

It is often referred to as being in limbo. That period of time when the ways of yesterday are done but the new way of tomorrow has not yet arrived. Life is different than what we knew before, and the future is still unclear. I have heard some of my colleagues refer to these times in our lives as “hinge” times. Sometimes we arrive at these times knowing that the transition has been coming for a while, and sometimes they show up unannounced and often unwelcome. Either way, these times are often uncomfortable and frequently anxiety-producing. Most of us do not enjoy not knowing what is coming next in our lives. Or, as it is with the disciples in our scripture this morning, knowing what is coming next, but having to wait in an in-between time – a time between what was, and what will be.

When we encounter the disciples in our text for this morning they have just witnessed what is referred to at the Ascension of Christ. According to scripture, after Jesus has spent a few weeks with the disciples after the resurrection, he is raised up into heaven. Jesus has told them to stay in Jerusalem until they are “baptized with the Holy Spirit in a few days. When the Holy Spirit comes upon them, they will receive power and become witnesses of Jesus to the ends of the earth. The disciples appear to be a bit shocked by Christ’s ascension as the text says they stood there gazing upward toward heaven until two angels appear and tell them to snap out of it.

So there they are, in limbo, waiting for an unknown number of days until the Holy Spirit arrives. And what happens next seems extremely mundane and boring and yet the actions of the disciples in this moment can teach us so much about being in these hinge times. The 11 remaining apostles are gathered with the followers of Jesus. Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus to the Romans, is dead leaving an empty 12th spot among the apostles. Peter uses this hinge time to do some housekeeping by finding someone to fill the 12th spot. This is the first piece of wisdom I noticed in our text. In this time of uncertainty, Peter steps into his role as leader, and gets back to work. They may not know exactly what is coming next or when, but there are things to be done in the meantime. This is an act of faithful hope. Finding a replacement for Judas means the apostles intend to continue to carry on the ministry of Jesus in his absence as they have

been taught to do. It means that even though the way forward may be foggy, they know that they can take this one step forward toward the future.

But it is important to take note of how they take this step forward. Let's look at what didn't happen. Although Peter stepped into the role of leader, he did not act as a dictator. He could have simply announced that he would pick the 12th apostle himself and claim it was his right as the leader of the group. But I think we can all imagine why that wouldn't have been the best idea. Instead he thoughtfully lays out the reason for needing to fill the spot in the first place, thus informing the group about the need to take this action. Then he suggests a few good criteria for the person who would fill this role. Peter's approach builds the community up. He includes them in the process, gives them a sense of purpose, and in doing so, they are invested in what happens next.

This way of moving forward also benefits Peter. He seeks the wisdom of the group instead of relying solely on his own opinions. When we are in hinge times, it can be tempting to isolate ourselves or to hide from others that we don't have it all figured out. But seeking wisdom from trusted people in our lives, might not only lead us to new insights, but also take away the stress and anxiety of having to pretend we are confidently moving forward when in reality we are second guessing ourselves every step of the way.

The text then says that "they" proposed to people to be considered as the replacement for Judas – Matthias and Barsabbas. If this was modern times, the next step would be an election. Matthias and Barsabbas would explain why they are the best choice and outline their 10-point plans for recruiting and retaining new believers. But that's not what happens. This is the second piece of wisdom I noticed in this story. After the two men are nominated, what happens? They pray. The community pauses to turn to God, seeking to understand God's will for this moment.

In ancient times, the practice of casting lots was one way people experienced divine guidance. However, this is the only time in the New Testament in which the disciples use this practice. It's unclear why they chose to cast lots in this case. One

commentator proposes two possibilities: First, that the choice between Matthias and Barsabbas was equally good and therefore the decision was left to chance in order to avoid conflict among the community. The second possibility is that the disciples believed God would make the results come out a certain way according to God's will.¹ Dr. Paul Walaskay reminds us that casting lots is a custom described in Proverbs. In chapter 16 verse 33 it reads "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the Lord's alone." Walaskay says that, in this way, "God's providence invades the human process"² It is very likely that the disciples viewed casting lots as a way of inviting God into the decision-making process.

How often do we take time to pray in our limbo times? And when we do, do we quiet ourselves long enough to listen for a response? Praying for discernment can take on many different forms. I have mentioned before a few different ways to pray because not all of us are good at sitting still in silence. One of my favorite ways to pray is to free-write a letter to God. In free-writing, you simply write your thoughts as they come to you without any regard for spelling or grammar or even relevance. When I do this, it seems to help me put away all the pretensions and fake confidence and allows me to get to the honest truth. As I free-write, thoughts will flow from my pen to the paper that I didn't even realize I was thinking. For me, these are moments of divine connection. Moments when I feel guided by God in some way. Whatever way you find helpful for prayer and discernment, when we find ourselves in limbo times, it is important to tap into the wisdom of the Divine and allow it to lead the way.

I know that many of you are in moments of limbo or hinge-times and I am sure some of you are experiencing hinge times that I am not aware of. These times show up throughout our lives. As children, each summer between school years can be a type of hinge time. No longer in middle school, but not yet in high school. As we come to the end of our teen years, we are in that limbo time of no longer being a child, but not yet being an adult. There is the time between school and career. The time between dating

¹ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/easter7b>

² Paul W. Walaskay, *Acts*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 31.

and commitment, the time between leaving a career and starting a new chapter, the time between losing a spouse or a parent and figuring out who we are without their presence. The time between being able to live independently and moving into a facility with nursing care. The time between the diagnosis of a terminal illness and death, either of ourselves or a loved one. These are not easy times. Depending on the situation, a hinge time might be full of dread, or full of excitement. Full of excited anticipation or full of anxiety and fear. But the good news is that we have a choice of how we live during those times. We can choose to make the most out of these hinge times by looking for what we are able to do that will prepare us for the next chapter. How can we build up the community around us or put in place the resources we need in preparation for whatever may come next? And we can seek God's guidance along the way. Through prayer, through the wisdom of our trusted community, we can open ourselves up to the ways God speaks to us and invites us into a faithful and meaningful limbo time – a time that feels less like an agonizing purgatory and more like a dance with the divine.

I will end with this prayer written by Thomas Merton which I have turned to multiple times in my life when the way forward seemed unclear. Let us pray, My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.