

“Threshold” a sermon based on Matthew 17:1-9 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 26 February 2017.

Orientation week. Students flooding into town. Leaving home for the first time. Leaving small towns for a city.

Encountering people from different places. Living in community with people unknown. Encountering an overwhelming number of new ideas and frameworks and world views.

Study stretching before us, three years, or four years or ?.

I remember that first week in Auckland more than forty years ago ... what it felt like.

Having committed myself with little idea of what to expect. Excitement and trepidation.

Risk and openness and fear and adventure, all mixed up. The biggest change in my life up to that point.

The future demanding my attention, and my commitment. A threshold, an in-between space.

Not just students. Workers at Cadbury. Children at a new school. A couple newly married.

A person with news of health.

A family recently shifted.

A church with possibilities.

Here we are, at the end of the season of Epiphany and on Wednesday the beginning of the season of Lent, in-between.

In Epiphany we declare who Jesus really is.

Birth, Baptism, Beatitudes, the sermon on the mount.

Jesus out in the districts.

As at his baptism, “This is my son, my beloved, in whom I delight.”

now on the mountain “This is my son, my chosen, listen to him.”

Then he turns to his future and speaks of what is coming.

He tells his followers he needs to leave the districts and go to Jerusalem.

To undergo great suffering.

be killed.

On the third day be raised.

No, said, Peter, you will not be killed.

And Jesus rebukes Peter – get behind me Satan – with some ferocity - perhaps because Jesus himself is struggling to imagine such a future, and is tempted to stay away from Jerusalem, the place of crucifixion.

He is trying to get Peter into the new frame, to move beyond what Peter knew.

“If any want to become my followers, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Writers about higher education highlight the importance of what happens on the threshold.

They talk of how students get stuck because they are unable to move out of the framework they have received.

Instead of developing a new narrative, or a new framework, they pick up this idea or that idea, but not in an integrated way.

They can't fit things together.

So they become stuck, and are unable to develop a deeper understanding, because the story they have received does not fit the new information they are being given.

So we come to orientation day.

Six days after the exchange with Peter.

Peter James and John and Jesus up the mountain.

The light shines on Jesus and a voice speaks from the cloud

“This is my son, the beloved.”

Threshold calls forth our identity - not giving into the people and pressures that pull us this way and that.

Who are we as we enter into our year?

Identity and continuity.

Matthew reaches back to Moses and Elijah.

Moses who led the people of Israel out of Egypt

Moses who received the law on the mountain, the cloud, the voice, the shining face, the revelation.

Elijah, the first of the major Jewish prophets.

The law-giver and the prophet.

So we come to threshold moments with people who have influenced who we are, who in spirit keep us company, with whom we continue to converse.

So as students in orientation week, as people on the threshold, yes there are people we bring with us, our family, our teachers, our friends, and they inform and influence and shape, but they do not determine our future and who we will be.

Peter wants to build dwellings for the three of them, and Jesus resists.

Over time, often, we find when we go back, we are not the people we once were.

Much depends on what happens on the threshold, how we enter into what is coming, what is before us.

Thresholds are places of uncertainty that invite trust and courage. A bright cloud overshadowed them and a voice spoke from the cloud. On the threshold, the presence, the voice, the assurance of God.

Not experienced by us as firm and fixed, but cloudy, misty, hidden, even the leading of God coming out of a cloud.

I love the writing of Marilynne Robinson.

She has a preacher character, John Amos, who says this in a sermon: "It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor grey ember of Creation and it turns to radiance—for a moment or a year or the span of a life. . . . Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?"

If we are open to it this year.

Dag Hammarskjöld

"God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason."

Looking and listening in the most ordinary places for transformation.

In a sermon entitled "Our God is Able", Martin Luther King tells a very personal story of a moment on the threshold.

"Almost immediately after the Montgomery bus protest had been undertaken, we began to receive threatening phone calls and letters in our home. Sporadic in the beginning, they increased day after day. At first I took them in my stride, feeling they were the work of a few hotheads who would become discouraged after they discovered that we would not fight back. But as the weeks passed, I realized that many of the threats were in earnest. I felt myself faltering and growing in fear.

After a particularly strenuous day, I settled in bed at a late hour...and was about to doze off when the telephone rang. An angry voice said, "Listen, (expletive), we've taken all we want from you. Before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery." I hung up, but I could not go to sleep. It seemed all my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point.

I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally, I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing to be a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I took my problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory.

"I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I have come to the point where I can't face it alone."

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever."

Almost at once my fears passed from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm.

Three nights later, our home was bombed. Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My experience with God had given me a new strength and trust. I knew now that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life. Let this be our ringing cry...that there is a great benign Power in the universe whose name is God, and he is able to make a way out of no way, and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. This is our hope for becoming better [people]. This is our mandate for seeking to make a better world."

Its threshold day.

Orientation day.

We head for Easter.

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