

***Liminality and Responsibility of a Prophetic Movement:
Performing Our Faith in the Public Square***

Zdravko Plantak
Loma Linda University

*Sometime the best map will not guide you
You can't see what's round the bend,
Sometimes the road leads through dark places
Sometimes the darkness is your friend.¹*

“Liminality” is not mentioned or defined in a variety of dictionaries. Even the Second edition of Oxford English Dictionary does not have it. However, it does have an entry for “liminal”, the adjective form, and lists it as a rare usage, defining ‘liminal’ as “Of or relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process”. Liminality, derived from the latin word “*limen*”, means “threshold”, the bottom part of the doorway that must be crossed when entering a building or a room.

One could find that in English language “liminal” has appeared first in the publications of psychology in 1884, but the idea was later introduced to the field of anthropology in the 1909 by Arnold Van Gennep in his seminal study *Les Rites de Passage*.² It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that Victor Turner³ popularized the terms “liminal” and “liminality” as he elaborated on Van Gennep’s work and made it more accessible and also more widespread for many different fields of inquiry, including in more recent times the field of religion, theology and ethics.

Turner links liminality to numerous ideas such as “marginal phase”, “that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both”, “betwixt-and-between period”, a “fruitful darkness”, and “the transitional being or liminal *persona*”, among others.⁴ And one could look at liminal space or liminal time as that which is quite scary, uncomfortable, and very unsettling. For some it can easily become a twilight zone, a hopeless space, a very depressing and negative, ambiguous, and uncertain time of life. However, it need not be so, because, as Leonard Hjalmarson rightly points out, “Liminality is where all

¹ Bruce Cockburn, “Pacing the Cage”, From *Charity of Night*, 1995, Golden Mountain Music Corporation, BMI.

² Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, London: Routledge, 2004. Reprinted from 1960 edition by Routledge and Kegan Paul. Originally published as *Les rites de passage*, Paris: Émile Nourry, 1909.

³ Victor Turner worked from 1967 until his death in 1983 on the concept of liminality and has published, among other works, three most prominent and important studies on the subject: “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*,” from *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (1967), “Liminality and Communitas,” from *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), and “Passages, Margins, and Poverty: Religious Symbols of Communitas,” from *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (1974).

⁴ These are all phrases from Victor W. Turner, “Betweex and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*”, *The Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society*, 1964, Symposium on New Approaches to the Study of Religion, 4-20.

transformation happens. It is when we are betwixt and between, and therefore by definition ‘not in control’. Nothing new happens as long as we are inside our self-constructed comfort zone. Much of our day to day effort at life is toward maintaining our personal little world.” And when this continues as business as usual there is only a routine that does not put us in the sphere of much growth or into a potentially life-changing and therefore life-building experience. Richard Rohr explains liminality this way:

Nothing good or creative emerges from business as usual. Much of the work of the God of the Bible is to get people into liminal space, and to keep them there long enough so they can learn something essential. It is the ultimate teachable space, maybe the only one. Most spiritual giants try to live lives of “chronic liminality” in some sense. They know it is the only position that insures ongoing wisdom, broader perspective and ever-deeper compassion. The Jewish prophets, Socrates and Diogenes, Jesus, Francis, Buddha, Gandhi, ... immediately come to mind.⁵

True liminality is a doorstep of genuine vulnerability and as such, Rohr concludes, it “leads to increased awareness, increased consciousness of the pain and the goodness -- your own and others -- and increased knowledge of the shadow, too. Who would go there willingly? I wouldn’t. You have to be led, or, like Jesus, you have to be “driven by the Spirit into the wilderness” (Mark 1:12). Because first we must meet the “wild beasts” and only later do “angels minister to him” (1:13). No one wants to wait for the true angels. We would rather manufacture plastic, churchy ones and bypass the truly present wild beasts.”⁶

I have been meeting with a few of such wild beasts in recent times and wanted to personalize this topic before I come to the theological suggestions on how we could embrace and utilize the liminal times and engage such twilight-zone with creativity and hope that is at our disposal. My wife and I lost both our mothers in the span of two weeks earlier this year. This would have been enough of a personal liminal crisis to illustrate the so-called “protracted liminality”, i.e. drawn-out periods of transition, of not knowing, of being so disjointed and dissonant.⁷ Then San Antonio happened. In the midst of the terribly stressful large agenda issues that many of us were experiencing, a good friend Gerry Chudley died as we all thought about women in ministry and then, not so long after, a great fighter of Adventism in the Pubic Square, Roy Branson, passed away.

