

The Terminal is a 2004 Steven Spielberg movie. It stars Tom Hanks who plays an eastern European from a fictitious country. The man takes a flight from his homeland and lands at JFK airport for a visit to New York. But apparently while he was in the air, there was a military coup back home, and his old country has ceased to exist. So his old passport is no good, and he is thus denied entry into the United States. However, the new country back home refuses to let him return. So he spends the next 9 months living at JFK airport until things are straightened out.

There's a technical term for such a situation. The noun form is "liminality"—the adjective is "liminal." Liminal derives from the Latin word *līmen* which means "threshold." When you're at the threshold, when you're in a doorway, you're in an in-between state. You're not fully in the room you're leaving but you're also not fully in the room you're entering. You're in between what was and what will be.

Think of graduation. Graduation is a common occurrence in our culture this time of year. It marks a transition between school and what comes after. But as graduation approaches, we often talk about graduating seniors as having "senior-itis." They're feeling that they're in a liminal state, and they're itching to get done with what's behind and move into what's coming.

Engaged couples are also in a liminal state. They're not single, but they're not yet married. And if it's a long engagement they may be in a liminal state for quite some time.

Today, we're also in a liminal period on the church calendar. This brief 10 day period is nicknamed "Ascensiontide." Ascensiontide is the last 10 days of Eastertide, the last week-and-a-half of the Great 50 Days of Easter.

Last Thursday was Ascension Day, 40 days after Easter Sunday. On Ascension Day we remember Jesus leaving his disciples behind and returning to heaven.

Next Sunday is Pentecost, the 50th and last day of the Easter season. On Pentecost we remember God sending the Holy Spirit to equip the disciples for further ministry.

But today, and every year on the 7th Sunday of Easter, we're in the midst of a 10-day liminal state. We're in between the Ascension and Pentecost.

And that liminality is reflected in our Collect for this morning. Earlier we prayed, "O God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before..."

The message is clear. Jesus has ascended. God please send us the Holy Spirit. Do not leave us comfortless. Do not make us wait forever, do not let us remain in this in-between state forever. Send us your continuing presence through the Holy Spirit, the Holy Comforter.

And... AND eventually we also want you to exalt us to the place where Jesus is. Please God, we want the Holy Spirit. But eventually, we also want to be fully a part of your heavenly kingdom.

But for now, we're in between. And so we wait.

There are seasons in life when we have to wait, seasons when we have to live with high degrees of liminality.

This often happens toward the end of life, especially if someone is slowly declining. Death sometimes comes quickly and unexpectedly. But often it is a longer, slower process that plays out over weeks or months or even years.

I've dealt with many people over the years who see their own deaths approaching. And many of them want death to come—they're tired of waiting, they're tired of struggling.

I've also seen families struggle as they watch their loved ones slowly slipping away. Sometimes the person is unconscious for a long period. Other times, the person has such a high degree of dementia that for all intents and purposes they are already gone in many ways. And yet, their bodies are still here. Such liminal times can be very tough for people to navigate.

And there are often times when people are experiencing seasons of liminality in their spiritual lives. And those can be tough times.

People experience God in many different ways. But for many Christians there is some sort of sense of God's presence. It may even be such a strong sense of presence that it is palpable and visceral. There are times when God may seem especially close.

In such times, prayer seems easy. Worship seems easy. You just seem snuggled in the warm spiritual cocoon of God's love.

But then there are other times. Prayer is a chore rather than a joy. God seems absent. You talk to God and only seem hear the hollow echo of your own voice. There's no sense of God's presence, only a divine vacuum, a void.

Such a state can be very disconcerting if you're experiencing it. But if you experience it, you're not alone. It's actually a fairly common spiritual phenomenon. So much so that it has a famous name. The great prayer warrior, San Juan de la Cruz, St. John of the Cross, called this experience of God's absence "The dark night of the soul."

St. John of the Cross is quick to remind us, however that just because we can't feel God's presence, that does not mean that God is not present.

He likens it at one point to a beam of sunlight coming into a room. You don't see the beam of light until it strikes something. But that doesn't mean it isn't there. You just don't perceive that it's there.

Or perhaps, you might think of such perceived periods of God's absence like parents who have to give their children some space to grow.

There are times when loving parents may have to stand back or stand by or watch secretly while their children are learning to do things on their own. That's often one of the toughest things for parents to do.

I remember when our daughter was an infant and wouldn't go to sleep without us rocking her. Eventually, her pediatrician told us we needed to help her learn to go to sleep without us, even if that meant letting her cry for 10 minutes without us intervening. That was a tough thing for us, to be out in the hall while she was crying for us to come rock her. In fact it was probably tougher on us parents than it was on her. But soon she learned and was able to fall asleep on her own.

That's what I suspect the dark night of the soul is often about: God letting us learn and grow during periods we might perceive his absence.

And that's also what St. John of the Cross says. He says that the dark night is a difficult and humbling experience, but it's meant to make you spiritually stronger.

And for most Christians, it is a phase. It is very common for people to experience God's absence for a season. But it is also very common for them to come out of it on the other side, often with their faith or their relationship to God feeling strengthened by the experience.

And of course, as a culture we've been dealing with a dark time of pandemic that we're now beginning to come out of. It too has been a liminal state between what seemed normal, and whatever the new normal is going to be.

Like a spiritual dark night of the soul, I hope that passing through the pandemic will strengthen many people, and that some good will come out of the tough experience we've been enduring.

And remember, in between the Ascension and Pentecost, the disciples hadn't really been abandoned by God. God was still with them. Yes, they weren't experiencing God's presence as palpably as they did when Jesus was amongst them. Nor were they experiencing God's presence as palpably as they would when the Holy Spirit came upon them in a new way at Pentecost.

But not feeling God's presence is a very different thing than God not being present.

Like that beam of sunlight coming into a room. You don't see the beam of light until it strikes something. But that doesn't mean it isn't there. You just don't perceive that it's there.

In the meantime, you can pray, 'God, don't leave us comfortless.'

'And God, bring us to the place you have prepared for us.'

It may not always be fun to be in a liminal state.
But God, we trust that you will bring us home.