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At this time of year as seniors graduate from high school or college, they may wonder what to do next, feeling as though they are living in a gap between one phase of life and the next. Some high school students take a year off before heading to college, which is often called a “gap year.” One young adult wrote about her gap year:

A year ago today, you would’ve found me in a train wreck that I called my life. I was about to commit to a school I wasn’t sure of for a major I wasn’t satisfied with. I’d felt the pressure of my family, my teachers, peers, and even myself to lead a successful life...I looked at my life and what were supposed to be my “golden years,” but I wasn’t happy. This wasn’t how I’d wanted it to be. So, I did what I thought was best, and I took a year off...I got to learn so many new, incredible things just from taking that time off. Without the horrible pressure of peers to weigh me down, and all the time in the world, I’d become the best version of myself...When this year started, I felt all was lost to me, that I had trapped myself... Yet, it ended up being the best year of my life (thus far). I’ve never learned so much in so little time.¹

Those times of feeling in the gap are not limited to those graduating from school and trying to discern the next path, for throughout our lives,

we may experience those gaps at various times. When leaving one job and striving to discern the next career, we may find ourselves living in an occupational gap. When the last child leaves home, the empty nest serves as another form of a gap. When we reach the retirement, we discover a looming gap in our daily schedules as our familiar routines disappear. When a loved one dies, we live in a relational gap as we mourn our loss.

The apostle Paul knew something about gap years, for he found himself living in one as well—in between what he calls our life in the body and when we will be at home with the Lord. In this gap, Paul wrote that “we live by faith, not by sight.” He knew that we can’t always see what’s coming our way, that the path may be unclear, and yet, we still trust that Jesus walks with us along the uncertain trail.

Even though we’re not sure what we’re doing, Paul wrote, “So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it” (NIV). In other words, we do the best we can during our lives, treating one another with kindness and gentleness, striving to follow the Way of Christ even when we can’t see the path ahead of us.

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At certain times in history, the church has found itself in those in-between times, especially about every 500 years when the church goes through a major shift, which writer Phyllis Tickle in her book *The Great Emergence* calls a giant church rummage sale. Ideas no longer working are tossed out, making room for new spiritual practices and refined beliefs. Around the year 600, Pope Gregory the Great guided Christianity through the first major upheaval. At the 1000-year mark, the church divided between the Eastern Greek Orthodox Church and the Western Roman Catholic Church. 500 years later the church went through the Protestant Reformation, resulting in many different denominations forming to express the diversity of practices and beliefs. And now here we are, feeling the shift again 500 years later in some new emergence of the church, though it's hard to explain exactly what is happening. Some lament the decline in church attendance, while others are ready for a change in the way we do things.

The time we find ourselves facing is a liminal time, which is defined as “a quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs during transition, when a

person or group of people is in between something that has ended and something else that is not yet ready to begin.”²

The church has been experiencing this in-between stage for several decades, but the pandemic seemed to highlight that fact as we quickly changed the way we did church. We're now a hybrid church, combining in-person with livestream worship, which will remain even though masks are coming off and life seems closer to normal. Some tell me they want church to go back to the way it was before, but we've changed. We're not the same, and being in this liminal place is uncomfortable, unsettling, disorienting.

I've been in several of those liminal places at various times in my life: When I resigned from a job and had no idea what was next. When a relationship fell apart. When a church asked me to leave. When my income didn't match expenses. I learned something interesting in each of those liminal places—that God was still there. Somehow, I learned to sense God's presence even more in those liminal times than when everything was going smoothly. I became more aware of God when I couldn't do things the same way I had been doing them—when life took a dramatic shift and I found

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myself in between where I had been and where I was going, when I was unsure of where I was headed. It was during these times that I learned to listen to God, rather than thinking I was in control.

Author Susan Beaumont offers a similar suggestion for churches in these liminal times:

Congregations today need to surrender to the realities of decline and stagnation. We need to quit fighting our liminal reality, as if this is something that we can ward off by striving harder at what we know how to do. By saying yes to what is, we can align ourselves with a future that needs and wants to emerge through us.³

What might emerge from our congregation? What might we become that's different from who we are now? Waiting to find out is not easy to do, is it?

How many times do we think we can be the church by doing it like we've always done it before?

¹ Annabelle Lucas, "Through My Gap Year, I Became the Best Version of Myself," <https://medium.com/gap-year-stories/through-my-gap-year-i-became-the-best-version-of-myself-df3cdfd7d8a1>.

Beaumont knows the struggles that we face when she wrote:

On our best days, we gain a glimmer of what it requires of us and what we must surrender. On our worst days, we are anxious, reactive, clingy, and without a clue about how to right our spiritual stance. We take two small steps forward, and then one giant step back.⁴

Ever felt that way? Anxious? Reactive? Clingy? In between one place and another? If so, you're not alone, for even the apostle Paul felt himself in between one time and another, and yet, he continues to remind us that anyone who belongs to Christ is a new creation, a new person. You and I are not alone while waiting in between, for Christ remains with us, helping us follow the Way even when the path seems unclear, when the weeds seem to obscure the trail. In these times, trust that the light of Jesus will continue to guide you and me and our church through the fog, for we are all a new creation in Christ.

² Beaumont, Susan. *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Kindle Edition.

³ Ibid. (p. 46).

⁴ Ibid.