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Boulton, "Lectionary Commentary for the 4 Sunday of Easter Year A," *SALT*, 27 April 2020. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/4/27/abundant-life-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-4>

<sup>5</sup> Prayer of Spiritual Communion (for Presider and All):

Beloved Jesus, we believe that you are truly present in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. We love you above all things, and know that you are with us. Since we cannot now receive you sacramentally, come spiritually into our hearts. Now and always we embrace you and unite ourselves entirely to you; never permit us to be separated from you. In your most holy name. Amen

Or...

Gracious God, we love you above all things, and are grateful that you are with us. Come spiritually into our hearts, unite our entire selves to you and never permit us to be separated from your presence. We pray this in the name of your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

<sup>6</sup> William E. Swing, "Our Inner Pandemic," Talk to the Members of Burlingame Country Club during the Coronavirus Pandemic, April 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems: 1957-1982* (San Francisco: Northpoint Press, 1984) 151.