

## Living in The In-Between

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There's a popular television show that streams on Netflix called *Stranger Things*. How many of you have watched the show? Set in the early 1980s, it's a coming of age thriller about a group of junior high and high school friends and the grownups who care for them as a mysterious horror breaks into their middle class lives. It's very clever, and the permeating nostalgia of *Stranger Things* draws in viewers like me who might otherwise balk at its creepy, preternatural elements. The framework for the show's horror is a reality called **The Upside Down**. The Upside Down is a kind of shadowy mirror of our reality: it's a dark, weird, sublime place, but it's nowhere you'd want to linger. There are monsters there, and I don't mean metaphorical monsters. Suffice it to say that those of us who watch the show are thankful that The Upside Down is not where we live, and move, and have our being.

But, what I want to show you today is that the place where we *do* live, and move, and have our being is pretty weird, too. Now, you may rightly think it odd for me to say our ordinary lives are weird, because the concept of weirdness implies something out of the ordinary. How could our *ordinary lives* be weird? Well, the weirdness I have in mind is hidden from us, at least most of the time. That's because we're really good at hiding the weirdness from ourselves. As a professional philosopher, I get paid to think about weird aspects of reality. I think that the weird features of our existence are not only interesting in themselves, but that they are also important for us to consider in our goal of living good, meaningful, purpose-filled lives. And because we Christians are called by our lord to be perfect, I think this weirdness at the heart of our lived experience is something that we had better attend to if we desire to be transformed into Christlikeness.

The weirdness I want to talk about doesn't apply to most things we know about. Indeed, it applies only to persons like us who self-consciously live in time; for to live in time as we do is to live in what I call **The In-Between**. In some ways our life in The In-Between is an even *stranger thing* than life in The Upside Down. According to the tv

show, it's possible to escape from The Upside Down, but there's no escaping from The In-Between. Not for us. What do I mean by life in The In-Between?

Do you remember when you were young and you couldn't wait to be older? When I was about 12 years old, I couldn't wait to be 15. I saw 15 year olds as super interesting near-grownups who were so much cooler than actual grownups. To be 15, I thought, would be **to arrive**. I imagined the freedom I'd have driving a car around town (yes: 15 was the legal driving age back then in Mississippi). I'd be independent! I could take girls on dates! But, you know what? When I got to be 15, it wasn't all I thought it was going to be back when I was 12. In fact, when I was 15, I found that I *hadn't* arrived. Life was even more complex and bewildering than it had been earlier. At 15 I found myself looking forward to being like the high school seniors I saw walking around running school so self-assured. But, when I got to be a senior I realized that now I had to worry about my future after high school. I had to worry about where I'd go to college, what I'd major in, and living away from home for the first time. I loved my college years, but even in college I bumped into frequent reminders that I was preparing for what would come after college. College, I realized by my senior year, was not the end game. It was just a transition phase in my life. You might have thought I'd learned my lesson by now, but you'd be wrong. Now I looked forward to getting that first job, living on my own, making my own decisions. That's when life would really kick in, I thought. But, once I'd achieved that level of independence and autonomy it was clear that I was still in preparation, perhaps for a career and a marriage.

Speaking of marriage, we say that when we get married we're "settling down". Ha! People who say that getting married is settling down are either not married themselves or *not paying attention* to what's going on. You want to do something that will change you in ways you can't possibly anticipate? Get married, stick with it, and work on it. You'll find that, far from settling down, you're being transformed in ways you could not have anticipated when you made the decision to say, "I do". What marriage does is to focus your energy and attention on certain things rather than other things. And one thing you learn, if your marriage is to survive and thrive, is how much you yourself are going to have *to change*. Indeed, you learn, and usually the hard way, that you stand in need of changes that were not on your radar at all when you committed your life to that person.

So, one important feature of life in The In-Between is that the real thing, whatever that is, when it arrives, is rarely what you thought it would be when you started preparing for it. This goes whenever you commit yourself to achieving something worthwhile, such as committing to a career, or deciding to have a child. When you make a commitment, you make it not knowing how that commitment will change you, and you make it with no guarantee that you'll be successful. There are great artists whose work will never become popular, great wives whose marriages will fail because their husbands won't change, great parents whose children will become drug addicts, and young people whose lives will be cut short in traffic accidents through no fault of their own. Even if you do all you can to achieve your goals, other people can thwart you; disease or calamity can strike you without warning. So it is for beings like us who self-consciously live in time with limited knowledge and limited power. One distinctive feature of life in The In-Between is that we must make our life-commitments under significant uncertainty, with no guarantees of success as we have defined success to be when we make our commitments.

Another distinctive feature of life in The In-Between is also illustrated by marriage. To commit to marriage is to severely restrict what you can do going forward. "Forsaking all others til death do us part" is, how shall I put it, a *radically limiting promise*. Marriage is one of the few times when we publicly **vow** to restrict our possibilities. But whether we publically commit to something or not, every genuine commitment removes possibilities we would otherwise have, whether it's a commitment to becoming a Broadway performer, or a mathematician, or to singing in the church choir. Every time you genuinely commit yourself to something and follow through on it, you remove possibilities from your life; for to commit to something is to devote yourself to *not* doing a bunch of other things you might have done had you not dedicated yourself to the thing you committed yourself to. This is, I submit, a weird feature of our existence: you can't commit yourself to anything worth achieving in life without severely foreclosing possibilities for yourself.

You probably know people who try, though. You know the guy who, when he's pressed to make a life commitment, says: "I just want to keep all my options open". That's a decent policy for *young people* who are still trying to figure out what their talents and values are, but for *adults* it's a recipe for a very shallow life, and surely not one that's going to make the world better. So why do so many adults stick to their safe, easy, well-

worn paths, fearing commitment, leaving their options open? Lots of reasons. One is that our capitalistic, materialistic, ego-inflating culture is always telling us that we can have it all, but it's a marketing lie. A good life is achieved only through commitments to goals that require practice and dedication and therefore do not keep our options open.

I'm not saying it's easy. Commitments to goals that make life worth living are always made under uncertainty and without guarantee of success as we envision it at the time we make our commitments. And we can't predict how our commitments will change us, nor can we know all the consequences of our commitments. Such is life in The In-Between. Our attempts at improvement, development, and enrichment are always experienced *in between* what we now know and what we dimly reach for, *in between* who we have become and what we hope to become, *in between* what we expect and the different reality we will experience in carrying out our commitments. That's real life in The In-Between.

Our Advent readings [Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalms 126; I Thess. 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28] reflect life in The In-Between. When Isaiah wrote his prophetic poetry, little did he know that he would speak the very words that would inspire both John the Baptist and Jesus. Little did Isaiah know that *his words* would give language to the missions that John and Jesus would respectively feel themselves called to accomplish. When John the Baptist, who is revered as a great prophet by the people—so great that people are beginning to say he's the Messiah—is asked who he is by the religious authorities, John humbles himself, confessing that he's *not* the Messiah but that another in their midst is. Little could John know that his baptism of Jesus would be the occasion of God's sign to Jesus and others that Jesus was the anointed one. Little could John know that his words and actions would be immortalized in the New Testament and provide inspiration to literally billions of people who would live after him, including us right now. And little did John know that he would be beheaded as a result of his faithful commitment to his calling. Isaiah and John were men of great commitment. They lived good, meaningful, purpose-filled lives. They did not leave their options open, but faithfully disciplined themselves under uncertainty to carry out their commitments in light of what they had reason to think were worthy goals they were being called to.

In this Advent season, I can't think of a better question for us to meditate on than the question the religious leaders asked John the Baptist. *Who are you?* You're somebody.

Well, *who* are you? Part of the answer is given by your history: by your genetic makeup, by how your parents raised you, by the commitments you've made and the successes or failures you've experienced in working toward your goals. Part of the answer is given by the values you embody and the way you see the world. All of these things are explained in your *past*, and you'd do well to spend some time in honest reflection on your history. But, a huge part of the answer to the question: who are you?, the *exciting* part of the answer to the question, has to do with what you're *going* to desire and commit yourself to in the future. Part of who you are concerns whether you will desire change in yourself as you look toward the future. Part of who you are concerns what you will *commit to* going forward. Who *are* you? If I understand the grand purpose of church at all, if I understand why we're here, it's to help us figure out who we *are*. It's to help us figure out what we're *doing*. It's to help us figure out what to *commit* ourselves to going forward, and what to leave behind.

