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Closing Worship

Mark Harris¹

As we gather today, we find ourselves at the threshold of a strange and in-between place.

With this, the last Open Door service of the Winter Term, we gather in Keffer Chapel for the last time, in this place as we have known it for so many years. God willing, we will return by the summer of 2018, to celebrate the opening worship for the 2018-2019 academic year. But in the meantime this place will be stripped and laid bare in the coming weeks, ready for reconstruction to commence. Meanwhile, the staff, faculty, and students are preparing for a year-long hiatus in Heidelberg House, and while that may not quite be a sojourn in the wilderness, it certainly feels like we are being exiled from this familiar place that has been the spiritual home to the seminary for over fifty years.

In the Christian Year, we also find ourselves in this strange, in-between time. We are hurtling toward the deepest and darkest days of the Lenten season. But for us, as a seminary, there will be no Easter together. While we have marked the Lenten pilgrimage together, as a community, classes and now concluding; so the great Feast of the Resurrection will be celebrated elsewhere and apart.

Even in the gospel for today, we find ourselves in this strange, in-between place as reflected in John's account of the raising of Lazarus. Just before today's reading, John's gospel tells us that, in response to the increasingly bitter opposition and threats of physical violence, Jesus and the disciples had withdrawn beyond the Jordan to a place of safety. In fact, Jesus had returned to his beginnings, to the place where John had been baptizing and where Jesus had begun his ministry. But upon hearing that his good friend Lazarus was seriously ill, Jesus delayed in going to Bethany, which is just outside of Jerusalem. To do so would be to leave the safety of the Transjordan and return to the heartland of his bitterest opposition. And while Jesus she could not know how events would unfold, he certainly would have understood the risk that we was taking. How else are we to understand Jesus' delay in responding to Mary and Martha's request on their brother's behalf, but that Jesus was – himself- struggling to find the courage to choose that path?

Yet, choose he did. And even his dim-witted disciples, who almost always missed the point, got it right this time. For Thomas, who would later be labeled “doubting,” spoke the deep truth regarding Jesus' decision when he said, “Let us also go with him that we may die with him.” It was an ending time, a risk-taking time. Anxious... faltering... afraid... probably lamenting the loss of the familiar, the loss of safety...but compelled to go forward nonetheless.

Jesus was returning to familiar ground, but now it had become menacing territory. And while he and the disciples were not yet sucked into the vortex of coming events that would spiral out of control, yet ... the decision had been made. The threshold was being crossed. Jesus and his disciples would go to Bethany.

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They were like ancient Israel, standing at the edge of the Red Sea, whose swirling waters were opening before them. And with the Egyptians pursuing from behind, there was only one way to go ... and that was forward.

They were like the exiles of Judah, driven away from a smoldering and destroyed Jerusalem toward their captivity in Babylon. There was no way to go but forward.

They were like Jesus, emerging from the waters from his own baptism and being led (or one of the gospels say “driven”) by the spirit out into the wilderness to be tested. There was no way to go ... but forward.

So Jesus, accompanied by his disciples, climbed the long, barren road through the Judean wilderness, out of the Jordan valley, to meet the destiny that lay before him and the forces that would be unleashed in Bethany. For in raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus would seal his own fate.

We – who are gathered here today – are fortunate beyond words. None of us will probably ever have to make the kind of critical decision that Jesus did, putting our very existence at risk because of the depth of opposition to what we believe. Nonetheless, life is filled with times that force us to choose, that compel us to wrestle with difficult and costly decisions that are informed by what we value and believe. Either we remain in the safe and familiar places that we have known and cherished, or we take the risks of venturing forth... not because we necessarily know where we are going, or what the journey might demand, or even where it might lead us. But we choose ... one way or another. And sometimes, though we wish it were otherwise, we simply cannot remain where we are. Life will not let us. At such times, we cannot stretch toward that which the future is calling us to become, unless we loosen our grip, let go of that which we have held dear, and begin the long and barren journey to God only knows where!

For over half a century, this place has been a spiritual home for the formation and education of hundreds of students. That is the reason that our fore-mothers and fathers founded this the Seminary in 1911, built Willison Hall in 1915, and dedicated this facility in 1963. Over the past fifty-four years, hundreds of pastors, pastoral counsellors, spiritual caregivers and psychotherapists, and students of theology have found their home and been equipped for their calling in this place. Devoted faculty, staff, and volunteers have dedicated countless hours to these efforts. These very walls are infused with the memory of them all.

A lot has changed over the decades. Much has been gained, but much has also been lost in the process and that will not change. During the coming months, the interior of this building - with the exception of the chapel – will be gutted and rebuilt. It will be a different facility to which we return in the summer of 2018 and we may well be operating under a new name. Yet at its heart, this place remains what it has always been, a community to equip people for leadership and service in God’s world.

As we conclude this chapter, in the life of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, we are crossing the threshold into a strange, in-between place... leaving behind more than just a building. In so doing, we are following in the footsteps of countless people of faith who have gone before us, people who have been called to leave behind that which they have known and cherished, and to make the journey into unknown and intimidating territories. And while there may be a kind of holy madness in that, sometimes, there is no other way to go but forward.

There is a prayer that is found in the Order for Evening Prayer in Evangelical Lutheran Worship, and its predecessors, the Lutheran Book of Worship and the Service Book and

Hymnal. It was written by Eric Milner-White, who served as a chaplain in the trenches of France during World War I. Utterly appalled and nearly undone by the unspeakable atrocities that he witnessed, Milner-White nonetheless went on to become the Dean of Kings College, Cambridge, where he introduced the “Advent Service of Nine Lessons and Carols”. He became known as one of the “Shell shocked Padres,” who profoundly shaped the Anglican Church in the United Kingdom during the post-war years. His prayer seems a fitting way to conclude:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.