

Gifts of the Dark Wood
Lent 5
“The Gift of Life in the Dark Wood”

*There's a path... though it winds its way through darkness
We would choose... to avoid it if we could
We awake...to an unexpected calling
God says, “come... there are gifts in the Dark Wood”*

The path of life is rarely clear or straight-forward. We find ourselves lost in a Dark Wood, unclear which direction to go, perhaps having strayed from the path we thought we were on. It is at these times that the gift of getting lost is that we begin to pay more attention than we usually do. Perhaps we are looking for blatant signs when the subtle nudges of Spirit are already right there. Our Lent journey invites us to get quiet and open wide our senses.

*There's a path (echo: **there's a path**) ... though it winds its way through darkness
We would choose (**we would choose**) ... to avoid it if we could
We awake (**we awake**) ... to an unexpected calling
God says, “come (**God says, “come**) ... there are gifts in the Dark Wood”*

Prayer

Permeating Love, enter our lives
and open us to the gifts residing deep within the Holy Darkness of our lives.
When we feel overwhelmed
by the twists and turns of life,
quiet us, open us,
heighten our senses to perceive your nudge toward life.
In your many names, we pray. Amen.

Hymn Come and Find a Quiet Centre VU 374

Scripture

Psalm 42

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and behold
the face of God?

My tears have been my food

day and night,
while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?” - Psalm 42 (NRSV)

John 11:1-45 (given in story form)

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.

So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.”

But when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, although Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, Even after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.”

The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.”

Jesus told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” but Jesus was talking about his death,

Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met and she said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah,

Martha then went back to the Village to get Mary and tell her Jesus was wanting to see him. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” Then Jesus, still greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.

Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, questioned Jesus, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."

When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Contemporary Reading

Rest in the Moment

Rest in this moment of God's creating, savor its beauty, inhale its fragrance, Listen to its music. Sit in awe of our God infused world. Rest in this moment of God's unfolding. Live not in regrets of the past, or anxieties for the future. Let go your distractions. Be content with what is. Rest in the moment of God's enlivening. Let the wonder of its gifts open before you like an unfurling flower. Inscribe them on your heart. Root them in your soul. Create within you a place of prayer.

- Christine Sine (Rest in the Moment)

Reflection

"Jesus if you had been there my brother wouldn't have died."

I don't know about you but I can almost hear Mary's voice today. So many people in our world must be saying something just like this.

God where are you? Why are you not with us?

Many in our world have literally faced the death of a loved one but they don't receive the good news of them coming back alive.

Even those of us who are not faced with the death of a loved one are asking "God where are you right now?" Even I am asking the same question which is why we need these stories like these. Which is why we need communities of faith, which is why we need to pray and meditate and seek for God. This is why we need to open up and see the truth in the story.

The truth is when Jesus heard of his friends' illness he didn't shy away he was like a first responder in love. The disciples beg Jesus not to go back to Judea, fearing for his life but he goes because he longs for his friends to know they are not alone. He wants to show them he is the resurrection and the life, he wanted to offer hope in despair, light in the darkness. He needed to go because his love was so deep.

And when Jesus enters the scene and he witnesses peoples hearts breaking he began to weep with them.

In times like these all I know to pray is "God hear the groaning of our hearts, be with us now, and God weeps."

And there is little we can do but stop and listen. Listen to the holy say Mary take away the stone. Lazarus take off your grave clothes and know I am with you. Even in the face of despair and grief God is there weeping with us, Jesus shows us that all the holy wants to do for us in these times is show us the way to hope and new life even in a journey of the dark wood.

Ann Voskamp writes "life is too urgent to be lived fast, too important to be consumed in a blur of activity, too precious to not take notice of the God moments, the God love that burst out in an unexpected hug and unanticipated beauty." I think this is a message we can hear right now. I don't believe God caused or intended our world to be as it is today but I do believe love and hope and peace will be what helps us overcome.

I have been having a lot of conversations about how this next few months will change our lives, about how we might be called to notice what it is like to slow down, to be with family to recognize our need for a holy pause. Life has not slowed down for me because I have been trying to figure out a new way of being, a new way of connecting, a new way of being pastor, minister, church, friend. I am missing face to face connections and so I am trying to offer lots of opportunity for connection. Some have picked up on it, most have not. I will continue to invite you in because if ever there was a time when we needed to seek out God's presence it is now. It's in the supporting of one another it is in the connecting in love (even if it is in a new way) I read a scripture from Paul to the Philippians (4:11-13) this week and it felt like scripture might be speaking to the world again. Paul wrote "I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength."

I long for that kind of peace and comfort and deep knowing right now, for all of you.

Christine Sine writes "Each moment of everyday invites us to rest in the presence of God and fully savor all that God has poured into that moment. Each moment is unique, special, never to be recreated and it offers therefore a unique and special revelation of God. If we do not take notice of it now we will never have the opportunity to appreciate it again."

I mentioned a couple weeks ago something that bares mentioning again. What if we took a moment and saw this time as a sabbath rest? This is an elusive rest. One that has been forced upon us. If we have been following the advice of health care officials and the government it has meant letting go of control over our schedules and our relationships. It has meant letting go of some of the things we love to do and take for granted. It has meant letting go of seeing some of the people we love and care about. For some it has meant letting go of certain hopes for the future and for others it has meant letting go of the busyness and fast paced lifestyles we have created. Whatever it

might be that holds us captive, we will never learn to rest fully in the presence of God unless we can relinquish our desire to be in control of our lives. More than ever people are wishing they could move fast, map out their lives and feel in control, but the universe has just reminded us that in deed we never were in full control. We have a choice right now and it is not necessarily an easy one. We can get angry, blame God, long for the things that are no longer possible, become resentful and miss the opportunity to rest, to heal to pray. These are hard times and I have had people that would never admit it admit to me in the last week that they are afraid, or anxious, or weary and so let me encourage you. Rest in the moment, know that God is groaning and weeping right along side you, look for holy light and love and so that you too can move away the stone and live even in this time. And for those of you who are working on the front lines of this whether it be as a doctor, nurse, paramedic, police officer, grocery store clerk, pharmacist, or whatever it is you are doing we see you. I have heard the groaning of your hearts this week and we thank you and I long for you to also be able to see the holy journeying with you each and every step of your day. Amen.

*As the deer pants for the water so my soul longs after you.
You alone are my heart's desire and I long to worship you.
You alone are my strength, my shield;
to you alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire, and I long to worship you.*

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Prayers of the People

"Come and Rest"

*Come and rest (echo: **come and rest**)
Come and listen (echo: **come and listen**)
Lay the fullness of your lives before the Maker (echo is a canon)*

There are many people who are walking the Dark Woods for various reasons.
Let us lift up names of those who need our prayers...

There are many places in this world where uncertainty reigns.
Let us lift up names of places in this world that need our prayers...

*Come and rest (echo: **come and rest**)
Come and listen (echo: **come and listen**)
Lay the fullness of your lives before the Maker (echo is a canon)*

*Let us hear the poem by Lynn Ungar again as a prayer
Pandemic
What if you thought of it as the Jews consider the Sabbath -
The most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
On trying to make the world different than it is.
Sing, pray. Touch only those to whom you commit
Your life. Centre down.*

*And when your body has become still,
Reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now).
Know that our lives are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear).
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils of compassion
That move, invisibly, where we cannot touch.*

*Promise this world your love -
For better or for worse,
In sickness and in health,
So long as we all shall live.
Lynn Ungar
Amen.*