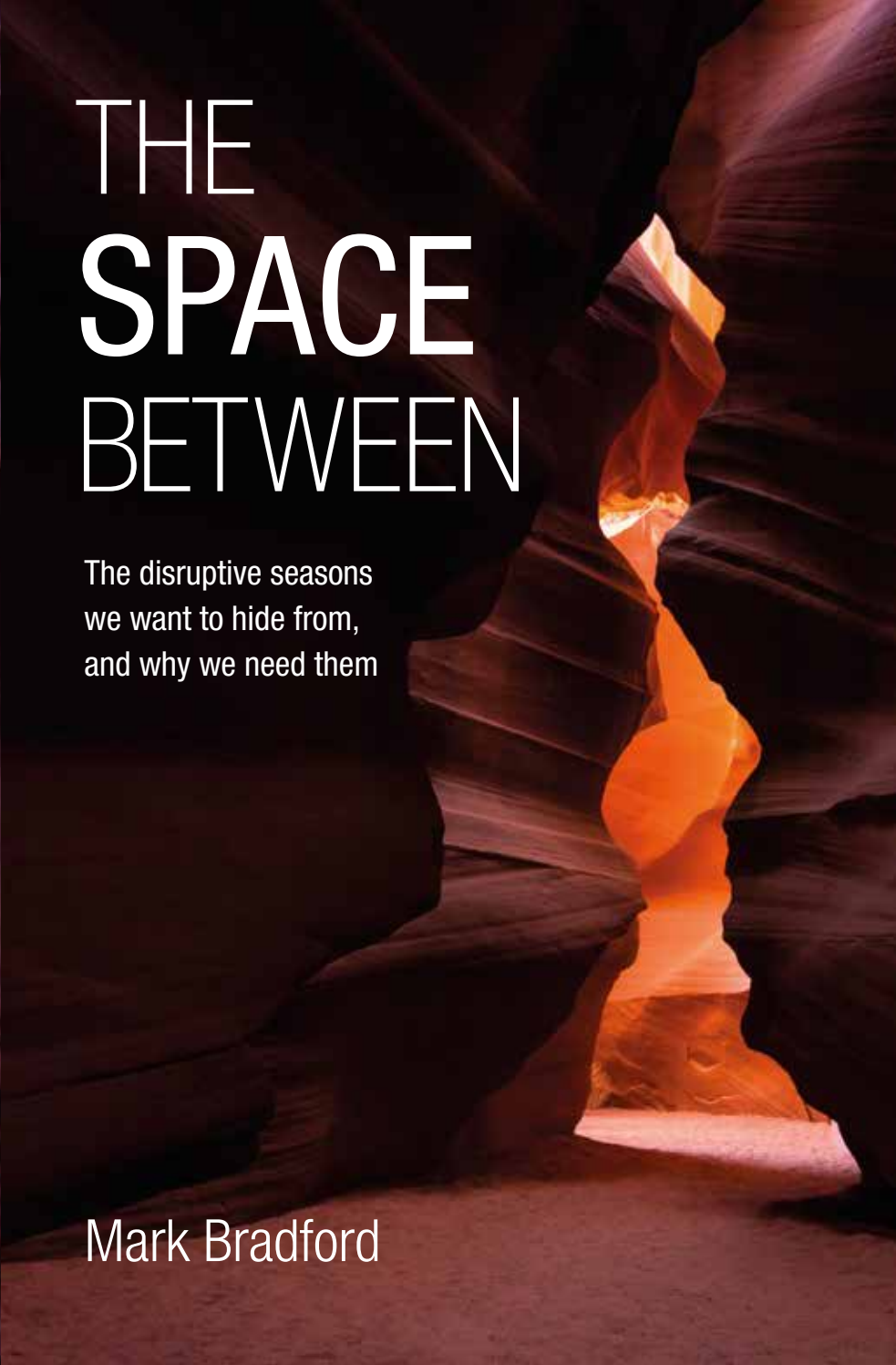
THE
SPACE
BETWEEN
The disruptive seasons
we want to hide from,
and why we need them
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Mark Bradford

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The disruptive seasons
we want to hide from,
and why we need them

To all who know the pain of the space between,
that it might become for them a place of hope and new life.

