

The In-Between Places

Luke 11:9-10

8-25-19

My son Andres and I took a field trip to Ikea a couple weeks ago.

I made sure to wear my Fitbit, 'cause I knew I'd be getting in lots of steps— that place is huge. In fact, when we got to New Haven, we decided that first we needed a little extra fortification for the daunting task ahead, so we went to Pepe's pizza and downed a couple tomato pies.

Then we tackled Ikea.

We were there because Andres is moving into his first apartment next weekend, in Boston, so come Labor Day you will find us sitting on the floor of a basement apartment, assembling the **49** pieces of wood that go into the Ikea bed Andres chose, using the 261 screws provided. God help us.

We will, of course, be in good company —
all around us in the dorms and apartments of Boston
there will be thousands of parents of students,
peering through their reading glasses at instructions for how to assemble
a bookcase, a desk, a lamp —
I know this because there were thousands of them in Ikea with us.
All over the country in fact,
last weekend, this weekend, next weekend,
there are parents and students struggling up flights of stairs
with overpacked boxes of books and sheets and blankets and shoes,
and the cleaning supplies that thousands of moms are *sure* their child will be needing.
It is that time of year, it is transition time.

Transitions of all sorts, really:

In one ten-minute visit to Stop and Shop on Friday,
I ran into a five-year-old (and his dad) who was so excited to tell me about how Kindergarten was starting soon, and how he was kind of nervous;
and I saw a new college grad, former junior deacon here, who asked for prayers for his job interview this week,
and then one of those very moms who had just dropped her daughter and all those cleaning supplies at college — and who is now as a mom in that place between proud and mournful.
All of them — from five year old to fifty-five year old — are in transition.

In the in-between.

The in-between.

When I was little,
 one of my favorite places to be was at my cousins' house in Massachusetts.
 We used to play games together of great imagination,
 filled with magic and adventure.
 One of the games was this:
 In an upstairs room in their house,
 there was a big closet with two sliding doors.
 And this is what we would do:
 we would slide the door on the right open, and all step into the closet, and slide the door
 closed.
 We're in a time machine, we would say.
 And then we would slide the *other* door open, and all step out.
 And now — we were somewhere else.
 In a place of castles and knights and wizards, usually.
 Occasionally Narnia.
 In between the closing of one door,
 and the opening of another,
 was our magical mystical place,
 a place where we journeyed from one reality to another.
 And that place, that in-between place, where one door has closed
 and the other will soon open,
 was a place that we filled with excitement and anticipation
 as we imagined something wonderful ahead.

I've been thinking this week about my cousins and that magic closet with its two doors.
 I've been thinking about how much of our lives is lived in that place,
 in that place where one door has closed and another door stands in front of us,
 when we have left one reality and are crossing into the next.
 Whether we're about to go to kindergarten,
 or to a new place to live, or to a different job,
 there are all those in-betweens in our lives.
 Just like my cousins and me standing in the closet waiting for the magic door to open,
 we live, often times, in that place where **we** wait for the next door to open,
 knowing that the one behind us has closed.

The in-between CAN be magical, exciting —
 filled with the thrill of knowing that something new is coming.
 Sometimes to close a door behind you feels right,
 sometimes, often, the in-between is a place of joyful anticipation.

But the in-between time can also be frightening.
 The in-between can feel like a place of great loneliness —
 especially when it was something we did not choose.
 There are times when the door that has closed behind us was not one that we wanted to close.
 It may be a loss that has rocked us back on our heels,
 grief that has sent us into a tailspin,
 a change in our lives that was anything but wanted.
 And we find ourselves not knowing when that next door will open,
 or what it will reveal.

The writer Joan Didion, a number of years ago now,
 wrote a powerful book about the grief that followed her husband's death,
 an in-between time that she called 'the year of magical thinking.'
 And she spoke with great candor and heartbreak about grief
 being that place that none of us know until we reach it.
 And in that place, she wrote, where we mourn our losses,
 we also mourn ourselves, as we were, as we are no longer.
 A door has swung shut.
 Grief is an in-between place, and it is hard, and it is lonely and it is dark.

I listen to a radio show, also a podcast,
 that I just love — it's my go-to for long car trips.
 It's called 'The Moth' - you've heard me mention it before.
 And its premise is very simple:
 people simply tell stories, true stories,
 about their lives.
 They run the gamut from the riotously funny to the poignant.
 On my last long trip,
 the person telling their story was an astronaut.
 Truly.
 Mike Massimino, NASA astronaut.
 And he told a story from May 2009, when he'd sent into space on a mission to repair the
 Hubble Telescope, which had lost power and stopped transmitting images.
 He had been chosen for his experience, his intellect, his grace under pressure.
 Because this was going to be a high pressure mission.
 The world was waiting for the Hubble to be repaired.
 And to do it, Mike Massimino was going to have to have to exit the spacecraft on a tether,
 float over to the Hubble,
 climb around it to where the instrument panel was,
 undo a bunch of screws, open the panel and do electrical repairs.

