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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## The In-Between Places

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SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ JULY 10, 2022

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**B**ut now, O Jacob, listen to the LORD who created you.  
O Israel, the one who formed you says,

“Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you.

I have called you by name; you are mine.

<sup>2</sup>When you go through deep waters,

I will be with you.

When you go through rivers of difficulty,  
you will not drown.

When you walk through the fire of oppression,  
you will not be burned up;  
the flames will not consume you.

<sup>3</sup>For I am the LORD, your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

I gave Egypt as a ransom for your freedom;

I gave Ethiopia and Seba in your place.

<sup>4</sup>Others were given in exchange for you.

I traded their lives for yours  
because you are precious to me.

You are honored, and I love you.

<sup>5</sup>“Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”

Isaiah 43:1-5

New Living Translation

## The Modern Airport

A historically unique invention of the past century has been the modern airport. It's quite an amazing place, a significant evolution from the railway stations of the previous century. We've all been in airports—some of us perhaps hundreds of times. Let's imagine that we are going to take a trip together to spend an extended visit with some family or friends in a distant place, and we will refresh our memories of what the airport experience is like in our minds.

We park ourselves and walk to, or are dropped off at, the Departure Zone. We walk through the sliding doors with our bags in tow. We are now in the airport. We stop at the ticketing area to get our boarding passes (and perhaps check luggage). With our boarding pass and personal ID in hand, we wind our way through the security line. At a podium we are confronted by a bored government employee who inspects our documents and points us to the conveyer belt and metal detector. After we've passed through, hopefully without setting off alarms and causing everyone to stare at us like we're terrorists, we put ourselves back together, grab our belongings off the belt, and start down the concourse.

Reaching our gate, we look for an unoccupied vinyl seat and begin our wait. And we wait. Maybe we get a snack or visit the restroom. And then, at last, we hear the pre-boarding call, followed soon after by the boarding call (by rows or zones or whatever). We line up, we snake our way to the desk to have our boarding pass scanned, and we line up again in the jetway. Finally, as we step across the threshold into the big metal tube awaiting us, we are out of the airport. Hopefully our flight will be safe and on time, and we'll make it to our destination.

The airport is a perfect example of an "In-Between Place." Its sole function is to move us through. Nobody goes to the airport for any other purpose than to get somewhere else (or to meet someone arriving from somewhere else and get them out of there as fast as possible). Nobody lives at an airport. It exists for transition.

Today we will be reflecting on the “In-Between Places” of life, with the airport as our metaphor. We all have been through those transition experiences. We all have more of them to come. And a fair number of us are in an “In-Between Place” right now. What was once comfortable and familiar has changed in some way. The landscape around us is now different. We have to adapt, figure out new approaches, adjust to new realities. And it’s not always pleasant or easy to go through a transition—even one we have chosen and looked forward to making.

### **Crossing a Threshold**

Psychologists have coined the term “liminal experience” for those times in life when the security and stability of the past is gone, but we are not yet fully adjusted to the new realities. I won’t be using this unfamiliar word much, but “liminal” comes from the Latin word “limen,” meaning a threshold: that dividing point between outside and inside a house, or between one room and another. Your life and mine are not static. We grow, we change, we go through various seasons, and time’s unstoppable march causes us to have to cross many different thresholds. One of the keys to successful living is to learn how to function well in the “liminal experiences,” which I am labeling the “In-Between Places.”

Let’s think of some of the more common ones.

1. A student who has lived all their life at “Hotel Mom and Dad”—with almost all their needs provided (and, in the best homes, with limits and boundaries to protect the young person from their worst impulses)—comes to the end of high school and moves to a distant college their freshman year. Now living on their own, with so much freedom and so many options, the temptations and pressures can be a challenging adjustment. “What do you mean, I have to do my own laundry? How am I supposed to balance a checkbook?” It’s both an exciting and scary transition.

2. Four or more years later (perhaps even after an extended academic womb of graduate school), that student now moves into the work force. Sleeping in until 10:30, stumbling half-awake to that 11AM class, and staying up until the wee hours partying or playing video games doesn't work when the employer expects you to be there at 8:30. It's both fulfilling to start a career and a bit daunting to have to make it in the unforgiving world of work.
3. A young couple, after several years of enjoying (and at times having to navigate) the adjustment from being one to being two, finds out that she's pregnant. The months of waiting may be punctuated with preparing the baby's room, reading a book or taking a class on parenting, and pondering a list of names. But when they bring the baby home, the real transitional time begins; not many are fully prepared for the adjustment. Two weeks later the husband, waiting for the office Keurig machine to brew his morning jolt of caffeine, is seen by his supervisor. "You look tired," he says. "I was up three times with the baby," the young dad replies. "Welcome to the New Normal," the boss cavalierly comments as he saunters off. For that man and his wife, the "new" will linger for a long time before it even begins to feel "normal."
4. A man or woman decides (or it's decided for them by mandatory age limit or downsizing) that the end of their career has come. Our society generally paints retirement as the paradise, the Valhalla, the ultimate goal of a working life that brings nothing but happiness. But crossing that threshold can bring unexpected complications. *Who am I now? What should I do with my days?* As many blessings as retirement brings, so in equal number are the adjustments and challenges of this new "In-Between Place."
- 5, 6, 7 and 8 ... There are many more predictable and common transitions of life. Married people can become single again (through

divorce or death), causing gigantic disruptions and volcanic emotions. Healthy people become unhealthy—sometimes for a short time, but sometimes permanently; chronic illness or injury or physical limitations present an entirely new reality of limited ability and mobility. A retired person or couple chooses to move from their home—and the lifestyle of complete independence they’ve known for 60 years—to a senior living or continual care community; what they may gain in security is at the cost of their independence. A person or couple have lived in suburban Cleveland for 40 years, but since none of their children now live within a thousand miles of Cleveland, they put that home on the real estate market and move to Southwest Florida. What could be a happier experience? Except that they now have to find new doctors, a new supermarket, a new church, and new friends. It’s every bit as much a transition place. Perhaps some new resident to our community has come here today, and you’re feeling like you’re in an airport and haven’t arrived yet at a new destination where you can be comfortable.

Those are all predictable life transitions. We’ve all been there, and we’ll all be there again: crossing the threshold from one room to another.

### **Opportunities and Challenges**

By no means are the transitions of life always negative. New adventures, new possibilities, new relationships, and the opportunity to reinvent or deepen oneself can enrich us tremendously. One dimension of the “In-Between Places” I have witnessed in this community is the chance to take a deeper step of faith, moving into a closer relationship with God. I have many friends here who would personally testify that their spiritual life had been somewhat “put on the shelf” during a different chapter in their life, when other things seemed so much more urgent. But now they have the time, and have discovered a new motivation, to get to know God personally and learn more about Him and the richness He brings to life. Moving from the old “room” where we had been comfortable into a new and more beautiful “room” across the threshold can be a blessing.

But we also know that changes can bring great challenges and hardships to us. The negatives that counter the positives include a sense of disorientation and confusion. We can struggle to adjust. We can feel tempted to want to turn back the clock, reverse our steps, and return to the old comfortable room (even if that's not possible).

Our emotions can surprise us with their intensity—and even more so if we stifle them or don't acknowledge them. What new parent would dare to verbalize the emotion "I'm not sure I like parenthood or am cut out for this new responsibility" when everyone else is offering congratulations and gushing over the baby (but doesn't have to change the diapers or do the 3AM feedings)? What suddenly -single person who has lost their spouse hasn't at times felt socially awkward—a "half" among married couples who look "whole," an awkward appendix, who has to deal with the empty other half of the bed every night?