Contents

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Last, but most important, I'd like to thank Sarah, Caleb, Anna and Phoebe for their endless love and support that keeps me going in everything, and without which this book, and so much else, would not be possible.

‘Fire’ by Judy Brown

What makes a fire burn
is space between the logs,
a breathing space.
Too much of a good thing,
too many logs
packed in too tight
can douse the flames
almost as surely
as a pail of water would.
So building fires
requires attention
to the spaces in between,
as much as to the wood.

When we are able to build
open spaces
in the same way
we have learned
to pile on the logs,
then we can come to see how
it is fuel, and absence of the fuel
together, that make fire possible.
We only need to lay a log
lightly from time to time.
A fire
grows
simply because the space is there,
with openings
in which the flame
that knows just how it wants to burn
can find its way.[1]

1

Introduction

Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'
JOHN 14:6

Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In the space there is the power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.
Author unknown[2]

Oh, the grand old Duke of York, he had ten thousand men.
He marched them up to the top of the hill and he marched them down again.
And when they were up, they were up; and when they were down, they were down;
and when they were only half-way up…

… they were in the 'space between' – in what we might term a 'liminal space'. Neither up nor down, neither here nor there, betwixt and between.

This book claims that most of life is lived in the 'space between'. Yet, all too often, we can have a practical understanding of the Christian life which hopes only to move 'from victory unto victory' and which merely equips us to live in the certain and the secure. The good news is that to live within the biblical story and the Christian tradition is to have all the resources that we require for life where it is most often located: amid disruption, uncertainty and a loss of momentum.

Caroline Welby writes that 'we tend to go through life without experiencing it in its fullness'.[3] It's like when you drive from A to B on a route that you are familiar with, and you get to the destination but can't remember exactly how you did it. All too often this is how we do life: on autopilot, as though we are sleepwalking our way through it. I often observe a stream of schoolchildren passing the front of our house on a weekday morning. Some are akin to walking zombies: heads down, eyes glued to phones, seemingly inattentive to the world around them. This inattentiveness to life is how I can live if I'm not careful. Sometimes, I merely follow the path of least resistance, the easiest way through. The focus of this book is the question of how God captures our attention to wake us up to the fullness of life. As I look back through my life so far, I reflect that in times and seasons of disruption, God has been at work to jolt me out of my slumber.

The Latin word *limina*, from which we get 'liminal', means 'threshold' – the place 'betwixt and between'. It's when we're out of our old comfort zone, and we're waiting in the dark, on the threshold of what comes next. It's when we've left the tried-and-tested, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It's when our old world has come to an end, or worse still simply fallen apart, and we're left in limbo wondering what the new world may look like. There are countless examples of what liminal space might look like in practice, but they all carry with them the common characteristics of grief, confusion, ambiguity and loss of control, to name but a few. It's a hard place to be in because we each arrange our lives for the sake of predictability and control, comfort and security – and 'the space between' offers us none of these.

Getting stuck on 'the Way'

One of the earliest designations given to the community of those who followed Jesus was 'the Way', derived from the well-known statement by Jesus, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). 'The Way' is used several times in the book of Acts: for example, when describing those believers

whom Saul was opposed to before his Damascus Road experience; and then (now named Paul) his representation of 'the Way' in his missionary activities.[4]

'The Way' is a deep pastoral theme as well. It speaks of the 'journey' that is inherent to our discipleship – that dynamic relationship of following Jesus to which we are all invited. It captures a vital sense of motion and momentum. Following Jesus is never a guarantee of a comfortable life – it cannot be since 'the Way' in Mark's gospel is the journey towards Jerusalem and to Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. Equally, following Jesus is never meant to be something static. It should always take us onward as, led by the Spirit, we go ever deeper in our relationship with the Father.

Yet, despite this, there are undoubtedly times on that journey of discipleship when we seem to get 'stuck'. There are seasons when our experience of life appears to be taking us nowhere – or, if it is taking us anywhere, then it feels like it's downwards. It is precisely *these* times, these liminal seasons of life, that this book seeks to explore. They are the times and seasons – the spaces between – that we often want to hide from, and yet the very moments, I believe, that God is most able to use for his plans and purposes and, against all expectations, to lead us onward with him.

Mind the gap!

We enter a space between whenever we encounter disruption in our lives. Perhaps something changes unexpectedly, or crisis hits, or a season naturally comes to an end and there is a significant transition to make. There are endless external circumstances that might trigger a disruptive season in our lives: for example, a serious illness, the end of a close relationship, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job or income, or the failure of a longing to be realised. Even positive changes, full of new beginnings – such as getting married or having a baby, moving to a new place or starting a new job – can have within them an ending that

needs to be faced. Sometimes the transition might be more developmental and constitute a slow, inner adjustment to a new perception of reality. These typically occur during adolescence, midlife or older age, but can equally take place anytime there is an inner awareness that the status quo is not satisfying and the search begins for an alternative. This inner feeling may, or may not, trigger an external change in the process.

In all of this, a 'VUCA' environment can ensue, in which the world is experienced as *volatile*, *uncertain*, *complex* and *ambiguous*.[5] For this reason, disruptive and liminal seasons are always experienced as places of pain. They are *volatile* in that something significant has changed, which destabilises us. They are *uncertain* in that we come to realise that life is no longer predictable. They are *complex* in that what has been familiar and certain is now lost, while the 'new normal' has not yet revealed itself. For all these reasons and more, they are deeply *ambiguous* and highly confusing.

Disruptive moments always involve loss and letting go. William Bridges describes five aspects of the natural 'ending' experience, which he terms 'the five dis's':

1 **Disengagement** – a separation from the contexts in which we have known or imagined ourselves. We disconnect either willingly or unwillingly from the activities, relationships, settings and roles that used to be of importance to us.

2 **Dismantling** – a taking apart of the structures that have sustained life for a time, whether they be our relationships, our sense of purpose, our rootedness in place, or our outlook on life. In a process of mourning, we stop thinking of ourselves as part of a 'we' and start thinking as an 'I'.

3 **Disidentification** – a loss of the old ways of defining ourselves. The end of a particular identity that once stemmed, perhaps, from a relationship, role or competency leaves us no longer quite sure who we are.

4 **Disenchantment** – a sense of being disappointed, let down, or disillusioned by someone, or something, that once held meaning or significance for us. This is the cost of the faith and trust that we exercise in different ways as inevitable parts of living.

5 **Disorientation** – a feeling of bewilderment and 'lostness', as vital parts of us slip away. All the customary signs of location are gone, and we cannot move forward into the future because we no longer know the way.[6]

Such endings create an inevitable emptiness. The old world has been relinquished, but there is not yet a new world to lay hold of. We are grieving a loss, yet are unable to define the shape of the hope into which we can step. The result is that we can sometimes fall down the gap that is the space between the two. Whenever I'm in London and I take the Tube, I'm relentlessly reminded to 'mind the gap between the train and the platform'. I can do this with ease. Unfortunately, however much I am reminded to 'mind the gap' between my endings and my beginnings, there is simply no avoiding these spaces between. In such spaces, there is only a void of nothingness which easily unsettles us. All our survival instincts are, naturally, to hurry back or to rush forwards. Yet, cruelly, we are unable to do either. There is no going back – things have happened which cannot be undone and which will leave their mark forever. Equally, there is no fast-forwarding through this time – we don't know where it will take us, so we can't anticipate the way ahead. We grope at something solid to lay hold of, but all we find are shadows that slip through our grasp.

To live well in the emptiness of the space between is a complex thing. The very sequence of an ending, a space between and a new beginning might not even happen in that order. For example, a new beginning, such as a new job in a new place, might trigger the realisation of a whole number of endings that are taking place and plunge a person into a space between. It may be a while before the new beginning can be fully embraced on the inside. Equally, someone in a relationship might sense an increasing disconnection from their partner and

internally disengage long before any external ending comes about. These are confusing and ambiguous phases of life to process. We sometimes hope that there might be an easy fix for all of our problems – a switch that can be flipped to make things okay, or a few simple steps to bring about a happy ending. When a machine, such as a car, is broken, it isn't the whole car that goes through the process of travail. Instead, the faulty part is identified and either mended or a replacement part brought in. If only it could be the same for us.

Yet no simple solution exists for the pain of what we encounter in our losses and endings. There is no key, switch or fix that will do the job. Nonetheless, there is a power, I believe, to naming and framing the empty 'non-experiences' of our lives in the ways that this book will explore. This will not explain what is happening to us, but it can give us a renewed vision for confusing times. The lenses offered are not hard, literal and precise, for we are each unique and complex. No one can say to us, 'I know how you feel', for even where the externals might be similar, we all experience and process things in such radically different ways. Instead, the vision opened up is soft, metaphorical and ambiguous. In this, I have found, both for myself and for others with whom I've conversed that there is strength to gain in realising that, though we *feel* lost, we are not lost. Instead, we are *somewhere* on the grid, even if we can't locate ourselves exactly. There is also encouragement in realising that our experiences, while unique, share a commonality with the stories of many others down the ages and within the present.

The origins of the term 'liminal'

'Liminality' emerges out of the field of anthropology. It describes the middle stage of rituals, as participants stand at the threshold between their previous way of structuring reality and the new way that the ritual establishes. This middle stage – this space between – is always marked by ambiguity and disorientation.

The concept of liminality was first developed in the early 20th century by folklorist Arnold van Gennep in his 1906 book, *The Rites of Passage*. Van Gennep claimed that all rites of passage followed a threefold sequence, composed of pre-liminal rites, liminal rites and post-liminal rites.[7] In pre-liminal rites (or *rites of separation*), there is a metaphorical death – something of the past that must be left behind. The middle stage of ambiguity and disorientation – that of liminal rites (or *transition rites*) – has two essential characteristics to it. First, the rite must follow a known sequence, and second, there must be a figure of authority presiding over it. The term 'liminality' was introduced to describe the passing through that marks the boundary between two phases of existence and reality. This middle stage is where the transition, albeit imprecisely, takes place. Post-liminal rites (or *rites of incorporation*) are then the stage in which the participant is reincorporated into society as a 'new' being with a new identity.

Victor Turner, who is considered to have rediscovered the importance of liminality, considered the initiation of children into adulthood to be the most typical rite. The awkwardness of teenage years, in which so much is up for grabs in terms of identity and belonging within family and community, is a classic example of the ambiguity and disorientation of the liminal middle stage. In the first phase, there must be a 'death' as childhood is left behind, while the crossing of the threshold leads to the celebration of a new adult and receiving them into society.

It is not difficult to see how baptism functions as the primary rite of passage within the Christian community, capturing each of the three stages in van Gennep's sequence. There is the death of the old person in the waters of baptism, giving birth to the new creation that arises out of the waters now that the threshold between death and new life has been crossed. This threshold, that liminal space, is located somewhere down in the font or baptistry.

Through the work of Turner, the concept of liminality began to be applied to a range of contexts beyond ritual passages in small-scale

societies. More recently, usage of the term has broadened to describe political and cultural change as well.[8]

The importance of the disruptive moments in our lives

The space between is a place of great pain. At the same time, it is also a location of great opportunity and overwhelming hope, for in it we stand on the threshold of something altogether new. Vitally, disruption creates a unique space for reimagination. The emptiness of the space between offers a whole new perspective from which to glimpse life both as it was before and as it might be in the future. The space between, or, in Bridges' language, the 'neutral zone', 'provides access to an angle of vision on life that one can get nowhere else'.[9] This reimagination opens the door to the possibility of transformation. If the goal of the Christian life is to be transformed more and more into the image of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18; Romans 8:29), then the disruptive seasons of life may be the most important means through which God accomplishes this. Importantly, *the disruptive process itself* is the source of renewal. This is to say that any change and transformation within us happens not *despite* what we perceive to be confusing, unsettling and even downright awful, but precisely *because of it* and only *through it*. The truth is that disruption and the liminal space that follows offer moments of intense creativity and profound opportunity for us. Richard Rohr comments:

