

## Gifts of the Dark Wood

### 4) The Gift of Being Thunderstruck

Rev Luke Ham

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During the season of Lent we have been journeying together and using Dr. Eric Elnes' book *Gifts of the Dark Wood* to be a guide as we discuss how God's presence can be made known to us in most clearly in the times and places that we least expect it.

Our first week we reflected on times of failure...like the Apostle Peter sinking when he stepped out onto the water to be like Jesus....

Our second week, we talked about that the gift of Uncertainty... and how so often we confuse Faith with that it means to be certain.... And that it is in those uncertain moments that we can discover new things about ourselves and our God.

And last week Pastor Ron led us in thinking about the gift of emptiness...and that choosing to empty ourselves may just lead us to find fulfillment...

This morning we will be thinking about the Gift of Being Thunderstruck. The gift of those places where symbolic flashes of light spark a thought in our brain....or the divine rumbles of thunder rattle awake our spirit.

I want to start off this morning by sharing a passage from the book that really resonated with me...

Dr. Elnes writes *“Over the course of my career people have asked me repeatedly why God doesn't speak to people “like in the Bible” anymore. Yet everyone with whom I've conversed for more than a few minutes has spoken of times when “the light bulb came on,” . . . The fact of the matter is that God never speaks with an audible voice in the Bible, just as God does not do this in our day. While the Bible is full of God*

*talk, its authors were trying to convey what was “heard” internally when the lighting hit.*

*He goes on to say that the Biblical writers “reflected upon the implications of that flash of insight, or moment of clarity, or “aha” experience sometimes for months or years, later recording these implications with the preface, “And God said. . .” They weren’t being dishonest. The ancients simply did not envision a time when the mythological imagination would be such a distant memory that people would take the metaphor literally...”*

Now...I have to say....this is merely the author’s opinion....because over the course of my life I have met some people who have shared with me that they were able to clearly hear God speak to them in an audible way...and I am not here to discount their experience or second guess it....In fact, I honor their experience and the insight that they have had when speaking with the divine.

However, that being said, the reason the Dr. Elnes’ writing resonated with me is because that sense of the “aha” moments...those feelings of discerning something from God is how I can best articulate my personal relationship with God speaking to me.

You may have the same kind of experience or you might have a totally different kind of experience....there is no right way....

But, the point he is trying to make here is that if you think there is **ONLY ONE POSSIBLE WAY** you can hear from God....you might want to consider that it can happen in other ways too.

Each year we take our confirmation class on a Bishop’s Retreat which is held down at Monte Toyon in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

This year, there was unfortunately a scheduling conflict so the retreat had to be rescheduled for a different time and location....and because of the distance and timing of the rescheduled retreat, our confirmands as

well as a other confirmands in our neighboring churches would not be able to attend.

So we decided to take matters into our own hands and I, along with our Youth Director Tawfick and the Pastors of Asbury UMC in Livermore and Lynnewood UMC in Pleasanton decided to just go ahead and hold our own retreat on the weekend the original one was scheduled for.

So last Friday we welcomed confirmands from those two congregations to come here to SRVUMC and we help our own retreat in Wesley Center.

Our theme for our time together, focused on articulating and sharing our faith stories. Something which the confirmands will share with you all during their membership service in May.

But in going back and thinking about my faith story with the confirmands last week, it occurred to me that even though we have spent almost 6 years together, that I don't think that I've ever shared my faith story...and particularly the way I felt called to ordained ministry...with you in a sermon....so if you will humor me, I would like to briefly share just part of that story with you this morning.

But before I get into it, I want to let you know that I realize sometimes during the sermon it can be kind of frustrating that the communication is largely one way...from me to you...so I hope that in the weeks to come you can take a moment and if you feel comfortable stopping by in person or calling me or e-mailing me with your stories of faith....or as our brothers and our sisters in the south call it, your testimonies....

Because I truly love hearing people's experiences and stories with God...they are what carry me and encourage me through ministry...so please do not afraid to share with me how you have felt thunderstruck in your life.

So a little background about me: I am a child a divorce. My parents separated when I was 4 years old. And when I say separated...I mean separated...my mother moved us to Napa, California and my father stayed back in Ohio.

I grew up in two worlds....my Ohio family are a group of devout United Methodists. My dad has served on the Staff Parish Relations Committee, the board of trustees....every committee you could throw at him.

To this day he runs the audio visual equipment for their church serves at Green Valley UMC every week. And my father's brother...my uncle serves as the senior pastor of a Methodist church that very closely resembles ours in Macedonia, Ohio.

My mother's side of family on the other hand do not attend church. Some of them say they don't believe in God at all.

Those were the worlds I was raised in between....one religious...one secular...

Little would I know how important it would be for my future ministry that I had experience with one foot inside the walls of the church....and one foot outside of the church with the skeptics...

Even though I grew up in Napa, I would always go back to Ohio whenever there was a break from school....and back in the mid-west there is a huge tradition...a tradition where every Methodist kid would go off for a week to this magical place they call Church camp.

And that week of camp would always be one of the highlights of my year...so much so that after my first year of college I decided to go back to Ohio and work as a Counselor for 12 weeks at one of these camps...

Little did I know what being a camp counselor really met...

