

Rev. Karen Millard

Lent 1 - The Gift of the Dark wood Series

Scriptures:

1 Corinthians 13:11-12

Matt 14: 22-33

The Gift of Uncertainty in the Dark wood

Today's gospel compiles us to recognize that "Sometimes... you need to step away from the security of your boat onto the stormy sea of your own awakening to discover that a sinking stone is a far firmer foundation than you ever have imagined." We are about to embark on a series of worship that will invite us to explore *all* the places where we find ourselves—not just the seemingly stable and blessed places, but the ones that feel like utter failure, or the most tenuous at the least. These are the places where Jesus says "Do not be afraid, it's me calling you out here to find the depths of your very soul."

This Lent we will explore what it means to be in the Dark Wood moments of our lives. We are not going to talk about just how to get out of it, as if life is good only when we are not there. We are going to explore what it might mean for our lives to recognize the gifts of the Dark Wood. What if times of uncertainty, failure or emptiness are opportunities for spiritual awakening?

When we allow ourselves to accept the journey within the Dark Woods, the Holy Spirit Guide tends to shake things up a bit as we begin to awaken to nudging toward a fuller life. But life is messy. Life is uncertain. Rather than a problem to be solved, what if we saw uncertainty as a gift helping us let go of all we cannot know so that we can live more wholeheartedly? We begin our Lent journey in the Dark Wood where rich discoveries can be made when we are willing to answer the question, "Do you want to be made well?"

Eric Elnes writes "You have a place in this world. It is a place awkwardness dissolves and you are most fully alive, therefore most fully human. You know this place very well, though you may feel far from it. Take a deep breath and hold it briefly. Exhale slowly. You know this place. You may not always know how to get to it, but you recognize it every time."¹ The lenten journey

¹ Gifts of the Darkwood Pg. 1

is about finding your place in this world. Finding your place with the holy when you least expect it and you feel furthest from it. The hard reality of life is that experiences of failure, emptiness, and uncertainty are critical for finding our way through life. These experiences are completely unavoidable. It is usually these experiences that help us find our way to our calling or our life path.

That is what happened for Peter as he journeyed with Jesus. Do you remember this person of a short lived faith, who got out of the boat to walk on water and then immediately sank in doubt is the same Peter that shortly there after Jesus calls “the Rock.” And says that it is upon this Rock that I will build my church. “Could it be that right failure is more important to Jesus than right belief?.... Jesus seems to want to build his church on a sinking rock. When you are upwardly mobile and life has not hit you hard lately, it is easy to assume that you have arrived right where life wants you to be and that all good things will last. We all fall into this trap now and again no matter how many times reality has caught up and shown us otherwise. Sometimes it takes a journey into darkness, even deep darkness, to finally awaken to the smallness of our success-based world. Sometimes you need to lose your way in order to discover the grandeur, mystery, and freedom of the world that awaits you. Sometimes, even you need to step away from the security of your boat onto the stormy sea of your own awakening to discover that a sinking stone is a far firmer foundation than you have imagined.”²

In his famous work “The Divine Comedy” Dante wrote of the Dark Wood he entered at the midpoint of his life. The DarkWood is a place of confusion, emptiness and stumbling that is entered because of our sin. You don’t choose to step into the dark wood and we all avoid it if we can. But in the end it is in the Dark Wood that we discover who and whose you are.

Take a moment to consider the holy spirit guiding you through the dark wood. If we would allow for the spirits guidance in every moment of struggle we like Peter would be invited to get up and step out of the boat onto the stormy sea in response to the spirits call. So often when we think of moments of the holy Spirit we try to remember those mountain top amazing parting of the cloud type of experiences and those can and do happen but in my experience the Spirit’s voice is more often found when I stop and pause and pray. The spirit comes to me through inner hunches, that I

² IBID pg 4

simply can't let go of or sweet spot moments and subtle intuitions that gently feel like everything is falling into place.

Pay attention to the intuitions, nudges, hunches and sweet-spot moments of the breath of the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit knows us better than we know ourselves. Dante said "I awoke in a Dark Wood where the true way was wholly lost." We don't usually choose the dark wood it is something that startles us awake. And yet when we find ourselves there we are given the gift of uncertainty. We often don't think of uncertainty as a gift but it is exactly what faith is about. I have actually decided to give up 'fear of the unknown' for lent because I fully believe that, that is the fear that is holding me hostage right now.

Elnes wrote "religion does a disservice when it seeks to remove uncertainty from life. Have you ever noticed how the more certainty a religion claims to deliver the more frenzied and hysterical are its adherents? The fact of the matter is that life is messy and no amount of doctrine or dogma changes this. Faith built upon certainty is a house of cards that falls apart when the "unshakable foundations" shifts even slightly."³

Throughout the bible the people who journeyed closest with God and were most faithful also lived lives of uncertainty. Consider Moses, Abraham, Peter, Paul, even Jesus. In the bible the ones with certainty were the unfaithful. According to the apostle Paul, those of us who have a high need for certainty in life are being childish. When Paul says I see in a mirror dimly he uses the greek word for Enigma, meaning mystery. Paul is saying faith must embrace life as a mystery that accepts uncertainty as a gift and not a curse. John Ortberg in his book "Faith and Doubt" writes "We all think we want certainty. But we don't. What we really want is trust, wisely placed. Trust is better than certainty because it honours the freedom of persons and makes possible growth and intimacy that certainty alone could never produce."⁴

It is like the biblical story of the paralyzed man who sits and waits for someone to take him to the pool to be healed for thirty-eight years. When Jesus approaches him and says "Do you want to be healed?" He doesn't snap back with "what a stupid question, of course I want to be healed." No instead he starts to give all the reasons why it is impossible, why it is the fault of the others who

³ IBID pg 25

⁴ IBID 28

haven't helped him along the way. If you look deeply at the story you can see that this man doesn't actually want to be healed. He has found his community in this place, people bring him what he needs for the basics to get by. He makes enough from begging. He has friends with him who take care of him in this place why would he want to change? It would take away his certainty.

Jesus doesn't work that way however. Jesus always wants us to be whole and full creations of who we are created to be so Jesus says "Stand up, take up your mat and walk." And you know what he does? Does he thank Jesus for the healing he has been waiting for for thirty-eight years? No he gets up but he is angry and he storms away not even thankful for what he has been given. A short time later Jesus finds the same man begging in a different location and Jesus calls him out saying he is healed. The man gets so angry he goes to the Pharisees to have Jesus arrested on the charge that he healed on the sabbath.

So why would Jesus heal this man who doesn't want to be healed? Because just like the holy spirit comes to us constantly calling us to more abundant life, Jesus does the same. He sees the potential, he knows there is so much more for this man if he would only choose life. Elnes writes "Jesus knows that the human soul is buoyant. Its yearning is for the freedom that comes from answering the Spirit's call. Shackled by our fears and excuses for very long, the soul inevitably revolts and seeks to break free. When it wins the revolt, we may find ourselves in places we wouldn't necessarily go ourselves, but we also find that we are terrifically OK with that. We experience a taste of freedom, even joy, like Rilke's swan finding its home in its elemental waters."⁵

Elnes calls the holy spirit unexpected love. I love that term. The holy spirit is the love that shows up to us when we are in the darkest, hardest places that whispers 'you are not alone. I am with you.' It that spirit that walks with us even in our times of unknowing and uncertainty providing the unexpected invitation to live our lives wholeheartedly.

Lent is the season where we are given the opportunity to stop and recognize the things and places in our lives where we are not letting God in and that are stifling our fullness of life. Lent isn't a penitential time just to get through it is a deep journey of the soul. Did you know that lent

⁵ IBID 33

actually means spring? The word Lent comes from old English “lencten” – meaning spring. Spring a time of renewal, new life, growth, transformation. Imagine lent as a spring time walk with God. A time for renewal, growth, new life, new eyes to see. Lent give us the opportunity to do some spiritual spring cleaning. It’s an opportunity to look afresh at our relationship with God and let go of the worries and place them into the heart of holy unexpected love.

Amen