

Our Mezuzah Moment

(Meditations from the Threshold)

*Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart . . .
and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*
(Deuteronomy 6:6, 9)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, **July 9, 2017**
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Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

The text I've chosen to share with you on this first Sunday of my ministry at Christ of the Hills is from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, the Shema, a Hebrew word meaning "Hear." It's the first word of our longer reading, "*Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD is One.*"

The Shema, foundational to our Judeo-Christian understanding of God, orbits around a central nucleus -- that we not merely Hear, but that we Love God. "*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*"

So wonderful is the Shema's invitation to Love God that these words must not be contained within one's heart alone and privately, but must be shared, must span the generations. "*You shall impress (these words) upon your children, you shall recite them when you are at Home and when you are Away.*"

It's this *Home and Away* theme I'd like to explore with you this morning, focusing on Moses' command to place these words precisely at the Threshold between Home and Away, upon your *Mezuzot* (Doorposts) and your *Sha'arim* (Gates). Entering a house or a gate in Israel one finds a long rectangular piece positioned on the door frame. This is no decorative ornament, but is the mezuzah, the Hebrew word for *Doorpost*.

The really priceless thing about the mezuzah is not the materials from which it is made but rather what's contained within. Inside the long cylinder of the mezuzah are these words of the Shema rolled up into a scroll. "*Hear O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD alone, and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.*"

Throughout the generations the Hebrews have taken seriously this command to place these words at the Threshold, the In-Between place separating *Home* from *Away*, the place through which we must necessarily pass in any of our



transitions from “*Here*” to “*There*.” The Mezuzah is a reminder that wherever we go we have a higher calling upon our lives, no less at *Home* than *Away*, no less *Away* than at *Home*, no less “*Here*” than “*There*.”

The Mezuzah at every door and gate is a way of modulating the merely mundane into sacred significance, acknowledging that a sacred canopy has been cast over all our comings and goings. The mezuzah is a way to sensitize us always to God’s presence, acknowledging our unique vulnerability at the Threshold places of our lives, the places of change and transition.

Threshold experiences are our “*In-between*” places, liminal zones of transition where we are in a sense suspended, drawing on the energy of both *Here* and *There*. In the hot weather we’ve experienced recently, we often experience the dual pull of the doorway. Opening the door to transition from inside to outside one feels the *Both-ness* of the Threshold, the heat of the outdoors contrasting with the cool of the air-conditioned inside.

In that moment of *Both-ness* we are neither fully “*Here*” nor fully “*There*,” but *In-Between*, making transition from *Here* to *There*. I’ve certainly felt that in these last several months since my late February appointment to *Christ of the Hills* was announced, feeling the pull toward visioning for a new and wonderful congregation while making all the necessary preparations to move and live in such a vibrant Village, all while still through these four months seeking to be faithful to the responsibilities which were mine at St. James.

This *Threshold* period has held, for me, a strange mix of grief and excitement -- grief in the loss of something known and beloved combined with excitement and increasing yearning to walk into a new horizon of opportunity in ministry. Since my appointment to *Christ of the Hills* was the first appointment announced in Arkansas, it’s been like I’ve been standing in the doorway and holding the door opened for four months! Why, I could almost hear my dad saying, “*Shut the door Sieg, are we trying to air-condition the neighborhood!*”

The word *Vulnerability* is a good word to describe *Threshold* moments of our lives, because the doorways of the major transitions of our living are places of surging energy where we sense we are moving into *Terra Incognita* as we leave one place to enter another. Cultural expressions around the world seek to meet the awkwardness of the threshold in ways that cushion that energy and remove any fear. This may be a simple expression of welcome with a doorway mat, or it could be filled with superstition, charms such as hanging a horseshoe or a rabbit’s foot above a doorway. At the doorway we may try to channel that energy into victory, such as when cheerleaders lead the way for the team bursting onto the field as the band plays the fight song. And, of course it could be a religious symbol such as the Mezuzah. All are the same in this, that they seek to counter the discomfort of the one entering upon the new challenge, sharing the universal recognition that *Thresholds* are serious business demanding respect.

This is perhaps best seen in our traditions surrounding one of the most significant of all thresholds, marriage. A father escorting the bride across the threshold of the church is a cultural recognition that something that has been will now be forever changed, the Old giving way to the New. Next, the groom carrying the bride across the threshold is a tradition of caring dating to Roman times, cushioning the surge of energy at a Threshold that can seem frightening.