However, the liminality, and as a result the radical or Christianly-rooted way to approach it, is not only faced on a personal level. We have been facing it as a church as well. Just think for a moment how much marginality has been created for many in our

⁵ Richrd Rohr, “Days Without Answers in a Narrow Space”, *National Catholic Reporter*, (February 2002). Also found at http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2002a/020102/020102h.htm, (accessed November 15, 2015).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Then I got sick. And, as if it could not get worse, Lidija got a serious vertigo. Finally her dad also managed to ‘earn’ himself a very hard hitting flu and made us worried that we might loose him at 86 years of age.

community by the discussions regarding the issues of women ordination, homosexuality, or a six-day recent creation. Our church has been and to a large extent continues to be in a post-San Antonio at a threshold or 'in-between' on so many issues. The rest of the Christian church is not except from very threatening insecurities of the threshold that postmodernism and post-secularism has brought to all of our door steps. Christianity is in crisis and many are attempting to make sense of it all. PEW Research Center has done a very thorough study of the present situation of what they termed "NONES on the rise", a substantial group of Americans who do not identify with any faith community any longer and define themselves as 'nones', or those who have no affiliation, and/or no religious faith.⁸ Similarly, Barna Research publications have identified very similar and disturbing trends among general Christian population.⁹ It seems that Christianity is in a place of how Bruce Epperly described the Holy Saturday, "a day in which nothing happens, nothing is guaranteed, and nothing is hoped for. It is the day Jesus lay in the grave, framed by the anguish of Good Friday and the celebration of Easter".¹⁰

This is what it means to live in a liminal time, in the wilderness with no compass, roadmap, or pathway. For some of us this is manifested personally and for many liminality is experienced also corporately: in crisis of our church institutions; on thresholds of what we morally know is right and yet we still do not equally treat our women and other marginalized groups in our communities; in the way we act to protect our turf even when it hurts such marginal and vulnerable populations; in the enormous pressures of natural sciences and evolutionary theories that generate a faith-crisis for many; in the attacks of the "new atheism"; even as we attempt to understand ourselves in this time of most liminal era defined as 'postmodernism', literary after something (modernism) and before something else that we have not yet even been able to name.¹¹

⁸ "'Nones' on the Rise", Pew Charitable Trust, (October 9, 2012),

<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/> (accessed on November 15, 2015) Footnote 4 also give further explanation: "The term "nones" is often used to describe people who indicate in surveys that they have no religion or do not belong to any particular religion. See, for example, Kosmin, Barry A. and Ariela Keysar, with Ryan Cragun and Juhem Navarro-Rivera. 2009. "American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population, A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey 2008." Trinity College, http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/NONES_08.pdf. See also Smith, Tom W. 2007. "Counting Religious Nones and Other Religious Measurement Issues: A Comparison of the Baylor Religion Survey and General Social Survey." GSS Methodological Report No. 110. [http://publicdata.norc.org:41000/gss/documents/MTRT/MR110-Counting-Religious-Nones-and-Other-Religious-Measurement-Issues.pdf](http://publicdata.norc.uchicago.edu/documents/MTRT/MR110-Counting-Religious-Nones-and-Other-Religious-Measurement-Issues.pdf).

⁹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity... and Why it Matters*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007) David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving the Church...and Rethinking Faith*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011).

¹⁰ Bruce Epperly, "Holy Saturday: Living in the Liminality", Patheos: Hostig the Conversation on Faith, (Blog entry, March 9, 2013), <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2013/03/holy-saturday-living-in-the-liminal/#ixzz3QnzMB4gM>, (accessed on November 15, 2015).