> Nothing good or creative emerges from business as usual. This is why much of the work of God is to get people into liminal space, and to keep them there long enough so they can learn something essential. It is the ultimate teachable space… maybe the only one.[10]

It is sometimes only when we are betwixt and between, and hence out of control, that God has the opportunity to regain control and to mould our lives into the shape that he would have for us. Left to

our own devices, we all too easily become 'comfortably numb', in the words of Pink Floyd. For this reason, Rohr describes God as 'the ultimate opportunist'. God certainly does not wish unhappiness upon us, though when those seasons come, he is uniquely able to redeem them for the sake of his eternal purposes. God can work *all things* together for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28). It is for this reason that Elizabeth O'Connor, one of the founders of the Church of the Saviour in Washington DC, writes, 'Our chance to be healed comes when the waters of our life are disturbed.'[11] M. Scott Peck agrees:

> The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers.[12]

Rohr goes even further:

> Most spiritual giants try to live lives of 'chronic liminality' in some sense. They know it is the only position that ensures ongoing wisdom, broader perspective and ever-deeper compassion. The Jewish prophets… St Francis, Gandhi, and John the Baptist come to mind.

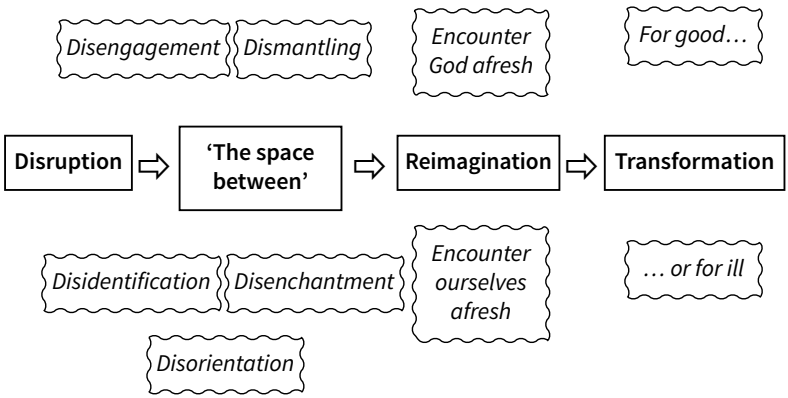
Yet most of us would not see ourselves as 'spiritual giants'. We would far rather choose predictability over uncertainty, control over chaos, the status quo over that which is unknown. We get locked into our tightly defined worlds, which we order so as to keep anything unpredictable or beyond our immediate control to a minimum. One unforeseen but inevitable consequence of such lifestyle arrangements is to define a place for God within our schemes, rather than letting him define one for us within his. In all of this, we are seeking to impose an artificial certainty on our lives. However, as Walter Brueggemann has rightly identified, certitude, though alluring, is ultimately powerless to deliver what we most desire:

> We all have a hunger for certitude, and the problem is that the Gospel is not about certitude, it's about fidelity [faithfulness]. So what we all want to do if we can is immediately transpose fidelity into certitude, because fidelity is a relational category and certitude is a flat, mechanical category. So we have to acknowledge our thirst for certitude and then recognise that if you had all the certitudes in the world it would not make the quality of your life any better because what we must have is fidelity.[13]

Brueggemann reminds us that it is possible to seek *certitudes* in life apart from any relational proximity *to* God – even when those certitudes concern God himself! Yet to be *faithful* demands a quality of relationship, a walking with Christ through 'the thick and the thin' of life, an obedience to his call to 'follow me'. It is only in such an environment that he can hone the sense of identity that we carry; only in such a context that he can make us the people that he wants us to be, as he forms us more and more into the image of Christ. All of this can happen in the liminal seasons of life. Just as water finds itself in an in-between stage when it is either heated to become steam or cooled to become ice, there are plenty of in-between stages on 'the Way' in which we may not be exactly sure where we are or what is going on. However, as with water, what is of greatest importance is that transformation *is* taking place.

