

Gifts of the Dark Wood

1) “Where We Find Ourselves”

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The Journey of Lent has begun!

A few nights ago, we gathered in this sanctuary on Ash Wednesday and remembered that we are but dust....but that God can do some amazing things we dust.

And now here we are on the first Sunday in this Holy Season.

We acknowledge that these next 6 weeks leading up to Easter is a time of repentance, fasting and preparation. It is a time of self-examination and reflection.

It's a time when we can focus on our relationship God and our brothers and sisters who journey with us in this community of faith.

One way we plan to focus on these areas is through a common small group study and sermon series based on the book *Gifts of the Dark Wood: Seven Blessings for the Soulful Skeptic* by Dr. Eric Elnes.

Elnes describes his book by writing *“Though commonly understood as a place to be feared and avoided, the Dark Wood is the surest place to meet God...It is a place where you may feel uncertain, empty, lost, tempted, and alone. Yet these feelings - these gifts of the Dark Wood - can be your greatest assets on your journey. According to the ancients, you don't need to be a saint or spiritual master to experience profound awakening. You don't even have to be above average...all you have to be is struggling.”*

We chose this theme for our Lenten worship and study this year as an opportunity to explore what can happen when we find ourselves in a “Dark Wood” time of life.

In the coming weeks, we will be talking about is the messy, uncertain, sad, empty, lost, and lonely places that we all have to travel through from time to time in our lives. And what we hope to discover is that there are gifts to be found even in those places.

As we explore some of those gifts we might find in the Dark Wood, we'll see that those gifts are not found by escaping or just muddling through those times and experiences.

The key to discovering the gifts each of us may find in our own Dark Wood times is making the choice to live fully in those times so that we learn to see life through new eyes, allowing the Holy Spirit to nudge us, awaken us, and lead us to a fuller life.

We begin our Lenten journey in the Dark Wood this week by first thinking about "Where we find ourselves."

And I've decided to break this topic up into two areas....first, where we find ourselves as individuals....as those on a spiritual journey....

And second, where we find ourselves as a church....as a community of faith.

Our scripture passage this morning recalled for us the story of Simon Peter sinking when he tries to walk out on the water with Jesus....

Now I've heard some theologians argue that Peter's doubt was in Jesus and some theologians argue that his doubt was actually in himself....but for us this morning that is irrelevant.

The only thing that matters for us this morning is that Simon Peter doubted in something....and that doubt led to him failing to be like his Rabbi....Failing to be like his teacher Jesus.

As some of our youth might say....It was an "epic fail"

But then shortly after that experience, Jesus surrounded by the disciples announces and affirms that Simon's name is in fact, Peter...which means "Rock."

And Jesus goes on to declare "Upon this Rock I will build my Church!"

So the main question we have before us this morning is: *Could right failure be more important to Jesus than Right belief or getting everything perfect on the first attempt?*

It is no secret that we live in a community, in a cultural context where success always seems to be measure we are using when determining a person's outcome or accomplishments. We live in a society where one of the first questions we ask someone after meeting them is "So...what do you DO for a living?"

We are part of a culture that looks for measurable success...whether it be which neighborhood you live in or what college your child was accepted to....or what kind of car you drive... We know this...we see it all the time

And before I go any further...I want to first say that this is no way means that those successes that we ourselves or our children have accomplished are or should be diminished.

I'm not saying that when something positive happens in the life of our community or in the life of someone we love that shouldn't be celebrate.... In fact that's why on the Sundays where time permits we share those joys with out loud with another in worship....

What I am saying though, is that we should not think that failure, or pain or a misstep is the end of the story....

We shouldn't miss the fact that powerful lessons, insights, inspiration and outcomes can happen in those times when we fail or are experiencing loss, sadness or isolation.

When I was writing this sermon and was trying to think about stories of finding success through failure and having a little bit of writer's block...I did what any 21st century pastor would do....I googled "Story of Failure Leading to Success."

And wouldn't you know I was bombarded with thousands of web pages containing stories of both famous and unknown people who wound up successful after failing in the beginning of their work....

Stories of people like...

Walt Disney who was once fired from a newspaper because he was told he lacked creativity.

And trying to persevere, Disney formed his first animation company, which was called Laugh-O-Gram Films. He raised \$15,000 for the company but eventually was forced to close Laugh-O-Gram, following the close of an important distributor partner.

Desperate and out of money, Disney found his way to Hollywood and faced even more criticism and failure until finally, his first few classic films started to skyrocket in popularity.

Or like

Milton Hershey...when he first started his candy production career, he was considered a "Nobody." After being fired from an apprenticeship with a printer, Hershey started three separate candy-related ventures, and was forced to watch all of them fail.

In one last attempt, Hershey founded the Lancaster Caramel Company, and started seeing enormous results. Believing in his vision for milk chocolate for the masses, he eventually founded the Hershey Company that we all know and love today....

Stories after stories after stories like this is what I discovered....

Yet, there was one thing I realized....that all these stories seemed to end up major earthly success. After persevering and working through the issues and rejection there was always a big amazing success at the finish line...

What about those times when there isn't a huge success at the end of the story....is it still worth telling? Does all the pain, loss, isolation or failure not count if there is no nice happy end to the story?

