

Thus says God, the Lord...See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them. Is 43:9

Dear Friends in Christ,

New Year's Greetings in the name of the Holy Trinity! Welcome to the new calendar year and the time of annual meetings in many of our congregations and ministries.

In her book *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading a Liminal Season*, Susan Beaumont describes the times and spaces the church lives in today as "liminal," as standing in the threshold of an open door to something new but we haven't gone through yet. In this space, part of us stands in the former things, part in the future things, and part in the right now, the right here, the confusing and messy "this."

This threshold is not an easy space/time for us to live in. As much as God seems to ask us through Isaiah's words that we should let go of the former things, humans caught up in the web of time and space just cannot do the impossible like God can.

In this threshold between already and not yet, we find both anxiety of an unknown future and the grief of losing a dying past that felt stable (whether it was stable is another question). In the threshold, we feel pushed by some to go too quickly into something we feel not yet ready for or we feel held back by those clinging too tightly to something that doesn't work anymore.

And in this threshold we find God. In fact, it's in the liminal spaces, the times we aren't in control, the times of not knowing and wonder that we actually find ourselves closer to God than any other time.

Why? Because this threshold happens when the layers of our self-constructed walls of our own agendas, plans and judgments are torn away and we are brought face-to-face with what God is revealing in the epiphanies of the new things God is declaring and doing. Skies are opened, the Savior is made known, the Spirit proclaims God's love for us and the whole creation, including you and me, are transformed into new creations. (*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 2Cor 5:17*)

After the pandemic, many thought a new normal and a quick stability would settle in. Many today still seek, even demand, a fast-food resolution to the liminality in which we stand. But we're still standing in that threshold between the former things and the new possibilities, a time of both worry and wonder and we may be standing there for a while.

You too may be experiencing the anxiety of living in the threshold. We're still dealing with Covid and its effects as well as the flu, RSV, cancer, mental illnesses, addictions and other afflictions to body and mind. We still see the violence, polarization, disasters, fascism, anarchy, chaos and oppression of others on the news. We still fear the future unknowns as our minds go quickly to worst-case scenarios.

In our congregations, the Montana/N. Wyoming Synod and across the ELCA, we are experiencing economic anxiety about dwindling financial resources and, in our scarcity mindset, we ask if we have money to send to the wider church or pay our pastors or continue our generosity in serving in the wider world. We are also concerned that the church, our church, is dying as fewer people are coming back to the pews and fellowship halls after the pandemic. We worry about a declining faith in Christ in the midst of so many who claim the title "Christian" but actually follow destructive philosophies and idols.

These reactions are understandable. I too am experiencing these anxieties and concerns as I consider the financial and social realities we are facing as we stand in the threshold. These are not easy times in which we live.

But in these times, I see God because I trust we are closer to God now than we were before. As our reliance on our own ways, goals and identities is peeled back layer by layer, we can begin to see more clearly God's presence with us and the new things that God has been, is and will be doing among us. We see through a glass dimly, for sure, but with open eyes, hearts and wills, we can see.

And not only does God appear more present to us during this time, but our Spirit-given faith (trust) tells us that "God is Able." This sermon title from Martin Luther King Jr. are words that I have been living with a lot over the past months: that God is indeed able. I think we forget that at times and begin to believe it is all up to us. But God is able to bring abundance out of scarcity. God is able to bring hope out of despair. God is able to bring life out of death. God is able to do all this and more again and again.

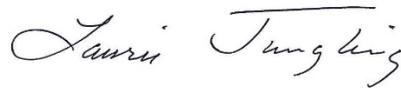
It's in the liminal spaces that the God-epiphany is revealed to us when we are open to seeing it. It's also in the liminal times that we need to cling to the promise that God is truly with us always, whether we feel it or not.

And then, when we trust in this truth and the transformation that comes with it, we can participate in God's "new thing doings" by walking humbly with the God who is able, by doing our best to let go of the former things and by letting the Spirit work through Christ's Church to equip us for the ministry of the gospel.

I want to thank you for the ministry of the gospel you through each of your congregations and ministries have been doing in your threshold places in the Montana/N. Wyoming Synod. Thank you for the many resources, including the financial resources, you have shared with the synod, the ELCA and our ministries over the past year. These gifts are crucial to the equipping work we are doing with and for you. Thank you for the on-going service and generosity to "the least of these" through your love and justice work in your communities, this state and nation and across the world. And finally thank you for standing in the threshold with me so that we can support each other in these liminal times, sharing the new things from God that are springing forth around us.

May God bless you with new life, new possibilities and new hope in the year ahead!

With Gratitude and in Christ's Love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Laurie Jungling". The signature is written in black ink and is centered on the page.

Rev. Laurie Jungling
Bishop, Montana Synod, ELCA