

The Second Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 5

Revised Common Lectionary, Year C

June 10th, 2007

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

Bullet Train Theology

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector

Train platforms have always been spiritual places for me, particularly in Japan. This past Wednesday, I was standing on a platform at Okayama station waiting for the arrival of the *Nozomi*, among the fastest bullet trains in the world. It's a remarkable feat of engineering, smoothly racing across the country sometimes at a cool 170 miles per hour. On the *Nozomi* you all but fly past the windows of apartments, office buildings, and homes with only a meter or two to spare. For a split second you glimpse a kitchen or a room, the locus of someone's life, joys, and worries exposed for the briefest moment to a world of travelers, commuters, business people, and sightseers. Occasionally and far more frightening to contemplate, you pass within a foot or two of an equally fast bullet train headed in the opposite direction, a streak of white and blue metal and humanity shooting past you at a relative speed of 300 miles per hour or more. But much of the time you are left with the landscape rushing by and the smooth rails of the track running beside you, more parallel than a mathematician's diagram, straighter in parts it seems than just about anything on the planet.

I imagine at moments like this the vast number of people who have shouldered enormous burdens to make such wonder possible, and the vast number who still keep the trains running like clockwork. How contingent my life is upon theirs, rushing along at breakneck speed, one moment to the next, one departure to another destination, immediately one with this and then with another part of a universe hurtling past.

Returning for a moment to the train station, being there in Japan means for me being a profoundly liminal space. Standing there for a few minutes on the platform in Okayama, the only *gaijin* in sight, with scarce grasp of the language in the midst of human lives and stories rushing past to catch the next train, meet the next deadline, I am suddenly and startlingly profoundly alone, foreign, alien, stranger.

Liminality, a term originally coined by the anthropologist Victor Turner and others, is this condition. I use it here in a spiritual sense of being caught "in between" in a peculiar kind of identity of feeling empty and alone. My backpack, my life, my memories on my back, cared for by people only far away, known by only a handful of folk, many of whom on another continent across a vast ocean. . .almost a world apart.

This is why, quite frankly, I love to travel sometimes, especially alone by train in Japan. It can be a spiritual experience of emptying. No schedules except the train ahead. No deadlines save the ones of hunger, sleep, or the other essential duties of bare living and breathing. It is for a

time, liminal. And for those of us who live surrounded by so much comfort, it is a glimpse – albeit still a relatively comfortable one – into the contingency of our lives.

For many of us who have lived on the edge on occasion, whether in great illness, the death of a loved one, the painful dissolution of a relationship, or simply left everything we've known for that which we cannot predict or understand. . .we have entered that liminal space. Some of our sisters and brothers live there at the edge for long periods of time, but through no choice of their own.

I am haunted by the words of one of my seminary classmates, Frances Mutatiina of Uganda, who remarked once to me that we do not understand the depths of faith, that is to be utterly reliant on God, until we have lived quite literally not knowing where our next meal for us or our family is going to come from. That's in its own way a liminal space, in the raw unknowing, compounded by the raw hunger that sits at the edge of death.

Liminality is about humanity exposed and vulnerable, uncertain and at risk. It is where we are at the edge, physically, psychologically, spiritually, emotionally, or all of these at once. It is where we can for at least a moment glimpse our contingency, our frailties as fragile creatures, our limited knowledge, our sheer need, and our utter reliance on others for all that sustains our life. And it is where our faith is most severely tested and most profoundly opened, broadened, and deepened.

At first glance, our readings for this day are about God's power to raise the dead. The sons of two mothers are brought back from the other side. One by Elijah, the other by Jesus. But more meaningful to me in these stories of miraculous events are the encounters of people on the edge, living in liminal space, with God. The stories involve two widows who are on the brink of complete dissolution. Both because their livelihoods, in fact the very root of their ability to survive, seems lost. For the widow in First Kings, a famine-stricken land surrounds her town, home, and life, and the food is just about gone. There is a curious and awesome dignity, almost one that brings me to tears, when she utters to Elijah, "I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

Likewise, though with much more drama left to the imagination, the widow in the Gospel According to Luke is out to bury her only son, her only source of hope left. Without him, she will be utterly destitute of any source of income or support in the culture in which she lives.

In both cases, God enters – yes to perform the miraculous – but more importantly demonstrating where our ultimate dependence and love resides. Faith is not so much about working deals, praying the right way, or even being correctly religious. It is about utter reliance on the ultimate rootstock of our lives. Moving, breathing, eating, sleeping, and even dying completely in the hands of a strange and other and at once immediately available God who is most visible to us only when we are the most vulnerable, when we enter liminal spaces in our lives.

Utter raw faith like this comes to us rarely. For me it is occasionally when traveling alone. For others it is in profound hunger or standing at the edge of despair. For yet others it is in far away

places at the edge of society, worlds, nature, and oceans. In today's Letter from Galatians, we hear the words of Paul articulating – almost protesting – for this kind of faith. A faith that drove him to do all things against his former life of persecuting the Church and a life of zealous devotion to the traditions of his ancestors. A faith that moved him, even after he began following Christ, into the precarious position of carrying, at times alone and unaided, the Gospel to the Gentiles, over and against the wishes for a time of the other apostles.

This is true faith, exposed in the liminality that life in all of its unpredictability gives us. We must be cautious not to run from these moments or over-insulate ourselves against them with the worry and materialism of the world we inhabit. Instead, we must be prepared to move forward into them with resolve, embracing the uncertainty, and opening our hearts to the stranger in our midst – even the Stranger we cannot describe or expect, like Elijah or Jesus showing up at the edge of town one day, or encountering God in between the rails of the Shinkansen in the midst of raw motion, raw mathematical precision, raw humanity, and the raw emptiness of self-identity in a foreign land.

On my trip by *Nozomi* this past week, I was traveling to visit our friends, Shintaro and Shoko, in Nagoya. I was going to see them and witness again to their shared faith. Shintaro, amongst his exhausting duties as a priest in a small Anglican Church with sometimes wildly stretched human resources, teaches and is chaplain in a college preparing pre-school and childcare professionals. He invited me to join him for the afternoon and play music for the weekly service he leads, sharing scripture and the Anglican Christian tradition with a few hundred mostly un-churched students. Few are Christian. Few will become Christian. Yet it is in this liminal space that Shintaro's faith is most visible, most articulate, most remarkable in its sharpness of mind, its ability to speak across the rifts, to talk with wisdom to an culture, while already in some respects wise, caught up as we are in a world of stuff more than a world of Spirit.

So there I was, on a sultry afternoon playing piano in a gymnasium packed with giggling young people, anxious and uncertain on the threshold of their adult lives. We began singing together Christian hymns of praise and praying to a God still strange and unknown. And then the room became quite and attentive, and the atmosphere of that liminal space was incredible – Spirit-filled and wondrous as any I can recently remember. These are the moments my friend Shintaro lives for. Liminal moments for a culture, like ours, built around edifices of hyper-modernity – where needs are not only met but oversaturated with noise, food, and goods. And suddenly we were together in a space where all the noise of a world mad with consumption disappeared and God was at last allowed to enter, if only for a few moments, into the deep places that hunger for true life, abiding love, and a sense of the ultimate – as intimately present as our beating hearts and closer to us than our breath.

It's these places of liminality where we risk being re-birthing and see the world anew. For all of us living increasingly on the edge as Christians in an increasingly post-Christian world, this is a glimpse of the future, of the profound places we are called to create even for the unchurched, where we invite others to embrace this strange God who comes to the widow, the dead and the dying, the sick and the lonely, and us in our struggles in an increasingly technological and artificial world always to become more fully human.