Wearing a spacesuit.

They practiced for months, even practicing how to unscrew the screws.

So then Mike Massimino told all of us listening the story of what happened on May 17, 2009.

That was the day he went floating out into space,

on his tether,

grabbed hold of the Hubble Telescope,

worked his way around to the instrument panel was,

and got to work unscrewing the screws.

They all came out. Until the last one.

Try as he might, he couldn't get the screwdriver to catch.

Down on earth, they were watching in horror as they realized that the screw was completely stripped — the one thing they hadn't prepared for.

And up in space, Mike Massimino was facing the complete failure of his mission.

And he said **this**, as he told his story.

"I looked at the earth," he said, "and I thought of all the billions of people there.

And I knew none of them could help me.

And I felt this deep aloneness.

Not *Saturday afternoon with a book* alone,

but truly alone.

I felt completely detached.

I felt that I was by myself, and that everything I knew and loved was far away.

And then the darkness came.

At the speed we were traveling, we had 45 minutes of light before we were plunged into darkness, the darkest black you can ever experience.

The absence of light. And the deepest cold."

And he paused as he told the story,

and you could feel his loneliness in that darkness,

you shivered to hear him tell it.

And here's how the story ends.

By the extraordinary creativity of the people back on earth,
and through Mike's own tenacity, the repair was made.

And when he returned to earth, he said,

when he drove up the street to his house,

he saw the whole neighborhood there to meet him,

running to hug him,

relieved to see him, telling him they'd been praying for him.

"And I realized", he said,

that in the darkness, when I felt the most alone I had ever felt in my life.
I had never actually been alone.
When I was at my loneliest, I was not alone at all.”

I’ve thought a lot about that story,
about Mike Massimino in the darkest remove of space, convinced only of his aloneness.
And I’ve thought about the **hard** in-between times in our lives
when we are immersed in darkness, aware only of our aloneness.
When one door has shut and the next is not yet opened.
Those are the hard, hard places.

But the truth is the same for any of us as it was for Mike Massimino,
the truth that he came to realize.
That he had never been alone. That **we** are never alone.

The truth is that our God is a God of the in-between,
the God who waits to meet us at that place where one door has closed,
and the next is about to open.
When Jesus said “knock and the door will be opened for you,”
when he said, “I stand at the door and knock,”
when he said “I am the gate, the door, the way,”
that’s what he was saying — God is the one who is with you at the unopened door,
with you in the in-between place.

Earlier this summer, on June 16,
Art McCain led the first of our outdoor summer services,
our lay-led services which take place all summer.
And Art spoke about just this —
about the doors we pass through, throughout our lives.
“We are always going through doors,” Art said,
“Marriage, jobs, having children, retirement, aging, even death,
all doors.
So how do we cope?” Art asked.
And the answer was this:
“By trusting,” Art said, “that Love never ends. That God is love and love is God, and this is
constant.”
In the midst of change, this is the constant.

Yes. Yes.
God is with us in those places where we don’t know quite how it’s going to turn out.

God is with us in the joyful anticipations of what is yet to be,
 and in the deep worry about what is yet to be.
 In the in-betweens, when the already is past and the not yet is still coming,
 God is what IS,
 God is the constant,
 and Love never leaves us.
 We are never alone. And we are always loved.

I know, I know, that many of you in this room today are in that in-between time,
 on the threshold between what was and what is yet to be.
 Some are moving into a new time of life, chosen, anticipated, joyful.
 Some are in a place of change not expected, maybe frightening.
 Some are in that place of grief that Joan Didion described,
 where the life that lies ahead is not yet discernible.

God is there.
 Whatever in-between you find yourself in,
 God is there in the strangeness and uncertainty,
 in the anticipation and the eagerness,
 in the sorrow, in the joy.

Remember the story with which I began this sermon:
 my cousins and me in that place between the two doors,
 imagining it to be a magical place.
 The truth is, that in-between place IS a place of wonder, and Spirit.
 The in-between is a sacred place.
 To be in-between is to be in a sacred place.

Because God is there.
 Because God stands beside you there -
 God who is our peace, our courage, our joy.
 God who is our constant.
 God who is Love.

And the door will be opened unto you.
 Amen.