Ironically, the seasons in which we appear to get stuck can be the ones that change us the most. Those that seem to propel us downward can end up leading us onward. There are insights and perspectives that can only come in the space between, wherein 'death' gives birth to 'new life'. Victor Turner attributed an unequivocally positive connotation to liminal situations as a means of renewal. However, it must be realised that disruptive spaces do not automatically give way to uniformly positive consequences in our lives. Suffering doesn't *always* make good. Time is not *always* a healer. In the same way that bones can sometimes reset in all the wrong ways, so lives can sometimes 'reset' badly as well. There's a deep question of how we respond to all that life throws at us, and to the grace of God that works within us, which is the focus of the chapters ahead.

The diagram below aims to set out something of what is in process during times of disruption and liminality:



Summary of the book to come

In the preface to the 1982 edition of *Capitalism and Freedom*, Milton Friedman observed: 'Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.' I believe that the living Christian tradition – the scriptures, the seasons of the church, our practices of prayer and our examples of faith – has plenty of ideas 'lying around' to help us live through our crises and liminal seasons. The challenge of the space between is to dig deeper into this treasure that lies all around us and which is freely available to us.

In the chapters that follow, we will explore all of this in more detail. We will begin with Jacob and two disruptive moments in his life that played a particular role in shaping him for God's purposes. We will then move on to explore five metaphors for the disruptive seasons of our lives: *the time of waiting* (when life is put on hold); *the place of exile* (when life feels alien); *the wilderness* (when life is stripped back); *the storm* (when life is shaken); and *the pit* (when life sinks to the bottom). These metaphors can give us a helpful way of framing our in-between

moments in life – offering a vocabulary to connect with them, and holding out hope as we stand on the threshold and wait for chinks of light to appear around doors that seem to be closed.

It is vital to realise that these five metaphors neither signify a scheme to follow from start to finish, nor represent an ordered progression through our own disruptive and liminal experiences. Rather, they are each a different way of framing the same experiences. The aim is to offer several different lenses on to the ambiguity of the space between, so that hope may be found and resources drawn upon for the journey.[15] We might resonate with one, two or more of the metaphors in particular, but they are all different ways of speaking about the same thing. We all know that a diamond emerges from the rough and only finds its beauty through processes of cutting and polishing. In the same way, these liminal experiences offer those processes in our lives. Within the mysterious working of God, they form something beautiful in us – though it will seldom, if ever, feel this way at the time. The aim, then, will be to keep turning the diamond, to see what light is shed on these dark and difficult seasons. The ambiguity of liminality means that the more perspectives we can garner on them, the more we might be able to draw something from them.

In this, N.T. Wright's concept of worldview as being made up of *story*, *symbol*, *praxis* and *question* is helpful.[14] For each of the five metaphors of the space between, we will explore *story* through scripture – Old Testament, New Testament and supremely the life of Jesus – as well as the lives of Christian saints, both historical and contemporary. We will look at *praxis* – those ways in which we embed our beliefs – through the seasons of the church year as well as time-honoured Christian practices, bringing much-needed perspective and offering pathways for transformation. We will see the way in which the psalms, not least the psalms of disorientation, ask key *questions* of God and self in an effort to locate us again. In addition, questions for reflection are offered at the end of each chapter. We will explore all of this *symbolically* through the art of a friend whose pencil sketches run through the book and are explored in words on page 184. Yet, the

true symbol for the space between is the cross of Jesus Christ. Living in the space between is so painful precisely because it is unavoidably a dying to self and a journey into the crucifixion of Christ. Each of the metaphors point to this, and we will explore Good Friday and Holy Saturday in more detail in chapters 6 and 7. However, what gives hope beyond anything else is that resurrection always comes in the wake of crucifixion. This means that, by the power of the Spirit, new life can always emerge from the tomb in which the old is being laid to rest.

Metaphor	Sacred time	Sacred practice
Time of waiting	Advent	Prayer
Place of exile	Epiphany	Pilgrimage
Wilderness	Lent	Fasting
Storm	Good Friday	Complaint
Pit	Holy Saturday	Silence

In all of this, my prayer is that strength may be found for those times in life when it so often fails, and that hope might be glimpsed of God strangely at work, even when he can seem to be so very far away.

