The portrait of Jesus in the gospels is not one of a religious master who sits in serenity and dishes out spiritual advice to pilgrims who come in search of sacred wisdom. He is a blur of action, a teacher constantly on the move, who leads his disciples from one risky situation to another.

Are you familiar with the word “liminal?” It is not a word that routinely comes up in conversation. Liminal comes from limen which means threshold. A liminal moment is a point where you leave one place and enter another. It is a place of transition. Author and spiritual director, Andrew Mayes writes, “In entering liminal space you leave behind your former ideals and conventions, the status quo, the ordinary routines, inherited mindsets. You also leave behind your safety zone; you exit your place of security. You step out into a space where you will see things differently, where your world view might be shattered, where your existing priorities might be turned upside down.

You cross a border and go beyond your usual limits. What had been a barrier now becomes a stepping stone into a larger spiritual adventure. The liminal spaces into which Jesus leads us are places of radical unmaking and unlearning – uncomfortable spaces where we are called to be utterly vulnerable to God, and from which we will re-enter the world (transformed). The limen is the place of departure, a springboard into a fresh way of doing things.”

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew, a passage we also find in Mark and Luke, describes a liminal point for Peter and the other disciples. It is a critical juncture in the life of Jesus and for those who seek to follow him. This is a moment of extreme pressure and intense reactions, but it is also a time of immense opportunity.

Jesus has been traveling on foot from one village to the next, touching hearts with the generous love of God and opening eyes to the surprising ways of God. He has been healing broken bodies, nourishing those who hunger and lifting dejected spirits. Now, he is back on the road, conversing with his disciples. As they walk along, Jesus questions them: What are people saying about me? Who do they think I am?

The disciples rattle off some of the answers they have heard. “Some speculate you are John the Baptist, some suggest you are Elijah, and some theorize that you are Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.” Jesus is obviously someone extraordinary, someone very different than their current religious leaders. He is undoubtedly in the mold of the prophets, but there is no consensus among the people on his precise identity. So Jesus makes it personal. He asks, “Who do you say that I am?”
Peter, the impulsive one, blurts out his belief. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

The eyes of everyone within earshot are suddenly riveted on Jesus to observe his response. He gives Peter the thumbs up and praises him for his answer. Peter revels in his moment of triumph.

But his jubilance lasts only seconds. Jesus snatches away Peter’s glory and tramples the disciples’ notions of a Messiah who will seize the reins of power and establish God’s kingdom on earth. He will neither sweep the floor with their Roman oppressors, nor dislodge the religious and political leaders who collaborate with them. Instead, Jesus says “they must journey to Jerusalem where people will not honor him, but revile him; will not embrace him, but reject him; will not follow him, but kill him.”

Peter cannot bear to hear it and lashes out at Jesus. The passage says Peter rebukes Jesus, and the Greek word is a verb that describes a harsh condemnation of an evil spirit. The implication is that Peter tells Jesus he is delusional and perhaps even possessed by a demon.²

In a blistering exchange, Jesus castigates Peter, calling him “Satan” and saying, “Get out of my way!”

Why is this exchange so emotionally charged? It has to be more than a theological disagreement. It has to be more than lack of sleep or missing a meal. What is it? I think it is fear.

When we are afraid that our secure world is crumbling and our future is unknown or even dangerous, our temper flares. We try to cover our fear with anger.

Our passage describes a liminal moment for Peter and the disciples; perhaps even for Jesus. They are crossing the boundary between the familiar routine and the uncharted road; the place of safety and the risky future.

Jesus makes it clear to his disciples that they are at a crisis point. Their decision will make or break their lives. He says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

He makes it clear that the path he is traveling is not for the faint of heart. Now is the time to opt out if they are not totally committed. But Jesus adds that, if they hang in with him, it will make all the difference in the world. He says, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Jesus is not a self-destructive person who urges his followers to seek suffering. But he knows that living in harmony with the will of God requires commitment and courage because it can put you at odds with powers that oppose compassion, perpetuate justice and undermine peace.

In his book, The Children, David Halberstam writes of a liminal moment in the history of our country. He tells how eight young black college students played pivotal roles in changing our nation by confronting segregation laws in the 1960s.

One of those students was Diane Nash, a young woman who grew up in Chicago and attended Fisk University in Nashville. During her freshman year, a date took her to the Tennessee State Fair where she encountered, for the first time, a sign that read WHITE ONLY. Then another that read COLORED. The signs for segregated rest rooms hit her like a slap in the face. The shame she felt was immediate and it was quickly followed by anger.

Within days she experienced other humiliations. Growing up in Chicago, she had enjoyed going downtown with her friends. They would shop at the large department stores, and then eat lunch at a restaurant in one of the stores. When she tried to do this in Nashville, she discovered that the store owners would gladly take her money for any purchase she made, but she was barred from eating in their lunchrooms.
Soon after those demeaning experiences, a fellow student mentioned that a minister was holding workshops designed to challenge the local segregation laws at downtown lunch counters and she decided to sit in on one of the sessions. Initially, she thought this was out of character for her, but soon it became obvious that she was a powerhouse among this small group of students and they asked her to be one of their leaders. The young men were impressed by her confidence and her courage. She was the slightest among them, and a female, but she appeared to be fearless.

If they only knew. Years later, she recounted sitting in Professor Hayden’s English class and all she could remember was how terrified she was. It was the last class of the afternoon before gathering with the others at the church and heading downtown to challenge the segregation laws at the lunch counters. She vividly remembers the large clock on the wall of her English class slowly ticking off the minutes that put her ever closer to danger. She remembers being unable to process what the professor was saying and she remembers her hands being so soaked with sweat that by the end of class she left wet handprints on her wooden desk. No matter how much she believed in their cause, the anticipatory fear was always there.

The night before the first sit-in, she sat alone in her dorm room and was overwhelmed with anxiety. She chastised herself. What had she gotten herself into? She was supposed to march downtown the next day and challenge the existing white power structure. She, Diane Nash, in her own mind a coward of the first degree, was going with a group of young black college students and ministers to take on the most important people in a big, very white, very Southern city. She and her friends were going to go up against white business men who were rich and powerful and connected. They had the police force, the judges and the politicians on their side. Diane Nash did not know one single powerful person in the whole country. She was 21, and way in over her head. The others looked up to her, but they had no idea how frightened she was. If there was any way she could have disappeared from the movement without causing great shame to herself and letting down the others, she would have done it. But something inside kept pushing her forward.

She remembered that she had become a part of the group for serious reasons. She had committed to a nonviolent way of changing America. She had found a spiritual home in the group that gathered in the basement of First Baptist Church. She had been impressed with the Reverend Jim Lawson and how he instructed them in the teachings of Jesus about love and forgiveness and standing strong for what is right and just.3

It was a liminal moment for Diane Nash and the others. They stood at the crossroad of the known past and the unknown future. Despite their fear, despite having coffee poured on them, despite having cigarettes extinguished on their heads, despite being pummeled and threatened with their life, they kept going. Their journey started with the segregated lunch counters in Nashville, but “they could not begin and end their quest with nothing grander than the right to eat lunch counter hamburgers. Each victory they gained demanded a further step... (They were on) an escalating spiral in which they kept pursuing ever more dangerous challenges to the forces of segregation in ever more dangerous venues... And no one reflected the remarkable transformation from scared young black student to black student samurai more obviously than this shy, often timid young woman, Diane Nash.”4

When Jesus calls you to pick up our cross and follow him, you may not be led into life-threatening places, but you will be led into demanding places – sitting with someone whose grief is raw from the death of a loved one, forgiving someone who does not deserve it, standing up for people who are treated unjustly, giving away a portion of our money to help people who are desperate.

Jesus is calling you to follow him wherever he leads and he can take you to life-transforming places that will save your soul.
NOTES

4. Ibid., p. 7-8.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Eternal God, this day we are mindful that it is easier to adopt the ways of the world than to follow the path of Jesus. We claim we are committed – we sing hymns of praise, we utter prayers of thanksgiving, we study the scriptures and we pledge our devotion. But when Jesus calls on us to pick up our cross and to follow him into an unknown future, we waffle. Indecision reigns in our minds and our feet freeze at the threshold. We want to be faithful, but we are not sure we want to step into new territory. We have grown accustomed to our comfortable routines and we become anxious when Jesus issues a formidable challenge. We balk at his call to lose ourselves in you and to give ourselves for others. Loving God, forgive us: for our feeble faith, for our conditional compassion, and for our measured mercy.

Mighty God, we yearn for the wisdom to discern your guidance and the will to follow you. Grant us uncluttered minds to meditate on your word:

- clarity of vision to behold signs of your kingdom;
- open ears to hear your whispers deep within our souls;
- and receptive hearts to the call of Jesus to faithfully follow him into the places of need.

God of Peace, there are so many places that scream out in pain. Our world is ablaze with wars and terrorism is on the rise. Violent crime and drug wars are too prevalent in our cities. The ugly sin of racism refuses to die. Intolerance of other faiths makes many skeptical of any religion. People with mental illness are turned out onto the street. Hunger and poverty rob children of a decent life. Pollution of our planet puts future generations in jeopardy. The problems are so vast that it is easy to become overwhelmed and discouraged to even step into the fray.

God of Justice, do not let us surrender to hopelessness. Remind us that faithful and determined people working for a just cause can overcome tremendous odds. Grant us courage to tame our fears and to defeat despair. Fill us with your Spirit so that we may love without reservation, spread light in dark places and give ourselves generously in your name.

Now, hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying, “Our Father…”