In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

We human beings love to mark our time. We tend to want to establish “bookends” and to make note of special events in our lives and we want to give meaning to our time. For example this time of the year for many will be a graduation time, a time of great pomp and circumstance and ceremony. Most of that ceremony part is not available to the graduates but I still see virtual parties and yard signs celebrating these important transitions. We are still finding ways to mark this important time even in the world of virus and separation.

In our church year we constantly mark time, first Sunday of Advent to Christmas, Ash Wednesday to Easter, Easter to Pentecost. It gives us structure when we do this, and it helps us to know where we are in the overall “scheme of things.”

 But what do we do with the “in between” time, the time where we live most of our lives? These are the times between the bookends, the times we are in transition from one thing to another, whether it is in our lives as Christians, as students, as workers, as people in recovery, whatever facet of our lives we are in at the moment consists mostly of these times between the bookends, where we change and grow, where we live and breathe and have our being.

Periods of transition such as the one that is happening now are what scholars of anthropology call a “liminal stage” or “liminality.” I’ve been talking about the concept of liminality throughout our current time if being distant from each other. This concept comes from the word “limen” which means both threshold and margin. Liminality means crossing a threshold from one stage or status in life to another. But it also means being on the “margins,” outside the boundaries of one’s society or community, during the period of transition. We as a church, community, and world society are in one of these times now, in a very big way.

Besides coronavirus, what have been your liminal, wilderness experiences? Each one of us has had them whether intended or not. College, for some, was such an experience. My brother, a Viet Nam vet who served in the army would certainly argue that basic training was one of these times. For him, no other time in his life was as leveling, and as marginalizing as wearing a uniform every day and living constantly by the commands of a drill seargent! For some of you, childbirth and parenting young children was, or still is, such a time. For me, seminary was a liminal time.

For still others, recovery from addiction – either one’s own, or that of a loved one, has required living on the margins of society long enough to cross the threshold from one way of life to another. We mark time in recovery with chips that tell us where we are, but the meaningful time, the time when we do all the work and experience all the growth is in the liminal time. The death of a spouse, divorce, the loss of a career - all these experiences position us into a liminal, in-between time. A time where we stand on the boundaries of ‘life as usual,’ whatever that is, a time where an old identity is relinquished and a new identity is formed.

These periods of time often seem to last for a very long time; indeed, recovery lasts a lifetime, god willing. A long time of feeling that sometimes we are without an identity. In fact, in the overall arch of the Christian narrative, in the broadest sense of the Christian life, we live our entire existence in transformation. We live in between the time when the Christ, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, walked among us and the time of the second coming, when all prophesy will be fulfilled and God will finally let us in on the secrets of what on God’s earth we’ve been doing here. Our lives in many ways consist of nothing but transition. We never really “land” on anything and many of us know that we’re fooling ourselves if we think we have. The greatest spiritual minds of ours and every age realize this, that we never really “achieve” a final end, reach a final goal. There can for many be great despair in this. We ask, what is our purpose, what it this all about? This seems like a very lonely way to walk through life; where is the good news?

Our gospel reading today comes again from the large section of John that consists of Jesus’ final words to his disciples on the night before he is taken away, his farewell discourse. In it he says this: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.”

We will never be left orphaned. In two weeks, as I said, we will celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit who lives and dwells within us. We are not alone; we are with each other and with God. Through this, I believe we find the meaning we so desire during this liminal time, this time in between, this time when the Kingdom of God is both here and to be fully realized later.

And what do we do in this time? What’s the goal? How do we know we’re doing it right? One answer comes at the end of the main portion of the Big Book, we are to join one another as we trudge the road of happy destiny. Another good idea when we have questions like this it is to look into the scripture for answers. Perhaps one such answer comes to us in the words of the Prophet Micah, who gives us this:

With what shall I come before the Lord,

 and bow myself before God on high?...

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;

 and what does the Lord require of you

but to do justice, and to love kindness,

 and to walk humbly with your God?

In the name of God…