Our life journey takes us across many Thresholds of change until we arrive at the final threshold from life to death, our faith bolstering us against death's mystery with the words of eternal life in Christ. If the progression of our lives is ever westward toward that horizon of the setting sun, we discover is that the world is blue at its edges. The Blue of the Horizon, the place where earth dissolves into sky, is what Rebecca Solnit calls, "*The Blue of Distance*." I like that. Why? Because blue is the color of *There* seen from *Here*. Blue is the color of where you are not, and where you can never go, for the blue you see from *Here* is not found *There*, at that place so many miles away. Those who are *There* have their own horizon, as far away from *There*, as *There* is far away from *Here*. Rather, the blue that we see from here is contained within the atmospheric distance between *Here* and *There*. Once *There*, the blue is lost, its beckoning hues dissolved into common scrub and soil.

Another way to think of this is that the seemingly distant Blue is the very Blue in which we live and breathe each moment. Once realized, this frees us for living Now, seeing in every threshold a new opportunity to live in relationship with God. The *Mezuzah*, then, becomes a way to sacramentalize life *Home and Away, Here and There*, to seek to live momentarily, to capture life's moments in a way that says, "*God is Here, and God is There. Wherever my journey takes me, God is.*"

Perhaps the art of life is to get the message in the mundane, knowing that the kingdom of God is not out there Somewhere, but around us, among us, within us. The mezuzah calls upon us to relish the wonder of small scale epiphanies. The beauty of spiritual life is to make every moment a mezuzah moment, to know that life is *Here*, not Somewhere Else but all around us, in a succession of astonishments.

I want now to quote from my final message at St. James in Little Rock after six wonderful years. I share this, not because I was too busy to prepare fresh thoughts but because, in the Threshold, I've drawn from the energy of both sides of the Doorway. What I said to them, I think, needs to be said also to you.

"Today, my last sermon from this pulpit, we find ourselves in a doorway, an "*In-Between*" Place. It is uniquely OUR "*In-Between*" Place. I love that moment in the Passover Seder when we pour *Elijah's Cup* – one chair is left empty, one chalice of wine untouched, the door opened as a signal of our anticipation to welcome Elijah and to welcome whatever is Next.

"We too must open the door to the *Unknown*. In our journey '*From Here to There*' we do not fear the temporary sense of disorientation, for we know that whatever is behind the now-opened door, whatever is rushing into our lives, whatever mysteries the Unknown future holds for us, God is *There*, his love for us not diminished.

"When I walked through the *Threshold* of that open door for the first time six years ago, I felt a profound sense of dislocation. For me, it wasn't my pulpit, not the one I had grown accustomed to over the previous five years in Mountain Home. The faces, your faces, which I looked upon six years ago were not the ones I had known so well and loved so deeply for those five years previous to coming here. I sensed that I was *In-Between*, stuck in the *Threshold* between Here

and There, having left one place behind but not yet ready to arrive anywhere else. I felt I was neither fully *Here* nor fully *There*.

“And, I suspect, there was a sense of dislocation in the congregation. ‘*Who is this new appointment from the bishop and cabinet? We don’t know him, nor do we know IF we want to know him. He’s an unknown. What quirks of character will show up next week, next month?*’ Together we felt, pastor and congregation, a sense of lostness. But you knew what to do. Sensing that lostness, you extended to me the chalice of welcome. With such a welcome, we learned to rejoice in the gift we had been given, walking together into the Uncharted places which these past six years have held for us and, once there, we became *Something Else, Something Other* than we had been before.

“As we experienced a certain lostness then, now we will know it again. Soon enough, I will walk through another opened door at *Christ of the Hills* and look upon other strange faces, which I know, as happened here, will soon enough become familiar to Sherry and to me, and beloved. And you will look upon another in this pulpit, Rev. Vaughn, as he comes through your open door. I rejoice in knowing that you will lift to that one, as you did to me six years ago, the chalice of welcome. That is who we are as United Methodists, it is important, and it makes me proud to be a part of such a Connection.”

Well, I hope you heard that as I intended it today -- not a word to St. James (thought that is where these words were first spoken), but as a word to *Christ of the Hills*, with great and growing excitement at what lies ahead.

Daniel Boone, that pioneer of the American wilderness ever crossing new *Thresholds* into the Uncharted, wrote, “*I never was lost in the woods in my whole life, though once I was confused for three days.*” I love that because it points out a legitimate distinction between lost and confused. Not lost, because Boone trusted his abilities to find his way. Boone knew what to do in the *Between-times*.

Do we, pastor and congregation, know what to do in the *Between-times*? Having received your warm welcome over these four months, I know the answer is “Yes!”

I confess, though, that I will feel a bit like Daniel Boone for a few days -- not lost, but perhaps a little confused. Not lost at all, because I trust my abilities to find my way, but also and especially because of the many and abundant kindnesses and the warmth of welcome already extended to Sherry and me from this amazing congregation.

This is, and uniquely, *OUR Mezuzah Moment*, and I cherish it. With these *Meditations from the Threshold*, may the Lord our God bless and sanctify this New Beginning. In the Name of the One Eternal God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen!