

On the Threshold of Something New

Advent is a time of preparation. Advent is a time of wishing for what will come. Advent is a time when we wait with expectation on the threshold of something new. The celebration of the birth of the world's Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is something we eagerly wait for. Christmas Day is a special time for many people that is hopefully anticipated. But sometimes we stand at the threshold of new opportunities that make us nervous and anxious.

Last month, we had the privilege of hosting the Rev Dr Alan Roxburgh at our Presbytery Meeting. He writes about this experience in his book "The Sky is Falling" when he says this:

'There's something about the opening to the movie Sea Biscuit that draws me in every time I see it. It's a simple scene, really. A man, wearing a shop apron and gaiters to protect his shirtsleeves, loiters outside a new business: C.S. Howard's Bicycles – a modest storefront where bicycles are sold and repaired. There's just one problem – Charles Howard has no customers. In fact, viewers soon see Charles dozing on a bench, waiting for business that never materializes. People wander by, and carriages fill the streets, but no one, it seems, is interested in the expertise this aspiring entrepreneur has to offer.

'Then, suddenly, Charles' fortunes change. A man pulls up driving a Stanley automobile with steam billowing from under its hood. "The boiler blew on me," says the driver. "Can you fix it?" Charles thinks for a moment and then responds with a confident "Sure". In true movie fashion, an inspired Charles not only manages to fix the strange new machine, but dramatically improves its performance as well. As a result, he abandons the bicycle business to become a highly successful automotive dealer.

'I don't know about you, but I can relate to that scene. No, I've never worked in a bicycle repair shop, but I do know what it's like to feel hopelessly out of touch. And, chances are, you do as well.

'The truth is many Christian leaders today feel like the owners of such bicycle repair shops, waiting for business. Not long ago, it seemed everyone was riding bicycles and there was a significant demand for trained professionals in the field of bicycle maintenance. But today, the primary form of transportation has changed. New machines are rolling up to our front doors and deep down we know that we have no idea how to respond to this new reality. For many people, this is a confusing, frustrating place to be.

'As church leaders today, it's as if we've been trained to fix bicycles. In many cases, it's the only thing we know how to do. We're good at it and we have a suitcase full of special tools to help us accomplish this task. We have letters after our names that validate our skills, and titles that identify us as certified experts. The only problem is, no

one cares anymore. Our frameworks seem disconnected from the emerging cultural context, and our words are often received as a strange, foreign language. We read books about becoming a new kind of Christian, or becoming more mission-directed, but we're not sure what exactly needs to change. A bomb, of sorts, has gone off in our hearts and we've become aware that something is amiss, but practically speaking, we don't know what to do about it. We sense that a missional direction is right, but we feel unequal to the challenge. The leap from bicycles to cars seems too great.

‘This is the experience of what I call liminality –or what Merriam-Webster’s defines as “the condition of being on a threshold or at the beginning of a process.” ’

I believe Alan is right. I believe we are living in an age of liminality – a time when we are on the threshold of something new. We are at the beginning of a process. For me personally, I am at the beginning of a new season of ministry as your Executive Presbyter. For us as Christians, we are at the beginning of Advent. For us as a presbytery, we are on the threshold of a new era of mission. It's scary and exciting at the same time. We have been trained to fix bicycles in a world that now drives cars. Some of our knowledge is no longer needed or doesn't seem to fit our current reality. We wait for new customers to show up at the front doors of our churches, but they don't come.

We live in a time of liminality. It's scary because we have spent years acquiring knowledge that doesn't seem to help anymore. It's exciting because we are at the beginning of a new process, where God seems to be transforming Christ's church in fascinating new ways. God has the power to turn every negative into a positive. Every bicycle repair person can become an auto mechanic.

Some people think I was crazy to move to this presbytery. But I think we are on the verge of something exciting. I believe we are on the threshold of some amazing new discoveries. I am eagerly anticipating what the Holy Spirit will do in our midst in the new year as we explore what God is calling us to do together. Please pray for us. Please celebrate Advent and Christmas with all the gusto you have. And please join us in the new year, because I believe we are on the threshold of something great.

Clark Cowden