Our liturgy is filled with guidance, if we'll just pay attention. Our prayers of confession remind us that we fall short of the good, and they invite us to admit this reality about ourselves, to concede and confess that we stand in need of aid that we cannot provide all by ourselves. Our biblical readings remind us of how the people of God who came before us struggled to understand their lives, revealing an arc of spiritual progress that points a way forward even for us today. Our prayers of supplication remind us that divine aid is available to us when we sincerely desire it. Our songs of praise remind us that there is a higher power, a good and merciful God who is worthy of the best words, the best emotions, the best desires our human hearts can raise. Our Eucharistic feast reminds us that the God of the universe, the transcendent, infinite ground of all being, desires actual *communion with us*, a communion that empowers us to be instruments of God's work in the world. Our fellowship and mutual support of each other through our various ministries reminds us that we are not alone but part of a body of people working toward a common goal: to bring in a world of lasting peace, justice, and mutual love. In short, our church's purpose is to give us a big picture framework to help us figure out where we've come from, who we are, and how to move forward.

Of course, no church service will show you, by itself, who you are in the details. Despite all we have in common, we are individuals, with varying skills, talents, tastes, and

callings. How are you to go about your **own** life in The In-Between? The answer will no doubt be as individual as each of us is an individual. Nevertheless, we have trustworthy guides in the scriptures, and there we find the somewhat paradoxical answer that, although we are individuals, our real selves are to be understood in our relation to all the other individuals. As St. Paul says, we are together *the body of Christ*, and each of us is a part of that body. What this means for us is that we have differing callings and missions depending on our gifts and talents. Shoulders are no good for walking, but they are excellent for holding up heavy objects like an injured person in urgent need of medical care; of course, without arms and hands that injured person is likely to slip off the shoulder, and without legs you wouldn't get far; and without eyes you'd have a hard time telling where you're going; and without a mind you couldn't coordinate the other parts of the body. The lesson is clear: the various parts of the body, which serve varying functions, are all needed for the body to function well.

And what is this body of Christ supposed to be *doing*? The scriptural answer is plain and obvious, although many people somehow miss it. It's right there in both the Hebrew bible and the New Testament. It's right there in our Advent readings for today. In Isaiah we learn that the descendants are to be filled with the spirit of the Lord, to bring good news to the oppressed, to heal the brokenhearted, free slaves, release prisoners, comfort the mourners, to bring justice, beauty, righteousness, and praise to all the nations. John the Baptist said his mission was to make a straight path for the Lord, whom he identified as Jesus. And what did Jesus say characterizes the Kingdom of God? It is a world manifesting Isaiah's prophecy: a world of justice, peace, self-giving love, and mutual respect among all people. *This* is our collective goal as the body of Christ. The ultimate meaning, the ultimate purpose of our lives is to be found in our living out our parts in this complex body. Together we are building something, creating something, bringing something good into the world that does not now exist. How exciting is that?!

The question for each of us, then, is who am *I* in the body of Christ? What is *my* part? What am *I* being called to become? Which goals are worthy of my time? What do I need to leave behind? In short, what am I to commit myself to, knowing that to commit myself to something is to forsake other things that I could pursue, knowing that I'll be changed by my commitments, knowing that I can't now know what my future will be as a result of

living out my commitments? Other people cannot answer these questions for you, for other people don't live your life. No one, not even God, will force you to use your talents for building up the body of Christ. You don't have to give yourself to the tasks God calls you to. You can keep your options open, fearing change or fearing for your safety. But, that is the path to a shallow life. A life worth living is a committed life. So, the question for any of us who want to have a life worth living is: what is God calling me to commit to? How do I contribute to the healing of the world?

Putting aside time in the coming weeks for reflection and prayer about these questions, I submit, is an excellent way to do the work that Advent calls us to: to prepare for the coming of the Lord. We're not, after all, preparing for a baby Jesus to be born. That's been done. We're preparing for the coming of the Lord right here, right now, in our lives living in The In-Between. Amen.