¹¹ Leonard Hjalmarson describes it in the following way: "What happens when an entire culture moves into liminality? It isn't just language and philosophy that is shifting, the entire culture is on the move. As a result our individual identities no longer seem secure. Identity is referenced to particular communities and worldviews, to the broader socio-economic and cultural realities. When the context itself is changing rapidly, our individual identities experience similar fluidity. Suddenly the question, "Who am I?" takes on new poignancy, producing personal anxiety and feelings of pain and loss." In "Forty Years in a Narrow

Such experiences seem as much the abyss as the way that the dark Easter Sabbath must have seemed to the disciples, “the experience of the apophatic, if the apophatic can be experienced, the imageless abyss of unknowing, the valley of grief [with] no hope of healing.”¹² In such a way, Epperly continues, in the wilderness of grief and uncertainty we may indeed

find Holy Saturday a window into reality. A holistic faith requires us to recognize the dazzling darkness of liminal times. On Holy Saturday, there are no guarantees that life will get better, disease will be cured, a lost child will return home, we will regain our professional status, hope will return, or that God will become real again. We need a miracle – a resurrection – but we cannot force it, guarantee it, or assume it. Resurrection happens, like falling [in] love or the lifting of grief, when we least expect it or believe love has passed us by. But, when it happens, we discover our cup runs over even though we still must sojourn through the valley of the shadow.¹³

Taking up gardening I was reminded recently that liminality is like the germination of seeds in the dark soil – despite our inability to experience it, we live with hope, we go back to see what has changed daily, we water [albeit sparingly due to the CA drought] the spots that still seems without any life. “Resurrection is our hope, right now, even when we cannot expect it or wonder if God’s way will triumph insuring that we can respond to our own brokenness, the threat of global climate change, or the growing gap of rich and poor. In the suspense of the liminal, we hope that we will experience God again and with it, the courage to become God’s partners in healing the world.” Or, as Sam Wells, dean of Duke University Chapel, describes liminal experience as ‘*the comma*’ between the cross and the resurrection. “To be a Christian,” he explains, “is to dwell in that comma.”¹⁴

So, as a way to look hopefully towards the more positive aspects of liminality and how important it is for our, personal and communal, creative ways forward both as a church and also as we contribute toward better common good and societal flourishing, I would like to propose couple of ways to look at this issue with encouragement. And one way of looking at this issue is through the concepts of re-imagining and then re-performing our faith on the margins of society.

As Leonard Hjalmarson rightly suggested,

This is one of the benefits of liminality: we let go of the old answers and begin to ask new questions. We return to the ancient text looking for clues. Liminality is a tremendously creative place, a formless place of possibility where the Spirit of God hovers over the waters. We ask new questions, because a faith that no longer connects with experienced reality no longer makes sense. The answers while

Space”, *The Next Reformation: Leadership, Formation, Culture, Mission*, <http://nextreformation.com/wp-admin/resources/liminal.pdf>, (accessed March 30, 2015).

¹² Epperly

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Gretchen E. Ziegenhals. “Liminality and Leadership”, *Faith and Leadership*, (March 14, 2011), <http://www.faithandleadership.com/liminality-and-leadership>, (accessed January 15, 2015).

wandering in the desert are different than the answers that work when settled in the city. What worked while framed in modernity can get you killed in postmodernity. A theology of hegemony, when the church is at the center, will not be useful when the church is on the fringes.¹⁵

And it seems that we have come again to the point in history when the church is on the margins, as has been the case in the exile in the midst of a significantly efficient and successful Pharaonic Empire, and through the rather tough and liminal time of the exodus when Israelites nomadically wandered for forty years in a dark and narrow space towards the promised land, as well as the time of Jesus and the first Christian community trying to establish itself from the margins of the Roman Empire.

“I will carry the Ring to Mordor, though I do not know the way,” we exclaim with Frodo.¹⁶ We are invited to embrace what bell hook terms “the margins of radical openness” and radical liminality. bell hook positively contends that liminal space is “a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves.”¹⁷

If looked in such a way, liminality becomes a blessing.¹⁸ “Marginality, in short, leaves the church free, if it is faithful, to cherish its absurdity; establishment just makes it fall in love all over again with the irrelevant respectability of the world's wisdom and power,” wrote Robert Capon.¹⁹ In times of great unrest as we experience in our journeys of faith and in our communal ecclesiastical nomadic experiences, liminality can and should become a place of immense creativity and imaginative potentiality. What philosopher and linguist James Tuedio termed “regenerative forms of nomadic life”²⁰, Miroslav Volf’s theological suggestion seems to celebrate when he asserted that “the center is not the place where Christian faith should be anyway: it was born on the margins to serve the whole humanity ... social marginality is not to be bemoaned but celebrated.”²¹

¹⁵ Leonard Hjalmanson, “Forty Years in a Narrow Space”, *The Next Reformation: Leadership, Formation, Culture, Mission*, <http://nextreformation.com/wp-admin/resources/liminal.pdf>, (accessed March 30, 2015).

¹⁶ Frodo in Peter Jackson’s “The Fellowship of the Ring.” (Wellington, NZ: New Line Productions Inc. 2001).

¹⁷ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, (Boston: South End, 1990), 152. See, especially, “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance”, (pp. 41-49) and “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” (145-153).

¹⁸ “We have to be taught how to stay in liminal space. It is always holy ground, but it actually takes a while to get those shoes off. ... And I must warn you, one of the most effective ways to avoid liminal space is to be super religious on the right or super correct on the left -- and reconfirm all your needed securities.” Richard Rohr, “Days without answers in a narrow space”, *National Catholic Reporter*, (February 1, 2002), http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2002a/020102/020102h.htm, (accessed November 15, 2015).

¹⁹ Robert F. Capon. *The Astonished Heart*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 64.

²⁰ James A. Tuedio, “Boundaries in Translation at the Margins of Liminal Excess: Calibrating the Voice of Empire to the Ear of Resistance,” Empire Conference (California State University Stanislaus: March 2006), *Margins* (CSU Stanislaus Honors Program Journal: May 2006), 63.

²¹ Miroslav Volf, “Theology, Meaning and Power: A Conversation with George Lindbeck on Theology and the Nature of Christian Difference,” in *The Nature of Confession. Evangelicals and Postliberals in*

There are many biblical stories one could tell of such liminal vulnerability and the dark night of the community of God's people when they found themselves in the "membrane between inner and outer" on the 'margins of the radical openness'. Stories of Peter in the twilight zone of the inner court when he is denying Jesus, or the stories of numerous other biblical characters could be cited: Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Samson, Elijah, Mary – Jesus' mother, John the Baptist, Paul, and even Jesus himself.²² However, in a very special and powerful way, the story of Israel seems to be most telling and useful for instruction on the potential hope out of despair on the threshold of faith. For many of us in the moments of vulnerable marginality and uncomfortable liminality the urgent and exceedingly difficult question becomes: "how can that promised hope override the despair"?

The enslavement of the people of Israel in the Pharaonic Empire was brutal and harsh. The hegemony and absolute control of people's lives started with a famine and ended through the appointment of the food czar Joseph who helped Pharaoh to create a monopoly on land and on the food supply (Gen 47: 20-24). Food, while scarce for the rest of the people, is plentiful for Pharaoh so, through "oppression and forced labor", he builds "supply cities, Pithom, and Ramses" (Ex 1:11). Walter Brueggemann, commenting on this text, says that "the narrative does not miss the irony that those forced by *famine* into slavery are engaged in storing then *surplus* of the empire. ... Pharaoh leverages food in order to enhance his power. In the end, the peasants are so 'happy' that they asked to be 'owned'":²³ "Buy us and our land in exchange for food. We with our land will become slaves to Pharaoh; just give us seed, so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate." (Gen 47:19.) At the end they are even grateful to be reduced to cheap laborers and finally slaves: "You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh". (Gen 47:25.) And, indeed, the unrestrained greed of the imperial force is ruthless, without any protection, and exceedingly destructive, as the voiceless and powerless crowd is given less rights, more work is demanded, and fewer resources are allocated, culminating in a suffering outcry: ""Why have you treated your servants like this? Your servants are given no straw, yet we are told. 'Make bricks!' Your servants are being beaten, but the fault is with your own people." Pharaoh said, "Lazy, that's what you are – lazy! That is why you keep saying, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord'. Now get to work." (Ex 5:15-18a).

The liminal life that Israelites found themselves in was getting tougher and harder from day to day. The Egyptians "worked [Israelites] ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with hard labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their hard labor the Egyptians used them ruthlessly" (Ex 1:13-14.).

So, how do the hopeless hope and how do the tired, vulnerable, and abused imagine?

Conversation, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 64.

²² Cf. B. J. Oporeza, "Apostasy in the Wilderness: Paul's Message to the Corinthians in a State of Eschatological Liminality", *JSNT* 75 (1999): 69-86. See, in particular, his footnotes 16, 21, and 22 for several biblical scholars studying some of the biblical narratives in the context of liminality.

²³ Walter Brueggemann, *Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture*, Forward by Bishop Thomas E. Breidenthal, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 18.

