

## **Journey, May 10, 2020 | Journey worship service**

**TEXT:** [Exodus 32:1–14](#)

**THEME:**

**TITLE: Liminal Spaces and Golden Calves**

*By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy*

Recently, Richard Rohr offered a meditation entitled, *Between Two Worlds*, where he discussed and defined liminal space as “an inner state and sometimes an outer situation where we can begin to think and act in new ways. It is where we are betwixt and between, having left one room or stage of life but not yet entered the next. We usually enter liminal space when our former way of being is challenged or changed—perhaps when we lose a job or a loved one, during illness, at the birth of a child, or a major relocation. It is a graced time, but often does not feel ‘graced’ in any way. In such space, we are not certain or in control.”

Rohr continues: “It’s no surprise then that we generally avoid liminal space. Much of the work of authentic spirituality and human development is to get people into liminal space and to keep them there long enough that they can learn something essential and new.”

The Israelites in today’s scripture passage were in a liminal space. Led by Moses under the direction God, the Israelites had escaped slavery in Egypt, crossed over the Red Sea without being consumed by the water, vowed to be God’s covenant people, and they were now awaiting Moses’ descent from the mountain. In their estimation, Moses, the man sent by God to set them free, and their connection to and intercessor with God, had been gone far too long from their presence. And like many of us in times of separation, despair, and uncertainty, they began to take things into their own hands in their attempt to balance the equilibrium of insecurity.

Sunday, March 15, 2020 is a day that will forever be memorialized in the life of ELPC. Following worship that day, the difficult decision was made to close the church as the Covid-19 virus had potentially invaded our space and we couldn’t risk becoming a petri dish where the virus would grow, expose, or potentially sicken our congregants, staff or community members. As of today, it has been 56 days since we physically closed the doors of the church. This has been a time of challenge for us. How can we continue to be the people of God while we are physically separated from one another? We too are in a liminal space, unable to access the place where we worship and come together as the body of Christ; the home base of our ministry programs, a place of comfort and support, and a place that is familiar and brings comfort to many is inaccessible.

The Israelites were experiencing a similar situation. They had escaped the plagues meted upon the Egyptian people, and the shadow of death had passed over their homes when they followed God’s instructions. Now the Israelites found themselves in the wilderness while Moses was up on the mountain for forty days and forty nights communing with God. The people were confused, restless and did not know whether Moses had abandoned them, if something tragic had happened to him, or if he was just taking a prolonged time of respite. They also knew that if Moses was not around to

communicate and intercede with God on their behalf, they assumed that God would be AWOL as well.

I have said it before, and it is as pertinent today as ever, the only thing worse than waiting on God, is wishing later that you had. The Israelites turned to Moses' assistant and brother, Aaron, demanding that he do something to right the situation—make gods for us, who will go before us. The people were used to being led, by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. The people were used to listening to and being instructed by Moses who was in communication with the God who had set them free from bondage.

This supposed vacuum and lack of leadership and separation was unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and unsettling. The Israelites knew that a god fashioned from precious metals had not and could not set them free, provide sustenance and shelter, nor kept them during their time of bondage—they were looking for assurance that they would be alright, even if Moses didn't return.

Instead of Aaron assuring them that God had not abandoned them, that Moses would indeed return, and that they would be alright because they were God's covenant people, he acquiesced and made golden calf. Many commentators state that Aaron was not insinuating that the golden calf was a god, nor were the people so gullible that they thought a metal object shaped and formed from their jewelry had led them out of Egypt. But in many Eastern cultures, a golden calf was considered a powerful symbol of divinity and an object through which people could appeal to or communicate with God. Never mind the fact that Aaron and the Israelites by taking this action transgressed the first two of God's commandments—you shall have no other gods before me, and you shall not make for yourselves an idol.

The gods we fashion, are not as elaborate as golden calves, but are subtle and just as destructive as they take our eyes and minds off of God who has brought us through dangers seen and unseen, times of trials and tribulation, separation and sequestration. Our golden calves cloud our vision and confuse our memories causing us to forget that God has been our protector, provider, and shield, and that God promised to never leave nor forsake us, and that God sent the beloved Son to redeem us back from the brink of eternal separation from God.

In this season, our golden calves are manifested as discomfort with the disruption of normalcy, being in a hurry to resume life as we knew it before Covid-19, opening the country to resume our conspicuous consumption at the risk of further spread of the disease, insisting that the loss of lives is inconsequential if it means getting the economy back on track. The major golden calf of this day is impatience, not waiting on God, not recognizing that God may be doing a new thing in our midst that we might miss, because we are so consumed with wanting things our way. Much like the Israelites who asked the question, how can we sing our Lord's song in a strange land—how do or can we worship God and be in community in this strange time, this liminal space.

Liminal space is unfamiliar, uncomfortable and disconcerting. In his devotional, Rohr lifted-up spiritual “giants like St. Francis, Julian of Norwich, Dorothy Day, and Mohandas Gandhi, who tried to live their entire lives in permanent liminality, on the edge or periphery of the dominant culture. Rohr stated this in-between place of liminality is free of illusions and false payoffs. It invites us to discover and live from broader perspectives and with much deeper seeing.”

Now, I am not suggesting that God is calling us to separate ourselves from one another permanently or to live in liminality forever. That has already tried by constructing false narratives defining and devaluing people based on perceived racial differences; defining some people as lazy, good for nothing, and therefore not deserving of safe, affordable housing and healthcare, adequate nutrition or quality education; insinuating that some people are stealing our jobs and should be stopped at the borders; or determining that people who have served their debt to society are not worthy of acceptance and integration back into community.

In the words of Rohr, “The vulnerability and openness of liminal space allows room for something genuinely new to happen. We are empty and receptive—erased tablets waiting for new words. Liminal space is where we are most teachable, often because we are most humbled. Liminality keeps us in an ongoing state of shadowboxing instead of ego-confirmation, struggling with the hidden side of things, and calling so-called normalcy into creative question.”

We are people who “are already but not yet.” Already in the kingdom of God, but we have not yet seen the kingdom’s full glory. We understand how and what it means to be live in liminal space. So, I contend that faithful liminality is manifested when we spend time with God, seeking to understand what God is doing and how God is moving in this season. Faithful liminality is trusting that just as God led the Israelites out of bondage and through the wilderness God is faithfully leading, shaping and transforming us in this bewildering time.

Beloved, as God’s claimed and covenant people, we have the assurance that just as God communed and communicated with Moses on the mountain top, God is in community with us. Just as God raised Christ from the dead, in God’s time, God will resurrect, revivify, and rectify this world and us from everything that would seek to destroy us and it. The writer of Proverbs instructs us to: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own insights. In all your ways acknowledge God and God will make our paths straight. Our hope and trust are not on the things of this world, on our self-constructed and destructive golden calves, but on the one who created and keeps the world. May we be in peace as we wait on God.

Amen