

reBuilding Bridges

15 I am the LORD, your Holy One,
the Creator of Israel, your King.

16 Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,

17 who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

18 Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.

19 I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

20 The wild animals will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,

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rivers in the desert,

to give drink to my chosen people,

21 the people whom I formed for myself

so that they might declare my praise.

The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Is 43:15–21.

9 About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. 10 He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. 11 He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. 12 In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. 13 Then he heard a voice saying, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” 14 But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” 15 The voice said to him again, a second time, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” 16 This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

17 Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon’s house and were standing by the gate. 18 They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. 19 While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Look, three men are searching for you. 20 Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.”

The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Ac 10:9–20.

Greeting

A couple weeks ago, Pastor Dan invited me to preach this morning. He asked me to expand on a devotional I shared a couple years ago. When we first talked about me preaching today, we were wrestling just with the impact of COVID-19 on our world, on our community, and on our church.

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We cannot ignore, however, the how the “unjust murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others, have highlighted the still rampant realities of systemic racism in our society.”

This sermon is built not only on the two texts we have read, but on three pictures.

My hope is that through these words of Scripture and these three images, we will be able to hear God’s call move forward even when our hearts long to go back.

I know that as I preach this morning that this a fractured and tense time. From work, to school, to our closest relationships, we have seen disruption, anxiety, and tension establish residence in our lives. We need to breath. It is hard to know how to speak to the racial tension in our nation. I commend our pastor and the EC of First Baptist for leading us courageously.

Living in Liminal Spaces

I wish I could go ten years into the future to look back on this time. How did we adapt? What really changed? What just went back to the way things were? When did we get a vaccine? Did it help? Who thrived in this time and why? What simply never returned?

Unfortunately, we are left to wrestle with understanding this time. We are left to wrestle with God. Each day, we are called to get up and begin to work at recreating life in a world that seems fractured, broken, and confused.

I think we are living in a liminal space. I know, we don’t use liminal every day. I thought that since Dan preached on acedia, that sin of spiritual apathy, I would throw out a word that might be new to many of you. A Liminal Space.

The Threshold

Liminal comes from the Latin that is translated threshold. In spiritual formation, a liminal space is a place where we the past can be let go, and the new is breaking into this world. It is a thin space where the presence of God seems more tangible and accessible. In the Gospel narratives, it is witnessed in transfiguration of Jesus and when Jesus calmed the storm on the sea.

Of liminal spaces, Richard Rohr writes, “Liminal space is . . .

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where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. There alone is our old world left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence. That's a good space where genuine newness can begin. . . . If we don't encounter liminal space in our lives, we start idealizing normalcy.

Liminal Events

Dr. Edward Thornton describes how his heart attack when he was in his 50s was a liminal space. The nearness of death allowed him to open himself to the fulness of who God created him to be. It gave him courage to live. It clarified his calling and freed him from expectations of others.

It feels like this is a liminal space for the church, for our church, and for our country.



The Old Choluteca Bridge

This first image I want to share with you is a picture of the old bridge in Choluteca, Honduras. It is a beautiful bridge. It is a replica of the Golden Gate bridge (even if it is not painted orange) and was built by the Army Corps of Engineers in the mid-1930s.

This beautiful bridge served the people of Choluteca for almost seventy years. The problem was this bridge was simply too small. As more and more products began passing from Central America, into Mexico then to the US and Canada, this bridge became inadequate.

When the PanAmerican highway was built, it was determined that a new bridge was also needed. The new bridge was not a beautiful Art Deco design or even a suspension bridge. They built a sturdy, functional bridge.

The bridge opened in the spring of 1998.



This is one of the most startling pictures I have seen. It raises so many questions. Why did they build the bridge there? Where is the road? What?

Hurricane Mitch

On October 29, 1998, Hurricane Mitch crashed into Central America as a category 5 hurricane, primarily Honduras and Nicaragua. It caused a massive flooding and landslides. Winds were in the range of 180 mph. It was a slow-moving storm that as it sat above Central America, it picked up moisture from both the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean.

Mitch was the second deadliest Atlantic hurricane on record. Mitch was responsible for the deaths of 11,000 people across Central America. In Honduras, 7,000 people lost their lives.

The flooding and mudslides were responsible most of these deaths. They washed many homes away and washed out many roads. If you have ever traveled in Central America, you know that normal rainstorms can wash out roads.

We are more familiar with Hurricanes Maria (Puerto Rico, September 2017) Sandy and Florence (Carolinas September 2018) or Andrew or Katrina. We know the damage that a hurricane can cause. Hurricane Mitch, however, was massively devastating, even if we don't remember it.



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Hurricane Mitch devastated Honduras, but it also moved the river. The bridge withstood the hurricane, but when the storm cleared, the bridge was left over dry land.

I want this image to be a visual metaphor for this moment in which we are living. In this time, I believe when the storms pass, we will find that the river has moved. The many of the old ways of being and doing church will no longer reach people who are hungering and thirsting for righteousness. For years, churches have grown increasingly isolated from the world around them. Even before the storm, many had become bridges over dry land.

Vise Grip on the Past

As we engage this image and we ponder the impact of COVID-19. As we engage this image and we hear the outcry for our nation to live up to her very core values at a time when the divisions are so deep. When we engage this image and we try to imagine how churches will walk into a new tomorrow. I believe we are at the threshold of new day in which “genuine newness can begin.”

