

"Thresholds"
Isaiah 60:1-6 Revelation 21:1-6
January 8, 2023
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

One of my favorite cartoons came from the creative and slightly warped mind of Gary Larson and his "Far Side" series. The cartoon shows a kid **pushing** with all his might on the door of a building labeled, "School for the Gifted." A large sign on the door says, "**PULL.**"

A favorite meme online said: "If one door closes... Open it. It's a door. That's what it does."

Have you ever counted how many doors or thresholds you walk through each day? I think the number might surprise you. Every time we walk from one room to the next, we cross a threshold. You can't really avoid it. I made a count of how many thresholds I cross just from the time I wake up in the morning until I get to my desk in the office. I came up with 11- 13 if I count my car door. And that is all by 9:00 am.

We really cannot go any place without crossing a threshold, the opening that leads us from one place to another.

Our guide through these seasons of Advent and Christmas, and now Epiphany, has been artist, poet, and minister Jan Richardson. Her book, NIGHT VISIONS: SEARCHING THE SHADOWS OF ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS, gave us a theme for each Sunday. We started way back on November 27 with the theme of "darkness," and we end this series today with "thresholds."

She offers this prayer:

God of the threshold, this we pray: that what comes in enters by consent, by invitation; that what passes through crosses over with grace, with mercy; that what dwells within resides in delight, in integrity; that what goes forth emerges, for peace, for blessing." (1)

She writes, "The word 'threshold' originally referred to the doorway leading to the place where the threshing of grain occurred. Beyond the entrance lay the place of separating the wheat from the chaff, of sorting and sifting, of beginning to cull that which would

become bread. John the Baptist used this image as he spoke of how Jesus would come to clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat.

John's words served as a vivid warning to the people to prepare, to consider whether they were ready to walk through the doorway toward the life to which Jesus would call them."

She continues, "We stand on the threshold of a new season. The Feast of the Epiphany is the Twelfth Day of Christmas and marks the end of this time of celebration. As we cross into the season beyond Epiphany, we are beckoned to ponder other passages we may be making. The thresholds of our lives serve as places to choose, to discern, to sort out what we consider important and where we feel called to go.

We may find ourselves at a threshold by choice or by circumstance, arriving by our own design or landing there by events seemingly beyond our control. Whether or not it seems sacred at first, a threshold can become a holy place of new beginnings as we tend it, wait within it, and discern the path beyond.

In this season past, we have journeyed through darkness, desire, preparing a space, hope, birthing, and welcoming. We will know these places again and again in our lives because God's path unfolds not in a straight line but in a spiral. We emerge onto each new threshold with the experiences of the passage we have just made, but we will understand the journey past only as we continue to embrace the path before us. I come to understand the ways that the holy is born only as I enter the mysteries of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany again and again. Each passage offers visions in the darkness. Each threshold offers signs for the way. (2)

The arrival of a New Year between Christmas and Epiphany is a very un-subtle way to remind us of the endings and the beginnings of this journey of our lives. The simple act of making the first notation in a brand-new calendar for a brand-new year carries us forward- whether we are ready to move or not.

One of the most important things we learn from the Bible is that God's people are **always** on the move, always on a journey, always crossing thresholds- physical and spiritual- from one experience of God to the next.

In the middle of the sixth century, God's people, the Jews, were enveloped in a fog of darkness so deep they could see no way out, they could imagine no threshold that would allow them to cross over from exile in Babylon to freedom in Jerusalem. Their holy city was destroyed. The dynasty of the great King David had come to a terrifying end. They had no land, no leader, and for some, no faith. Those left behind in the shattered ruins of Jerusalem looked every day upon the rubble of their once magnificent Temple and knew that not even God had a home there any longer.

They are heartbroken and helpless. They have no future, and their past is quickly becoming a faded memory. And then, out of nowhere, the prophet speaks an unlikely word from God, offering a threshold to a defeated people. *"Wake up people! Get up! Turn your face toward the sun and soak in the warmth of God's glory!"* He told them that even though the world they were living in was consumed with darkness their time of hiding in the shadows is over. A new day is dawning, and God expects them to get up and lead the way for others into the brilliance of God's presence.

This is not an invitation. It is a command. The people are called to step out of the season of darkness and run into the season of light. Through the grace of God, they are being called to move from absence to presence; from despair to hope; from fear to joy. Isaiah tells them that something new is happening.

It is something they could never have hoped for or dreamed of- God is moving decisively into their world and everything is going to change. With God's intrusion they are called to look up and see the miraculous vision- all nations are streaming toward their holy city of Jerusalem, which is restored and splendid. Those who were sent away are coming home. Everyone will rejoice and celebrate! These people, these prisoners, these exiles who were defeated by their enemy will become a light to all the nations.

This was their epiphany- the moment when an important truth suddenly became clear. God is doing a new thing- calling for transformation of the people and the city. They quickly learn, though, that it isn't going to be an easy transition. The magnificence of God's promises soon hit the reality of real life when conflicts arose between those who remained in Jerusalem and those who returned from exile. The city was in ruins, life was extremely difficult, and they did what people too often do when times are tough, they turned on each other.

This is a reminder to us that God's promised transformation always requires our participation. The people had to figure out how to work together to restore the solidarity of their community life and to renew the sacredness of their religious practices. It wasn't easy. Those who expected a quick and painless transition to peace and prosperity were in for a big surprise. They had to figure it out together. And so do we.