How can, in such difficult and liminal circumstance, hope override despair? Walter Brueggemann, in his 2014 SBL lecture in San Diego entitled “Performance as Liminality: Between Reality and Possibility”, considered “the hope of the hopeless as liminal activity that runs between social realism about the power of Pharaoh and his son-in-law and social possibility that lies beyond the aegis of the extraction.” He continues,

That liminal ground is filled, in ancient Israel, by dramatic performance in oracle, song, narrative, and dance in liturgical form. These performances are acts of resistance that entertain the prospect of life outside the domain of greed. That performance edges out beyond realism and entertains possibilities that are performed liturgically long before they are enacted in the economy. The purpose of such liturgical performance in a liminal mood is exactly to be ready...

The Exodus narrative is the performance of defiance and alternative that keeps attesting that there is life beyond Pharaoh and his son-in-law. The Exodus—the exit—is ... *a liturgical departure from an ideology of bondage* that manages to assert its own totalism. Pharaoh wants to make the ideological case that there is no possible life thinkable, imaginable, or livable outside his domain of production and accumulation. The liturgy of Exodus, however, dares exactly the opposite.²⁴

And this liturgy of exodus seems to begin out of the depth of despair of the hard-hit slaves who are unable to even imagine differently at first, but still through their groans and cries start calling upon the Lord. They are unable to imagine the unimaginable. And yet, they cry out and finally the force from the outside comes into their midst and becomes the most significant character in the drama and liturgy of the liberation. “During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning” (Ex 2:23-24).

In Israel’s case the drama of liminality is expressed as the cries and sighs of the public display of unbearable pain of the ordinary people. Brueggemann, in another book, describes vividly that “the pain is caused by the imposition of the ruthless, demanding production schedules of Pharaoh. It has taken a very long time for the slaves to gather and muster a voice of protest. The sounding of that voice is risky; it is the risk run by every uncredentialed surfacing of the oppressed. It is the hazard undertaken by every whistle-blower in the corporation. It is the grievance of every abused person who finally will assert, ‘I am not going to take it anymore’.”²⁵ The story does not begin with God’s initiative, but it is initiated by the voice from below, the voice that is in pain, the voice of the voiceless who is unable to even start imagining a different reality. And yet, the reimagining must be done and must start in this scary, hopeless, and liminal space with a voice that has no specific plan nor a vision of a final outcome. It is a dance, poetry, and

²⁴ Walter Brueggemann, “Performance as Liminality: Between Reality and Possibility”, a paper delivered at the annual Society of Biblical Studies Conference in San Diego, November 2014. It has been subsequently published at *Theology Today* (October 2015) vol. 72 no. 3: 262-275.

²⁵ Brueggemann, *Truth Speak to Power*, 28.

performance that is coming from the depth of human injustice and suffering. We experience at times this type of state of the soul at the thresholds of our faith. We experience it personally, and we further encounter it in the church that is occasionally arrogant, unjust, and unfair. We are too often coerced by the powerful empirical forces that try to reduce us to commodities and consumers,²⁶ or that try to act in such prejudiced ways that may almost feel like the crazy religious laws of some totalitarian and fundamentalist regimes we despise in other cultures. And yet, that cry is, what Antonio Gramsci calls “the small door through which Messiah may come”.²⁷ Such voicing is “an act of defiant hope that refuses the bodily pain inflicted by the greedy world of Pharaoh”.²⁸

Eventually the new and primary character in this drama, the Holy One seen and heard in the burning bush, and whose name is so enigmatic that it cannot be boxed into any ideology, appears with a strong resolve for the emancipation of his people. This is a public drama of which the purpose is a “teaching curriculum in a narrative form”, in words of God, “that you may tell your children and grandchildren” (Ex 10:2). This has been given as an exit liturgy so that we, the New Testament children of Israel, and not only our Jewish counterparts, could continue re-performing such worship rituals in the Easter service and in the Lord’s Supper, re-enacting the story of Passover and remembering that there is hope for newness in the midst of liminal ‘not-knowingness’ and the apparent fear and trembling. The night is dark and heavy, the angel of death may be passing by our doors, the liminal nature of faith is frightening, and yet there is hope found on the thresholds and doorposts, the hope of the possible exodus. And the exodus is not yet a fully resolved time out of liminality, but, in the case of the children of Israel, one frightening liminal experience leads to the forty years of a liminal wilderness experience. Brueggemann argues that, “Because we ourselves are the instructed, socialized grandchildren of these narratives, we keep reading it for all its poignant contemporaneity, even while we recognized that it is only a story. It is not a doctrine or a proposition or a proof. ... Reading it this way, we ask about transposing the old narrative into present reality.”²⁹ He goes on to suggest that when pain and holiness collude in subversion, “we engage that plot and entertain the notion of its fresh reperformance, we see the outcome of the original performance:

- They tore themselves away from Pharaoh’s system, even though they later recalled that his system assured a steady stream of food (see Num 11:4-6).
- They went through the deep waters of risk where Pharaoh and his enforcers could not follow.

²⁶ See an excellent recent exposition on this issue in Joan Chittister, *Between the Dark and the Daylight: Embracing the Contradictions of Life*, The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition., chapter 7, “The Emptiness of Accumulation” (Kindle Locations 541-587).

²⁷ Antonio Gramsci is cited in Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 243.

²⁸ Brueggemann, *Theology Today* (October 2015) vol. 72 no. 3: 262-275.

²⁹ Brueggemann, *Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture*, 36.

- They came out on the other side and danced for the first time, their emancipated bodies now free of brick quotas, unencumbered by the requirements of Pharaoh. Thus Moses sang: “The Lord will reign forever and ever” (Exod 15:18)
- And Miriam and the other emancipated women sang and danced: “Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea” (15:21).”³⁰

The force of the liminal performance is the recognition on the part of those who do not see clearly that, nevertheless, there is life beyond the present reality, beyond the liminality in which we find ourselves. Brueggemann is worth quoting one more time:

“The narrative signals to the children of cheap labor the prospect of a real life alternative. It is no wonder that Miriam and the other women – and eventually Martin and Nelson – sang and danced: Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, free at last (Exodus 15:20-21).

Freedom is imagined. Here is freedom from the quota system of monopoly, freedom from fate as cheap labor, freedom from endless production. Freedom is the discernment that Pharaoh’s power is phony and his claims are false, phony and false because they cannot withstand the holy God who comes voiced in the cries of the departing hoppers whose silent despair has turned to voiced possibility.”³¹

The new life begins, but the new life is not yet ‘unliminal’. They become homeless wonderers and disoriented complainers in their newly found ‘freedom’ of what became the hard, and once-again liminal, ‘exilic experience’. For forty years they wandered through the desert, not reaching the promised home.

Bono of U2 sings this line in the song *City of Blinding Lights*:

“The more you see, the less you know,
The less you find out as you go,
I knew much more than I do now.”³²

“In a similar way, the people of Israel having been freed from slavery and sent on their way to the promise land found themselves in the wilderness. They were in liminal space – neither in the past, which was familiar though harsh, nor in the future toward which they were heading. Rather they were in that disorienting place where all faith in God is formed. ... The people of Israel faced an *adaptive* challenge. In that in-between place of faith, the community – just like the church – has to find ways to adapt creatively to the challenges of their

³⁰ Ibid., 37-38.

³¹ Brueggemann, *Theology Today* (October 2015) vol. 72 no. 3: 262-275.

³² U2, “City of Blinding Lights,” from *How to Dismantle an Atom Bomb* (London: Universal Music Publishing, 2005).

situation. They are disoriented in liminal space on the way to new orientation in a new land, being formed as a free people who will radically depend upon God. Again, fear threatens to overwhelm them, even to the point of wanting to go back to slavery.”³³

B. J. Oropeza, evaluating Robert Cohn’s perspectives on the experience of wilderness in Torah tradition as ‘a buffer zone’ between Egypt and Israel, suggests that during the Israelites’ wilderness trek the conceptions of liminality “affected social and religious values of the people in a revolutionary way. ... The narrative thus became a repository for traditions expressing the ambiguities of liminality, the possibilities of *communitas*, and the limiting values of structure’.³⁴