If we are going to be able to cross that threshold, we must be able to release our “vise grip” on the past.

The Two Texts

We began this morning with two texts. The text from Isaiah 43 and the text from Acts 10. I believe both of these represent the very liminal spaces about which we have been speaking.

In Isaiah, the people are in Exile in a foreign land, Babylon. The Temple of Solomon has been destroyed. Jerusalem has been conquered. A puppet king sits on the throne.

In Acts, the church sits at a crossroads. They honestly don't know that they are at a crossroads. Peter is just hungry and tired. (A common affliction for some preachers.) The crossroads? Will the church remain a sect of Judaism or will it spread to the entire world?

In Isaiah, the prophet paints a picture one of the greatest events in Jewish history. The defining moment as the slaves had escaped from Egypt and they were trapped between Pharaoh's chariots and the Red Sea. God made a way across that sea. And here, God says through Isaiah, forget the past. I am going to do a new thing. Perhaps you should pause and reread Isaiah 43:15-21.

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For Peter, he has a dream about a sheet and some unclean animals. He is told to eat, but he refuses. I am guessing he hears his mother and his childhood rabbi in his head, “Good Jewish boys don’t eat food like that.” Three times he has this dream. God says, “Don’t call unclean what I have called clean.” Sometime today or tomorrow, take time to read all of Acts 10 and 11. Read it multiple times. These two chapters are a major liminal moment in the life of the church.

In my mind, I can just imagine the conversations at the bridge after Hurricane Mitch.

I can hear the guy who owns heavy equipment, “Give me a couple days, I can move that river right back under that bridge.”

I can hear the town spiritual, self-righteous opponent of the new bridge, “I told you God didn’t want us to build this new bridge. I told you that new bridge would bring the wrong sort of people to Choluteca. You see, God destroyed the bridge before our town was destroyed.”

I can hear the exhausted, “I don’t know what we are going to do. It will cost too much to build a new bridge. All hope is lost. We are destroyed.”

I can hear the resident historian, “I remember the old bridge. It was such a beautiful bridge.”

In this moment, we can hear these voices, maybe they are our own voices, but we hear them all the time.

In this moment, the most dangerous reaction we can have is the hunger, the desire to go back to the way things were.

Crossing the Threshold

Isaiah announces that God is going to do a new thing. Peter is warned not call unclean what God has called clean.

Isaiah asks, “Can you perceive it?”

Peter is left wondering what the meaning of this dream might be. And then there is a knock on the door below. Three Gentiles invite Peter to come and share the gospel with their boss. Their boss also had a dream. Can you see it? Cornelius could see it. Could Peter?

Purpose

The fundamental purpose of the bridge is to carry people and goods across the river. If that is the purpose, what do we need to do.



The fundamental purpose of the church is to worship God, make disciples, and build community. Our purpose is not maintaining stained glass windows, listening to organ music, and drinking coffee. Those are all good and beautiful things. But they are good and beautiful as they lead us to our fundamental purpose.

The fundamental values of America: “The pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness for all.” The belief that all people are created equal. The belief that we are on a journey to create a more perfect union. This is what has drawn the oppressed and the refugees to this land. It is not what brought African slaves to this land, but it is their inheritance and their hope that they left to the generations that followed. These values are why we fought the Civil War, because we knew that

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fundamentally, if we were to stay true to the promise of our essential values, we could not continue treating African-Americans as less than human.

We have never, NEVER, gotten this right in our nation's history. Our history is filled with our failures. Horrible, horrific failures. But in moments, we catch glimpses of who we can be. As President Lincoln said, we need to be reminded what draws us together "by the better angels of our nature." In this time, we are being called to live up to the values that shaped us to be a people called Americans.

Church, I cannot tell you exactly what new thing God is doing. I can say that I believe deep in my soul that God is standing on the other side of the threshold inviting us across.

I promise you the cost will be high. Not just in dollars, but in every area of our lives.

I promise you that the work will be hard.

Conclusion

It is natural to look back. It is healthy to grieve and lament. Lament is a holy language; as holy as praise. As the Psalmist wrote, "In the evening, in the morning, and at noonday, I will complain and lament, and God will hear my voice." (Ps. 55:18 NJB) It is ok to ask the hard questions, "Where is God?" "Will we survive?" "Why did God let this happen?" We can complain that we don't like this new place. We are uncomfortable and we want to go back to a place and time we once knew.

However, we dare not allow ourselves to get paralyzed in the questions and the lament. As Professor Dumbledore says to Harry Potter about the Mirror of Erised, "This mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible." We can be entranced by a desire to return to a time that no longer exists.

Biblical lament ends in the proclamation of hope; in belief that God will intervene!

We can stay stuck in the desire to return to a way that is gone, or we can courageously join Pastor Dan as he seeks to lead us into this new future. We can rebuild and reconnect with the world in ways that the church has not been connected in generations. As a nation and as a church, we can

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let go of things that have not worked for a long time. We can refocus our ministry on the essentials on our core values.

Sometimes we have to unlearn the old ways.

We know that we will make mistakes as we move forward. But God calls us forward, not into the past.

God invites us to see a new way of being church. We are being invited to see a new way of being America.

Either of these challenges would be more than we could handle. However, we get to be church in the midst of both of these challenges. WE believe that God can rebuild that bridge. Let's join God in rebuilding these bridges.

In this liminal space, our bridge stands over dry land. Now what?