Covid-19 as a space between

It has been interesting to write the bulk of this book during the Covid-19 pandemic. There has been a profound congruence between the topic of the book and the experience of Covid-19 and lockdown. I've noticed the way that people have intuitively framed their understanding of the pandemic through metaphor, including those that we explore in this book.

Usually, our experiences of the liminal seasons of life do not overlap. We go through them as separate individuals or smaller groups, siloed from the confusing in-betweens that others are experiencing. What feels almost unprecedented about Covid-19 is our global experiencing of a space between together.

At the time of this book's publication, we cannot know the full effects of Covid-19. In lockdown, we have imagined ways in which our home lives, patterns of work and gathering as churches may be affected in the long-term. We have seen the economic, social and environmental effects of lockdown and envisioned new futures for our world. We do not know exactly what the future will look like, but we know that it will be different. This experience has affected us all profoundly and the world has changed, perhaps forever. In this sense, as with all disruptive and liminal seasons of life, there may be no going back to normal – only forward into a new future.

Prayer – 'Disturb us, Lord'

Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when
With the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst
For the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life,
We have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
Of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas
Where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars.
We ask You to push back

The horizons of our hopes;
And to push into the future
In strength, courage, hope, and love.
M.K.W. Heicher[16]

Questions for reflection

1. Do you characteristically see disruption as an inconvenience or an opportunity? Why do you think this might be?
2. What have been the main disruptions, or 'spaces between', in your life? Try to plot them on a timeline.
3. Pick one of those times and try to get 'inside' of it. How did (or does) it feel in terms of disengagement, dismantling, disidentification, disenchantment and disorientation?

Notes

1. Judy Brown, *A Leader's Guide to Reflective Practice* (Trafford, 2006), p. 4. Used by permission.
2. Cited by Stephen R. Covey in Pat Croce, *Lead or Get Off the Pot! The seven secrets of a self-made leader* (Simon & Schuster, 2004), p. xiv.
3. Caroline Welby, foreword to Judy Hirst, *A Kind of Sleepwalking: And waking up to life* (DLT, 2014).
4. 'The Way' is woven as a thread through New Testament scripture in other, more subtle, instances as well. The gospel writer Mark alludes to it when he speaks of one who will come to prepare the 'way of the Lord', drawing on a powerful theme in Isaiah (40:3). As Jesus journeys with his disciples from Galilee in the north of Israel to Jerusalem in the south (Mark 8:22—10:52), Mark makes particular use of 'the way'. On several occasions, Mark refers to 'the way' as he narrates how Jesus predicts his suffering, death and resurrection. Each time, the disciples demonstrate their 'blindness' in misunderstanding him, and Jesus teaches them what it means to follow him (Mark 8:27; 9:33–34; 10:17, 32, 46, 52). Compare Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22. In contrast, the title 'Christians' that we are so familiar with today

is only used three times in the whole of the New Testament – Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16.

5 This acronym was first used in 1987, drawing on the leadership theories of Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus.

6 William Bridges, *Transitions: Making sense of life's changes* (Lifelong Books, 2020), pp. 112–27.

7 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (PUB, 1977), p. 21.

8 Bjørn Thomassen, 'The uses and meaning of liminality', *International Political Anthropology* 2.1 (2009), p. 51.

9 Bridges, *Transitions*, p. 145.

10 Richard Rohr, 'Days without answers in a narrow space', *National Catholic Reporter*, February 2002.

11 See **nextreformation.com/wp-admin/resources/liminal.pdf**

12 M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled* (Arrow, 1990), p. 11.

13 Walter Brueggemann, quoted at the Emergent Convention, Atlanta, Georgia, 16 September 2004.

14 N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (SPCK, 1992), p. 123.

15 Metaphors naturally overlap and interchange. For example, Israel's experience of exile is described in scripture as being like a wilderness (e.g. Isaiah 35:1–10).

16 This prayer is often attributed to Sir Francis Drake but is likely written by a gentleman named M.K.W. Heicher, according to **suburbanbanshee.wordpress.com/2011/11/18/sir-francis-drake-didnt-say-it**.

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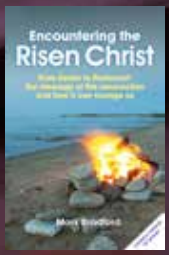

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