



**THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**  
**MAY 3, 2020**  
**“THE MYSTERIOUS GATE BETWEEN WORLDS”**

**JOHN 10: 1-10**

“Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

Therefore, Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

**SERMON**

Deb and I once had a beautiful great Pyrenees named Dink. He was a big boy, weighing over 100 pounds. If you are unfamiliar with the breed, a great Pyrenees looks like a polar bear. Dink was a rescue dog who had been crate-abused. He was only taken out of his crate to breed. When we got dink, the fur on his back and the skin on his nose was rubbed raw from rubbing and pushing against the crate.

Because of the time all that time in his crate, dink hated to be confined. We first discovered this when we brought him home and let him out of the French doors into our backyard.



Deb and I wanted to give him some privacy to get acclimated, so we left him to roam in our fenced-in yard.

Checking on him a few minutes later, dink was gone. He had opened the latch on the gate with his nose and was ambling down the alley. Eventually, he would open the French doors, the door on his crate, the screen door. He was like Houdini. A master of escape....

A gate separates two worlds. For dink, there was the world of the backyard, enclosed with a fence, and then a gate that led to the outer world. We could even say that the crate had a gate that separated the enclosed crate space and the wider world.

For these reasons and more, the gate is a powerful symbol.

The gate symbolizes communication between one world and another: between the living and the dead

The gate is the threshold. The entrance to a new world.

In myth, gates are usually guarded by animals, such as lions, dragons, and bulls. We are guided through the land of the dead by a dog, because a dog knows how to sniff out the safe pathway through the underworld.

The gates of the east and west are the doors of the world temple, through which the sun passes morning and night.

The straight or narrow gate, referenced elsewhere by Jesus, is the central point of entry between the lower and higher realms.

At night, the gate separating the ego and the unconscious opens to let the dream enter.

In this pandemic, we are standing in the gateway. We are poised and paused in the threshold. For we are living in liminal space.



Liminal space exists betwixt and between. The mysterious gateway between two worlds. It is a time of wandering, represented in the bible by the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for forty years. Jesus tempted in the wilderness for forty days. Forty, a symbolic biblical number for “a heck of a long time....”

Here’s another way to think about liminal time and space:

Think of a favorite room in your house. You know the placement of everything in the room. For example, I think of our renovated basement room. A fireplace, my bar, a ceramic tiger in one corner, pictures of the walls, the comfortable leather sofa where deb and I sit each night with Hana and Lucas, our dogs, and watch Longmire, Bosch, and Ozark.

But when liminal time and space falls on us, as it has with this pandemic, we find ourselves standing in the gateway, motionless in the doorway, upright in the threshold. We can no longer live in our comfortable, familiar room. We are forced out that room and we cannot go back. And yet, we cannot move forward.

What can be frightening, and anxiety-provoking is that we cannot yet see into the new room. The next room is dark and unknown. We have little idea of what will life look like when we emerge from the pandemic. The world will have changed, but in what ways?

Now some people cannot bear the anxiety of standing in the threshold. Some people cannot tolerate being unable to move forward. Recall the Israelites who fight with their leader, Moses; who erect and worship a golden calf, who grumble about the same old food every day. Liminal time is tough, folks.

And some people will do just about anything to resist waiting patiently in liminal time and space.

For example, a pastor considers this liminal time a hoax and heads to New Orleans with his family where he contracts the coronavirus and dies.

Another pastor believes God offers divine protection and continues to call people to worship where they contract COVID-19.



Some governors have resisted even admitting the reality of COVID-19. We will soon see what happens what the Georgia governor opens his state for business.

Rather than calmly and wisely leading the people as did Moses, anxious leaders issue confusing and misleading statements meant to force us into the next room.

Yet from ancient times, liminal time and space has been considered sacred time and space where God slowly works transformation.

In liminal time and space, the Israelites are freed from bondage in Egypt and travel slowly to the promised land. In liminal time and space, Jesus fights the adversary and comes to know his identity as the son of man.

Liminal time and space are an unspecified time of grace. But, generally, it does not feel like it. You may not have called it so, but we all have had liminal times where our former way of life is challenged and changed: marriage, the birth of a child, a change in career, a geographical move, a divorce, the death of a loved one, a major illness. All experiences of liminal time and space where life permanently undergoes a transformation.

At around forty, I became fully immersed in liminal time and space when I resigned as a parish pastor and re-tooled as a pastoral psychotherapist. For four years, I drove and took a train twice a week to Chicago, sleeping on a friend's couch in oak park, taking the el into downtown Chicago. Racing back to Bloomington to see my first clients. Simultaneously going through a separation and divorce. Eventually, I emerged a changed person. A new calling. A new marriage. A new approach to life.

