

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: September 18, 2011

Sermon Title: God of the Thresholds

Scripture: Luke 11:9-10

Pastor: Rev. Alida Ward

Last year, at right about this time, I stood before you, mournfully lamenting the departure of my oldest child, Brigitta, off to her freshman year of college. While she was in high school, we had had this understanding, or rather, edict, that I was not to tell stories about her from the pulpit, but since she had at that point left the area, I figured it was now safe to talk about her. So I stood here last September and told you about how tough a transition it was for her, how hard to leave home how agonizing it had turned out to be to step across the threshold into college life, and into a closet-sized dorm room. I even told you how, in the midst of the weeping and gnashing of teeth that went on, she had sobbed that Pennsylvania was a Godforsaken place because probably no one there even *knew* who Derek Jeter was.

After all that, though, she went on to have a great freshman year, and she completely forgot the misery of the first few days. Sort of like childbirth, you know – it all just kind of blurs away. Until she came home this summer. The first Sunday she went back to church here, she came and found me afterwards and said “Mom, we need to talk. Why is everyone asking me if I’m *doing all right* now? And why do they all seem compelled to talk about Derek Jeter?” “Oh,” I said, “um, I, uh, might have shared a little in a sermon about your initial transitional issues,” I said. Needless to say, the gag rule went firmly back into effect immediately.

But -- she’s back at school now. So now I can tell you all about *this* year’s transition into college life: I’ve got nothing to report. It’s sophomore year, whole different ballgame. This year’s goodbye consisted of a quick hug and no tears. Been there, done that.

*But* as we moved Brigitta in, all around us were other families, families of freshmen, laden down with lamps and bedding and beanbag chairs, approaching that very same difficult passage for their first time. We watched as they stood, literally, on the threshold college, at the doorway of tiny freshmen dorm rooms, looking into their

daughter's new home, looking into the beginning of adulthood, looking back at the end of what had been. Stood on the threshold, and, as I had, burst into tears. Yeah, did I mention that I had cried, too? It's not easy. It is good, but it is not easy.

Truth is, our lives are delineated by such thresholds, by the passage from one place to another, from one room of our life to the next, from one home to the next. Like Brigitta last year, like the freshmen I watched this year, with their forlorn parents. Our lives are marked by thresholds, as we step from one place to the next.

Just in these past few weeks, I have stood on a lot of thresholds, it seems, with people I care about – I have been with couples on the threshold of marriage, awaiting their weddings, excited and nervous all that same time – I have been with a friend on the threshold of a new job, a threshold on which he has had to stand and wait for a long hard time – I have been with another friend who finds herself suddenly, unexpectedly, on the threshold of a single life after the end of a marriage – and been with kids on the threshold of middle school, of high school. All, all, moving from one place to another, and all standing there in that place in-between, where the old is behind and done with, and the new is ahead, but not yet familiar, not yet known, not yet home. All standing on the threshold in that in-between place.

And the threshold is not an easy place to be. It's downright scary, in fact. Maybe that's why in ancient times folks used to think that there were particular evil spirits that lurked around thresholds. That crossing-over place was thought to be where you were most at risk, most vulnerable. Did you know that's actually why, after a wedding, the groom was supposed to carry the bride across the threshold of the home? To protect her from those little ankle-biting soul-stealing evil spirits. The first great act of chivalry in the new marriage. Just to forestall the obvious next question, no, I did not make David carry me across the threshold of the Parsonage – I mean, geez, the guy had double knee surgery last year.

Thresholds, crossing-over places, *are* scary – and the ancients knew that – and in our lives, we know that. Whenever we cross over from one place in life to the next, whether to something long sought after, or to something unexpected, whether to something that we think will be good, or into a loss that we have long dreaded, the threshold in between is where it is hardest to be, that place where life is unsettled, and it's not yet known how it will all turn out, Being between jobs is being on the threshold. Waiting for a child is being on the threshold. Packing for a move is being on the threshold. The loss of someone you love puts you on the threshold. Starting anything new means that you are living on the threshold. And it's not easy to be there. The ancients and their stories of spirits knew that.

But here's what *we* know. Thresholds can also be *sacred* places. The in-between, the not yet, the what was is not what will be, those places, those places can be sacred places. Because our God is a God of Thresholds, the God who waits to meet us at that place where one door has swung shut and the next is just about to open. When Jesus said "knock and the door will be opened for you," that's really what he was saying – God is the one at the door with you, on the threshold, in the in-between place.

