



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

In This Liminal Time

December 29, 2019

Texts: Luke 2:15-19, Isaiah 63:7-9

Sermon: Preached by the Rev. Linda Hoddy

I always feel a bit lost during this time between Christmas and New Year's. It's always disorienting. The big build-up to Christmas is over, the gifting and feasting are over, and yet the New Year and its celebrations are not yet here. Our normal activities are suspended. Schools are closed; many workplaces are closed, or at least work is scaled back. I get confused about what day of the week it is. The kids, and sometimes we adults, are now bored with their toys and restless. Mentally, we're starting to think about New Year's Resolutions, but thank goodness, we don't have to start acting on them yet!

Anthropologically, psychologically, and spiritually, I think this disorientation has purpose. In many cultures, there is a liminal time -- a time between the worlds -- built into the end of one year and the beginning of another. In Judaism, the high holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur last for ten days. And during that time, people are encouraged, even expected, to let go of the old and make room for the new. They do that by thinking about unfinished business, letting go of vows made during the previous year, apologizing to anyone they might have harmed, whether intentionally or unintentionally. For ten days, the Book of Life is open, to be written anew, before it closes on the Day of Atonement—which can also be pronounced At-one-ment. So these Holy Days are a way of bringing the community back together, of helping them to be at one.

Though it is explicated in a slightly different way, something similar is going on in the Christian world during these early days of Jesus' life. This liminal "in-between time" allows the old year to slowly die, and our old selves to also pass away. We let go of the old selves so that we can become new, and hopefully better – in many senses. With the death of the old, there is suddenly an opening up of possibilities. Anything becomes possible. Even reconciliation in those long-term troubled relationships. Even a healthier body, even renewal of career or job, an end of boredom and return to the excitement of the new. There is hope for us to be better people, better in every sense of the word.

Our secular culture helps this along through the tradition of New Year's Resolutions. "Resolving" to do something implies that we've given some thought to how we want to change, how we want our new selves to be. And though most New Year's resolutions don't last past the third week of January, the fact that we make them

implies that we believe newness is possible. It seems to be built into the cycles of life that newness requires the death of the old; letting go. Here's a little story about the power of letting to make room for the new.

*There was once a really old man, who had lived a long and very happy life on a beautiful island. He loved his homeland greatly. There on his island, all his family, through all the generations, had lived, made their homes and earned their daily bread. And so, when the old man realized that he was approaching the last days of his life, he asked his sons to take him outside one last time. There, he knelt, and gathered a handful of his native soil, and clutched it tightly in his gnarled old fingers. Soon afterwards, the old man died and came to the gates of heaven. The angels greeted him joyfully. "You have lived a good life," they exclaimed. "Welcome to the kingdom of heaven. Please come in." So the old man tried to cross the threshold of the heavenly kingdom, but as he did so, a kindly angel said, "You must let go of the soil you are clutching." "Oh, no, I could never do that," he cried. "This is my native soil, the earth of my beloved island home." The angels were sad as they went back to heaven, leaving the old man wandering, lonely, outside the gates. Many years passed, and the angels came again. They brought the old man a taste of the heavenly banquet and feasted with him there, outside the gates, trying to persuade him to come into the fullness of the kingdom. He wanted so much to join them for all eternity, but again, when they asked him to let go of the soil he was clutching, he couldn't bring himself to do so. And again, they had to leave him standing there, alone. Finally, after many more years had passed, the angels came again, and this time, they brought with them the old man's granddaughter, who had grown old in the meantime and had died herself. She was delighted to see her beloved grandfather standing there. "Oh, Grandad," she cried, "I'm so happy you are here. Please come and join us in the heavenly kingdom. We love you so much, and we want you with us for all eternity." The old man was overwhelmed to see his little granddaughter there, and in his joy, he flung out his arms to embrace her. And as he did so, the soil slipped right through his fingers. With great joy, the angels now led him into his heavenly home, and the first thing he saw there was the whole of his beloved island, waiting there to greet him. (Letting Go, a retelling of a traditional Mediterranean story. Found in, *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World*, edited by Margaret Silf, Pilgrim Press, 2003)*

It's a motif we see over and over again in literature and folk tales and even in the Bible. In order to cross the threshold into a new life and a new year, we have to let go of the old. Anthropologists and psychologists call this a Liminal time, and it happens in many situations. It happens when someone dies, and there is that time between the death and the final rites, and even beyond. It happens when there is some large rift in our lives, such as divorce or losing a job, or being told we have a chronic or terminal illness. It takes time to re-organize and re-orient our psyches and our faith, so that we can absorb the news, let go of the old and welcome the new reality.