If the exodus is indeed a schooling process, and the significant educational curriculum to the heirs of the chosen community liberated by the mighty hand of the Lord, then the wilderness trek is truly a story of liminality that becomes a paradigm for our own life. It becomes truly a repository for our own tradition and the situation in which we find ourselves, personally, as a community of faith, and as a Christian church at large. It is this marginal ambiguity that we experience in the public square and it is a place of genuine ‘exercise in hope’ when there seems to be, at times, only darkness. The threshold of our faith is an opportunity to reimagine how it could be as we contribute to the common good, and directing our cries towards heaven without even being able to imagine that things can completely turn around and that we could be liberated from the ‘claws of Egypt’. In our public life we begin to perform anew our liturgies of faith, exercising our faith-narratives not only on Sabbaths but also through the entire week. Love and hope, in the liminal situations that are laden with occasional doubt, jealousy, coveting, prejudice and hatred – all the opposites to genuine agape love - and, finally, in the seemingly dark and despairing situation we start in hope for the city and repair of the world (“Tikkun Olam”)³⁵ on the journey of God’s will being done on earth as it is already in heaven.

Viv McWaters writes that in order to create something new, we must, like a trapeze artist, first let go of what we are currently clutching. The liminal space is the space between the letting go and the grabbing on, she explains. Blind Bartimaeus must let go of his cloak, giving up all he has, before he can embrace the love and healing that Jesus offers him (Mark 10:46-52). We may need to let

³³ Hjalmarson, “Forty Years in a Narrow Space”.

³⁴ B. J. Oropeza, “Apostasy in the Wilderness: Paul’s Message to the Corinthians in a State of Eschatological Liminality”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 75 (1999): 75. The quote in Oropeza’s text is from R. I. Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space*, American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion, (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 20-21., cf. pp. 3, 22.

³⁵ “Tikkun Olam” in Jewish community seems to be very close to the idea of Revelation 22 that suggests a repair of the world in terms of “Healing of the Nations”. See, for example, Elliot N. Dorff, with Cory Willson, *The Jewish Approach to Repairing the World (Tikkun Olam): A Brief Introduction for Christians*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008.; also for a brief description see <https://www.adatshalom.net/index.php/social-action/2/tikkun-olam-guidelines>, (accessed 15 November 2015).

go of habits, old stories, a culture, a pattern of behavior, an expectation or an attitude. ... Old habits are safe and predictable. And most of us don't want to let go of the trapeze bar, unless we have some sense of what we're grabbing onto next. But when we let go and allow ourselves to experience the in-between, we are open and unallied in a way that gives us the perspective we need to be fully creative.³⁶

I believe that Hjalmarson is right when he comments on Rohr's idea that "the mind only takes pictures using the film with which it is loaded": we must "learn to see in new ways, to listen in new ways, and then learn a new language to describe what we were seeing. ... We had embarked on an unplanned journey with an unknown destination, without maps and with little light."³⁷

Like the children of wilderness having spent forty years in the dark and narrow space hoping for the promised land, we must also start imagining what God desires for us and to what God is leading us, and then continue performing our faith anew through the liturgy of exodus, recognize what God has done on the Easter weekend and enduring the dark, insecure, scary, and disillusioned liminal Sabbath hours while remaining with our Lord Jesus in the dark soil still waiting to be resurrected. We are right there with Him on many of our own personal "Holy Sabbaths", not quickly being able to resolve the hard ambiguities and discover the resolution that the resurrection would eventually offer. We stay with Him through the dark night of the soul, in the grave and the separation as we cry side by side our Lord, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?",³⁸ waiting for the germination of the seed that will produce a new life. In that the most liminal of all places, we hope for the life abundant, even while we and the earth are still groaning.

Elizabeth O'Connor, one of the founders of the Church of the Savior in Washington, DC writes that, "Our chance to be healed comes when the waters of our life are disturbed." We need not to fear liminality, disturbed waters, exile and exodus, not even the dark soil of death. We need to expect them, even pray for them, so that transitions can happen and so we could develop into something that status quo does not allow for.

And we need to live our faith in a daily performance of love, as a community of saints, as the Body of Christ. We do not perform our faith narratives once a week when we step into the sacred space of church. We learn that such performance of our faith penetrates every nook and cranny of our everyday life. And we recognize that we can only do this liminal performance on a local community level, church by church, group by group, community by community.

³⁶ Gretchen E. Ziegenhals. "Liminality and Leadership", *Faith and Leadership*, (March 14, 2011), <https://www.faithandleadership.com/liminality-and-leadership>, (accessed November 15, 2015).

³⁷ Hjalmarson, "Forty Year in a Narrow Space".

³⁸ Matthew 27:46.