At the beginning of a new year, a new threshold, we turn to the last book of the Bible, perhaps your favorite- the Revelation of John. It is, perhaps, the most mis-interpreted book in the whole Bible. Even though it is the last book in the Bible, it is not a book about endings, it is a book about beginnings. John- pastor, poet, and theologian- was living in exile on the Greek island of Patmos. He says that he was sent into exile because of his testimony about Jesus Christ.

John was separated from the seven house churches in his care and the only way he could be present with them was by writing a letter that would be read aloud in worship. And what a letter it is! He wrote to congregations he knew and loved who were suffering. His letter was one of hope. It was a solid reminder to vulnerable Christians that God had the first word and will have the last.

Revelation is apocalyptic literature. Contrary to the popular usage of the word as the cataclysmic end of the world, apocalyptic actually means "revealing," "unveiling." What is unveiled in this letter is the way the affairs of the world look when viewed through the eyes of God. It is not a foretelling of the future, but a "forth" telling of God's vision of and for our world, as interpreted by John. At that time in history, it wasn't easy to be a Christian, but they were not under heavy and deadly daily persecution. What they experienced was more subtle- social ostracism and discrimination in economic opportunities.

John wasn't worried about **persecution** by the empire of Rome as much as he was about **accommodation** to the empire. Many Christians felt as though it was just easier to blend in with the crowd and be like everyone else. But John was very clear- resist the pull of the empire or else be consumed by it. There was no middle ground. Choose- God or the emperor.

John didn't write a letter to be included in the Bible. He wrote a letter to people he knew and loved. He didn't need to explain the historical context to them because they were living right in the middle of it. We dilute its power when we forget that this letter is a particular message to a particular group of people in a particular situation at a particular time and place. If Revelation was actually a book of predictions about the events in our time, it would have had absolutely no meaning to its original recipients. When interpreted responsibly, Revelation has a message to our time, but it does not make predictions about it.

The Revelation of John is about beginnings. In Revelation there is no "rapture," no snatching up of Christians from the earth. In John's vision, in fact, heaven actually comes down to earth. The culmination of history is when God comes to be with us. Heaven will no longer be "up there somewhere." It will be right here, right now for all to see.

John was writing to people who were losing their vision of who Christ was and who they were called to be. They were getting weary and confused. His job was to re-orient his congregations- to direct their gaze away from the seductive power of the world around them and direct it toward God- who was the first and the last. John knew that the antidote to their failing hope was the promise of transformation and new life.

John wrote this letter to offer comfort to his people, not to terrify them. They understood the theological code, the outrageous metaphors, the bizarre images- because every one single comes from their scripture. He wrote to encourage those who were losing hope.

He wrote to challenge those who were tempted to compromise with the powers of the empire; those willing to accept its rule of injustice, persecution of the weak, and oppression of the needy. He writes to those whose faith was dulled by lies cloaked as truth and greed hidden in plain sight. He wrote to shake up those who were comfortable with lukewarm faith.

For John, the creation of a new community in communion with God is not the **result** of history, it is the **purpose** of history. To the tiny group of Christians surrounded by the huge, powerful, and brutal Roman Empire, this was incredibly great news!

John reminds them that God had the first word and will have the last. God is with us in the beginning and the end and every moment in between. God is where we come from and where we are going. He knew that what people believed about the future affected how they lived their lives every day.

If we believe that the future is in the hands of our loving God, then perhaps we will do all we can to make that future a reality. Perhaps we will work for justice, peace, and inclusion.

Every generation seems to believe that they are living in the worst time in history. It isn't a contest- for each generation has their own sorrows and crisis. The members of John's churches were dealing not only with the empire, but they also experienced times of war, famines, earthquakes, and the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. Christians were even blamed for a fire that nearly destroyed Rome.

John wrote an urgent message for his generation, and he expected his people to respond by transforming their lives. His call for a new heaven and a new earth gets at the deepest yearning we have for a sense of place and security for all of creation. For John, the reign of God was not just a future hope, it was a daily reality. His hope was in the One who made all things new. John envisions renewal for all creation, not an escape for certain people.

Humans are called to partner with God in making this new earth a reality. From the beginning, God's work has been done in partnership with human beings.

So, here we are, on the threshold of a new year, 2023. Do we approach this threshold with joy or with fear? With hope or with dread? Are we committed to walking through this door

together as a community of faith? Are we ready to cross this threshold and head toward the life to which Jesus is calling us?

Remember that a threshold can become a holy place of new beginnings as we tend it, wait within it, and discern the path beyond. Remember also that crossing a threshold means moving on from one place to the next. It doesn't mean we can never go back, but if we do, it will be as changed people -transformed by yet another experience of God.

So many blessings await us in this new year, perhaps even a new vision for our congregation. May we have courage and grace in the journey. A few final words from Jan Richardson.

"The Map You Make Yourself"

*You have looked at so many doors with longing, wondering if
your life lay on the other side.*

For today, choose the door that opens to the inside.

*Travel the most ancient way of all; the path that leads you to
the center of your life.*

No map but the one you make yourself.

*No provisions but what you already carry and the grace that
comes to those who walk the pilgrim's way.*

*Speak this blessing as you set out and watch how your rhythm
slows, the cadence of the road drawing you into the pace
that is your own.*

Eat when hungry. Rest when tired. Listen to your dreaming.

Welcome detours as doors deeper in.

Pray for protection. Ask for guidance. Offer gladness for the

gifts that come, and then let them go.

*Do not to expect to return by the same road. Home is always
by another way, and you will know it not by the light that
waits for you but by the star that blazes inside you,
telling you where you are is holy and
you are welcome here. (3)*

May it be so.

Amen.