In that process this year, I encourage you to include in your New Year Resolutions a resolution about nurturing your spiritual life. Perhaps it would be reading scripture or praying on a regular basis. Or looking for the light and love of Christ in one person every day. Or enacting that light and love for another person every day.

I'm contemplating resolving to not engage in any disrespectful speech. And that will be very difficult for me, especially as I watch the nightly news. It's quite cathartic to make my cynical and judgmental comments about the people of whom I disapprove. And yet, I know that cynicism and disrespect are simply digging myself deeper into that hole of fear and mistrust. Instead, I will try to see that of a loving God in others, even when it seems deeply buried under hate or anger or dishonesty or greed. It's a wonderful paradox of faith that in the Christmas story, the new life comes at the beginning of the liminal period. I like to think that is God's way of reassuring us, of saying, I am here, I will be with you as you make this journey from old to new. It's very reassuring in this disoriented, liminal time.

In today's scripture from Isaiah, we are told it is the "Presence" of God that saved the Hebrew people. Not an angel or a messenger, but God's Presence. In recent years, my favorite word for God has been that word, "Presence." I can't tell you what God is, I can only tell you how I experience God. And the best word that I can find for that is "Presence." I experience God as a "Presence" in my life. A Presence that is always there, always available to me, in the beauty of nature, in the miracle of a new birth, in death, in the faces of strangers as well as loved ones.

That last verse in Isaiah gives us the image of God as a loving parent: "In his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." I believe that it is this kind of Presence which will save the world. We save the world when we offer a loving, generous, compassionate Presence to ourselves and to one another. There are many things paradoxical in the Christmas story. It's paradoxical that God becomes human in the first place, and that God does so not as a king, not at the top of the socio-economic ladder, but at the bottom, a poor child. The story calls us not just to be the loving parents, but to be the vulnerable new baby.

Some years ago, maybe 20 years ago, I read for the first time the words of the 17th century German Angelus Silesius. He trained first as a scientist and physician, and later entered the priesthood. He left us this little three-or-four line poem, depending on which translation you read. One version reads

*If in your heart you make a manger for his birth,
Then God will once again become a child on earth.*

Another translation renders it as

*If you could turn your heart into a cowstall,
Christ would be born again on earth!*

For some reason I cannot completely fathom, those words pierced my heart and mind and I understood the Christmas story in a whole new way. It said to me, “Oh, the whole point of Christmas is that I make room in my heart so that the Christ, that universal spirit of compassion, can be born in me once again.” Compassion, love, light, hope and joy-- all those good things are attempting to be born, regenerated in us, once again. But no great story leaves out the tension between light and darkness, between greed and generosity, between good and evil. Let us not forget that the story also has darkness. There is an evil king, who feels threatened by this child celebrity. In fear of what the child might mean for his earthly power, King Herod over-reacts and kills all male children two years and under. We call it the Slaughter of the Innocents. Mary and Joseph, like many immigrants today, must flee their country looking for safety, looking for human Presences who will receive them and their threatened offspring in love.

Sometimes God does not seem present to us. Instead, God is absent. We cannot believe in him/her, nor feel his or her presence. We call this the Dark Night of the Soul. Often, during such a time, all meaning in life deserts us, and we may have no joy nor sense of new possibility. We may believe change is impossible. When I underwent training in Spiritual Direction, we explored the Dark Night of the Soul, and accepted it as a time of waiting, of lying fallow, of trusting that through this absence, God was preparing us for something deeper, for a more meaningful relationship with her in the future. This requires great faith and patience --to wait in darkness for new light. It requires trusting in this liminal time, realizing that “without darkness, nothing is born or comes to light.” Mother Teresa offers us perhaps the greatest role model in this regard. In the midst of her career, she lost her faith, and yet she kept going, trusting that the work she was doing was of God, even though she had lost contact with the God who had called her to it originally.

We all know that Jesus’s chronic compassion, his refusal to exclude anyone, led to his death. But death is never the end of the story, for there is always new life. Though the old die, the young are born in the spring. Though we sometimes lose our purpose and feel dead, there are always new energies coming in to materiality, new forms, new incarnations. New light breaks in, overcoming the darkness, and we are carriers of that light. Jesus brought new light and life into the world, but we are called to carry it on. It is required of us that we hold the darkness and light, the suffering and exaltation, the evil and the good, the curse and the blessing all together. God’s promise is that we are capable of that because he is with us. In Psalm 37, the Psalmist reassures us: “Do not be vexed by evil men; do not be incensed by wrongdoers.” Instead, “Trust in the Lord and do good, abide in the land and remain loyal, Leave all to the Lord, trust in Him, wait patiently for him.”

As we move through liminal time, letting go of the old, opening to new possibilities, may we find comfort, rest, in faith that God accompanies us, is present to us, even through the valley of the shadow of death, and into a new year and new life. May it be so. Amen.