So what does that mean? It means that God isn't just with us when things are orderly and tidy and life is predictable and church is on Sunday. It means that God is with us in the mess and the chaos, in the uncertainty and the change, in the joyful anticipation of what is to be and when what is to be is something terrifying. God is on the threshold, in the in-between time. Which is why threshold time is sacred time – the time when what is familiar is shaken loose but God is the constant, when what is certain becomes uncertain, but God is what is sure. On the threshold, when the already is past and the not yet is still coming, God is what **is**, standing on the threshold with you to lead you through the door to all that can be.

Joyce Rupp, a gifted spiritual author, writes this: *Threshold times contain tremendous energy. They hold the power to unglue and shake us deeply, to set an imprisoned spirit free, to bring peace. When my father died suddenly of a heart attack, his death plunked me down on a doorsill of grief where I stayed for a year. I yearned to go back through the door to the past and undo his death. On my threshold of immobility and sadness, I did not know what I was gestating. Only as depression lifted was I able to move beyond my immobilization, to step through the door into renewed hope. Only then did I realize how compassion had grown in me, how I could empathize more fully with the pain of others who knew loss.*<sup>i</sup> This was the gift of the threshold.

That's how God works. God comes to us in those places where we are a bit unglued, where we don't know yet how it's all going to turn out. God comes and joins us on the thresholds, the thresholds where we stand, hesitating, wishing we were not alone. And we are *not* alone. Knock and the door will open, Christ says, because I am the one here with you and I am the one who opens the next door.

I've just been reading through a pretty amazing book, a book called *Breaking Night*. You may have run across the author, Liz Murray – she's spoken quite a bit, she was on Oprah before Oprah went away. She grew up in New York as the daughter of two bright and loving but hopelessly addicted parents, who spent any dime they could get on any drug they could get while their children went hungry and the rent went unpaid. And when Liz was 16, her life ended up on the threshold – as she lost her

mother and her father disappeared, and she ended up living on the streets, homeless. The title of the book, *Breaking Night*, is a slang expression for staying up through the night until the sun rises. *I would ride the D train all night*, Liz Murray said, *until I saw the first hints of sunlight and the morning commuters. I would break night on the train.* Or break night on the top landing of an apartment building where no one would see her – or, on good nights, on the floor of a friend’s closet, hidden from parents.

Drifting, troubled, in trouble – Liz was between what had been and what was yet to be. She was *living* on the threshold. And then one day, one day – well, here’s what she writes: “As I sat there, lonely on the sidewalk, surrounded by all those people, my mind began to race. One minute I had a home, family, a roof over my head ... and now Ma was dead, Daddy was gone. Everything was different. Life has a way of doing that: one minute everything makes sense, the next minute, things change. The rapid changes I had experienced were hitting me hard as I sat there, and yet suddenly sadness wasn’t what came up in my gut. Out of nowhere, for whatever reason, a different feeling snuck up in its place, and it was hope.”<sup>ii</sup>

What she did in the strength of that hope was get herself to school and get herself As and, extraordinarily, remarkably, get herself to Harvard.

What we could call that feeling that snuck up on her is God – what we would call that hope that suddenly enveloped her is God. The God who saw Liz Murray through the darkness and broke night with her; the God who stayed with her through the dawn is the God of the Threshold. The God of the in-between times – the God who finds us between the already and the not yet. The God of the Threshold.

From homelessness to Harvard is a pretty dramatic threshold to have crossed over – the thresholds we pass over will probably not become Lifetime movies of the week, as Liz Murray’s did. But our times of passage are no less real for us, those times when life is not what it was and not yet what it will be – when we stand before a door to something new, good or ill – something new.

And I know, I know, a lot of you are on a threshold, paused between what was and what will be. I know a lot of you are right there.

**I** am right beside you, Christ says. The One who stepped across the threshold of a tomb and left it empty is the one who walks us across our thresholds, opening the door and showing us all that yet can be. The one whose life proved that nothing is stronger than love is the one who breaks the night with us and leads us always into dawn.

Christ of the open door.  
Christ of the empty tomb.  
God of the Tresholds.  
Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Joyce Rupp, *Open Door*, p.95

<sup>ii</sup> Liz Murray, *Breaking Night*