What makes liminal time and space so difficult is that the ego's programs for happiness are defeated. The ego must surrender to a higher power for a very long time. Paradoxically, every experience of grace is experienced as a defeat of the ego. We don't want to let go of life as we know it. We do not want to undergo God's transformative energy. No one likes to wander. No one likes to be uprooted. No one likes to be forced to let go of the familiar life, even if God's hand is at work.



And that is what is happening to the world. We have been forced to surrender the comfortable, the familiar. We have been humbled. Control has been torn from our hands. We no longer get to make the rules.

We are now in an immense, collective liminal space. And there is no telling when we will emerge.

So, let's reflect for a moment on this liminal time.

What is the world saying?

Pope Francis says he believes that the coronavirus is “certainly nature’s response” to humanity’s failure to address the ongoing “partial catastrophes” brought about by human-induced climate change. Scientists assert that if our mad destruction of natural habitats continue, it will only bring more deadly viruses our way.

The pope states, “there is an expression in Spanish: ‘God always forgives, we forgive sometimes, but nature never forgives.’”

He goes on, “every crisis contains both danger and opportunity: the opportunity to move out of danger. We have to slow down our rate of production and consumption and learn to understand and contemplate our natural world.”

Consider the foundational story of Judaism and Christianity. In the far reaches of our unconscious, we know of the garden. We catch glimpses of paradise where God, humankind, and all of nature live in harmony with one another.

But, if we trace our journey from the garden to today, we witness an acceleration in the destruction of God’s creation: the air, the land, the oceans, the forests, the animals, and one another.

Who is benefitting except scores of billionaires and corporate powers?

And what does God say?



Scripture records that God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. Could any of us say now that the creation is very good?

God so loved the world that he gave his only son. Not so loved humanity or white people or money or power or pollution. God so loved the world....

It is spiritually and psychologically dangerous to attempt to force a premature closure to liminal time. One cannot crash through the gate without dire consequences. Jesus calls people who do so thieves and robbers.

Liminal time is God's time and God issues the invitation to enter through the gate.

Let's remember that there are two kinds of time. Chronos and Kairos.

Chronos is watch time. Calendar time. We can manage this time. We can make our plans within Chronos time.

In scripture, Kairos time is God's time. It is time that is pregnant with new possibilities. It is the right time. It is time when we surrender to God's will. As Jesus says, the gatekeeper opens the gate. Thieves and robbers circumvent the gatekeeper and the gate and thus bring about destruction.

So, how will we emerge from the pandemic?

The way is narrow, says Jesus.

Yes, the way is narrow.

What we are learning is that we are interconnected. But Jesus taught us this long ago when he said, "when you do it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you do it to me."

Drop for a moment, our individual experience and just stay with the feeling, the affect, the emotion. When we do this, we find we are connected in our humanity and we all know suffering. We are connected in our humanity and we all know hunger. We are connected in our humanity and we all know anxiety. We are



connected in our humanity and we all know what it means to be in need. We are all connected in our humanity and know what it means to want to live a fulfilling life.

Will we emerge from liminal time and space as one humanity, working toward safety nets and support systems that provide food, healthcare, a livable wage, safe living conditions, safe water and air for all?

Or will it be business as usual? Where the wealthy few prepare their resort bunkers complete with helicopter pad, prepared for the next plague, and the hell with the rest of us?

Will we emerge no longer willing to buy into the same false promises, behind closed-door deals, and crumbs left for the vast majority.

Let's not pretend that this is a Christian nation until the poor are fed, the marginalized are included around the table, the sick are provided healthcare, the racially motivated imprisoned are freed. We either follow Jesus or we don't. You can't fight for the right for every baby to be born if you are not going to ensure that those babies have access to lives worth living. And lives worth living do not include government officials who are slumlords, a frozen minimum wage, lack of education, an unjust political system, and the destruction of societal safety nets. That is the height of hypocrisy.

The way is narrow. And the gate is still closed. If people want to bust through, let's see how quickly the death toll rises.

Until that time, the gospel urges patience. Our time is not God's time.

The word patience is derived from a Latin verb meaning to endure, to undergo, and to experience.

This is what is being asked of us: to endure, to undergo, to experience liminal time.

God's time. A time of transformation.



When the time is right, we will know it because God will show us the way through the gate.

And that will be a lovely day. A joyous day. A new world.

### **SERMON SONG**

*THE DOOR* by KEB MO)