When you look around, especially on Television you see a lot of pastors who are telling their congregations that with enough perseverance and enough faith, you will always conquer whatever obstacles are in your way...

Televangelists that say if you just pray hard enough....if you just wait for God's time...that you will get all the earthly things that you ever wanted.

I even saw one preacher who said if you just make a donation to our "church," we will send you some miracle water....and some miracle oil...and once you use these items all of your problems will go away...

And I'm not making that up....just google "miracle spring water" and it will be the first thing that comes up...

The funny thing is....these promises...or at least the promise that God will bless us through the hardships is absolutely 100% right on....but unlike what some of those "Prosperity Gospel" evangelists tell us...the blessing may come in unexpected ways...

The blessings may be purely spiritual but not physical...

The blessing may not be that new home you want, but instead the realization that what you have already is gift enough...

The blessing may not be that new high level executive job you hoped for...but instead for you to realize you have another calling in this world....

The blessing may not be material stuff....but instead emotional comfort...

The blessing may not be that the pain is taken away...but instead that you felt the presence of God more clearly than at any other time in your life...

What Gifts of the Dark Wood asserts and what I affirm to you this morning....is that even though things don't always work out in an Earthly way.....they do work out in a spiritual way if we are open to it.

We may or may not get through the Dark Wood seasons of our life in the ways we expect to....but if we look for divine during those times....we will see God more clearly see and experience God more powerfully than at any other time.....and what Greater Gift is there than that?

I'll be honest...for many that can be a tough message to read in our book....that can be a tough message to hear....it's a tough message to preach...

But....I truly believe that once we are open to and encounter God in those Dark Wood moments of our life we will understand. We will discover the truth of this message....

The Gospel of John actually gives us a wonderful image to use an example for this idea...

John writes that Christ is the light and the light shines in the Darkness but the Darkness won't over come it...

Think about a Candle.....when all the lights of a room are on and it is the middle of the day, we can see the light of the candle if we look closely... if we take the time and make the effort....

But when all the lights are off in the middle of the night....we can easily and clearly see the candle without any effort at all....

Much of the room can even be illuminated by the single flame....

That's how it works with God....sure when things are going perfectly we can still see God.....we can still experience God if we take the time to look....

But it is in the dark times.....when we see just how much light the divine truly provides...

We have been focusing a lot on us as individuals but I also want us to also take a moment to reflect on what this means for us as a Church....as a community of faith.

It is not secret that the church, or at least the church in the United States and Europe is changing....

Or perhaps another way to put it is that society and culture in these places is changing and that is causing the place in which the church sits in society to shift.

In the mainline denominations like ours, there is a great deal of anxiety around the fact that many congregation are aging....that many congregations are shrinking in terms of membership and worship attendance.

There is anxiety in many congregations that the Sunday school classrooms aren't as full as they once were.

Fear because soccer and swim practice and marathons are taking place on Sunday mornings and drawing larger crowds than churches do.

There are many who believe that the best days of church are behind us....

And if you just read the statistical tables it might be really easy to believe that....to throw in the towel and think that the church only has a few good years left....

Last week, I was asked to go over to Sacramento and sit down with a task force who is writing a grant proposal with the aims of using those funds to recruit young clergy....young being defined as those under 35 years old.

Naturally, as someone who fits within that demographic, I had to ask myself why did I pursue becoming an Elder in the church....why did I spend 7 years studying religion in college and seminary to do this work....why did I plunge myself into student debt....

Why, after going through more interviews and trainings and evaluations than I can count, did I choose to take the vows of ordination...

The answer....because I truly believe there has never been a more exciting time to be part of the church....

That the challenges we face are great...but they are opportunities to experience God in a whole new way.....

The challenges are an opportunity to discern together the next great thing God is going to do with the church.

Because Jesus didn't just tell Peter that he was going to be a Rock that the church is built upon....

Jesus went on to say that the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

Think about what Jesus is saying to us in that...think about what that means...

No matter how dark it gets...no matter what changes are taking place...no matter how things are now verses how they were in the 1950s....Nothing will prevail against Christ's church....

I don't know about you....but I take a lot of comfort in that...

But I also recognize that with that assurance from Jesus comes a great deal of responsibility on our part...

Because of Jesus' promise to us....we need to be willing to take chances on how we as the church think about and implement ministry.

We need to not always stay in the comfort zone of what is familiar to us and has always worked for us in the past and instead take a chance on doing something new.....something risky...

And the truth is....there will be times....when we as a church take risks...when we try new and innovative methods to share God's good news with the world....and it won't work out...

There will be times when we as the church in taking risks and exploring new ideas will end up falling into the dark wood....but even if that happens...we will find God and discern the next step that much more easily....

That's the power of God....that's the promise of Jesus....

Whether we are basking in the light...or wondering in the dark....God is with us.....God will not leave us or forsake us...

Romans 8, verse 9 so beautifully puts it this way: "Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

With that in mind may we in our personal lives...and our lives as a community of faith not stray away from those times when we enter into places of dimness or darkness....

May we instead be ready to experience God more clearly when we are wondering in the dark...

And may we find comfort in the promise that Jesus will rescue us...will teach us...will affirm us and even empower us when we begin to sink...

Amen.