### **Throughout the Bible**

It may surprise you to discover how much of the Bible is occupied with people who are moving through "In-Between Places." The Patriarchs of the Book of Genesis were literally nomads, living in tents and on the move. God had promised that one day their descendants would settle in the Promised Land, but they wouldn't see it in their lifetimes. Centuries later, the people of Israel were delivered by God from slavery in Egypt, but once they got to the Desert of Sinai—as bleak an "In-Between Place" as you could imagine—they started moaning and longing to return to the familiar in Egypt (no matter how awful it was). The Book of Daniel tells of Jews carried off into exile in Babylon, and how they had to adapt to the new environment where God placed them, while longing to return home.

In the New Testament, Jesus spent 40 days in another wilderness, preparing Himself for the great transition that would come as He began His ministry that would end in brutal execution. The Apostle Paul, finding himself in prison under Roman guard, had to figure out how to make the most of his uncomfortable time of waiting and

transition in that “In-Between Place” —and he decided to write a few letters while he was stuck in jail. Good choice!

Some Bible scholars and theologians have written that we can actually understand the entire Christian life, and all of Christian history for 2,000 years, as an “In-Between Place.” One has labeled it “The Already and the Not Yet.” Our sins have already been paid for by Christ’s death on the cross, but the final victory and removal of all sin and temptation for us doesn’t come until our earthly life is over. The eternal life purchased for us by Jesus at His resurrection is already guaranteed for us, but we haven’t yet experienced it in its fullness. Christ inaugurated the Kingdom of God, which lives in the hearts of all men and women who believe in Him, but that Kingdom is yet to come in its completion (and until then, evil people like Vladimir Putin still act, and Satan still tempts). And perhaps America, the country we love, is going through a difficult “In-Between Place” right now—with different forces trying to pull us one way or another, like a gigantic tug-of-war.

### **Successful Strategies**

Let’s think about what some effective strategies might be for dealing with the negative experiences of a transitional time. Here are some things that people have shared with me, or I have personally experienced, that give us the strength to move successfully through those “In-Between Places.”

- 1) Try to do some things that feel “normal,” or that you used to do in the former place; this will reassure you that life can still have its joys and pleasures.
- 2) Talk about and attempt to verbalize what you’re feeling. You can talk with a spouse, a pastor or counselor, a trusted friend. You can talk directly to God in prayer. You can write down your thoughts in a journal or a letter, if that is a way that helps you organize your inner emotions (as it does for me).
- 3) Learn from others who have been there. This is why support groups can be literal lifesavers for those who join them—

whether grieving the loss of a family member, adapting to child-raising, enduring cancer treatment, caring for someone with dementia, seeking to defeat an addiction, or experiencing some other “In-Between Place.”

Like the people of Israel who wished they could go back to Egypt (as nonsensical as that thought was), so we will find ourselves at times wishing we could turn back the hands of the clock. But instead of that fantasy, here’s what we need to do. We need to accept that our emotions and reactions to change and loss and transition are normal. We need the perspective that the “In-Between Places” are all temporary. We cannot allow bitterness or self-pity or resentment of our lot in life to warp us.

And we must remember that we are not powerless. We always have choices to make, even if just the choice of how we will deal with our new situation. The courageous writer Victor Frankl, a survivor of the Holocaust, revealed his secret after he was liberated. “I could not change my circumstances, but I could decide every day how I would react in my mind. The Germans could not take away my will.” You and I always have the power to choose our response.

## Never Alone

Most importantly for the Christian, we can claim the voluminous promises of God in the Bible that **we are never alone**. No matter how strange the “In-Between Place” might feel to us, He is right beside us. And He has also given us fellow travelers, our Christian brothers and sisters, to support us. The amazing promise of our text this morning is as reliable today as it was 2,500 years ago, when it was first written. “When you go through deep waters, I will be with you... Do not be afraid.” Not **if**, but **when**. We will all go through transitions and changes. When they seem overwhelming, **fear not**. Our Lord will take us by the hand and lead us through those “In-Between Places.” ■