It meant the work week started every Sunday at 9am....making preparations for the campers to arrive at 1pm...

It meant putting in immense energy...getting the kids excited to be there....learning their names....teaching them all the rules....

During the week the work day would kick off around 7:00am....and we would be running around leading games....canoeing...leading worship...doing bible study...camp fires....you name it until 11pm each night....

Once we got our cabins settled in for the night I might have a chance to sneak away for a few minutes around midnight to make a phone call to Stephanie or send her an e-mail.

Often I would finally get to sleep around 1am....and if we were lucky we would only get woken up with a homesick camper, or someone falling out of their bunk or someone making a ton of noise while trying to slip to the bathroom once during the night...

This was my week until Friday evening when the campers would head home, we would clean the camp...do a staff briefing and hopefully be dismissed around 9pm....

So from Sunday at 9am....until Friday at 9pm....

Work, work, work...

One night...when I couldn't sleep...I started to think about those of my friends who were lifeguarding or working retail or who were Nanning for their summer jobs....who only worked 30-40 hours a week yet were somehow making way more money than I was when I was working 100 hours a week...

And that's when I had my a-ha moment.....that is when I was thunderstruck.....

Because at that moment I realized, no matter what other opportunities may have been out there....no matter if I could of made more money...no matter if I could have worked less hours or had an easier job.....**THERE WAS ABSOLUTELY NO OTHER PLACE I RATHER BE.**

And it dawned on me that even though there were moments when I was physically exhausted....I was always spiritually filled....in fact my spiritual cup was overflowing....  
Somehow even though I was getting less sleep and exerting more energy than at any other time in my life.....I had incredible peace and fulfillment....I was content....I was exactly where I needed to be.

I didn't sleep at all that night....and I snuck away before anyone woke up to go watch the sunrise over the Lake....and it was at that moment when I asked God if vocational ministry is where I was called to be...

And there was no audible voice telling me yes....there was no overt sign from above.....instead there was an overwhelming feeling of assurance.

The only way I can describe it is this.....before that point...most things I did in life felt like I was in a kayak paddling against the current of a river....but once I was thunderstruck....It was like I was now moving along the with current....accomplishing way more with God than I could ever do on my own....

And I am proud to say that even though the work can be tough...even though there are really big challenges or moments of discouragement.... Still experience that feeling of "going with the flow" everyday as I do my best to live out my Call to Ministry.

That is my story.....that is my simple testimony....

No huge plot twist....no hitting rock bottom before seeing the light....just discovering who I was supposed to be for the rest of my life while making \$150/week at summer camp.....

We each have a different story.....and each of our stories are continually being written....

Our first scripture passage this morning shares the call story of two of Jesus' disciples....

The first we hear about in our passage...Phillip...doesn't seem to need much convincing.... Jesus asks him to follow him and Phillip as least as far as we can tell happily accepts the offer....

But then we meet Nathaniel...who appears to be one of those people that we come across in life who has no filter...who seems to speak the words as soon as he thinks them.....Nathaniel calls them like he sees him.

His first reaction when hearing about Jesus as the one who Moses and the Prophets talked about is to blurt out the line "what good can come from Nazareth....obviously referring to the fact that not many people had a lot of positives views of the small, out of the way town.

But...even with his skepticism...Nathaniel went to go meet Jesus....and it was there in a simple interaction that he had his ah-ha moment...when Jesus said the words "I saw you under the fig tree before Phillip called you..."

Biblical Scholars have some different interpretations of what those words meant....but the bottom line in that no one knows for sure...

What he do know for sure is that it meant something to Nathaniel to hear Jesus say them....so much so that right then he acknowledged Jesus as the son of God.

And then Jesus essentially say....if you think that's impressive....Just wait to you see what you are going to experience next if you follow me....

You often hear people refer to a time when they had a "mountain top" experience....when their breath was just taken away through the awe and beauty of that they were experiencing...

And I know people treasure moments which is very important for us to do.... What we need to be careful of though...is falling into the trap of thinking that is the tallest mountain they can reach....

Because Jesus reminds us that we haven't seen the half of it yet...

That's how amazing the God we serve is....

That a-ha moments lead to more a-ha moments which lead to more...

Being thunderstruck isn't a once in a lifetime happening....it is something that continues to happen when we allow ourselves to be open to it....

Jesus reminds us: If you think that call was something.....just wait to see what God has in store for you next....

Just wait to see what good and purpose God has for you next....

Our second passage from John gives us the familiar image of the Vine and the Branches...an image that shows us the importance of staying rooted in the source of our spiritual nourishment, Jesus....

This passage conveys to us that in discerning our various callings in the world we are not simply trying to find out what we are supposed to do and then going out and doing on our own...

We are to be in partnership with God.

No matter what that calling is....whether it is on a mission trip, or balancing the books at your day job or raising your family.... God wants us to stay rooted...to stay connected with Jesus....and when we are...the purposes we are called to get accomplished in a whole new way....

Verse 16 says: “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...”

A ritual I am passionate about is reminding us of the 3 General Rules of the United Methodist Church in at least one of my sermons per year....back when I was the youth Pastor, I would always do this on graduation Sunday when we acknowledged our high school graduates...

But since of course, since our new youth director Tawfick will be leading that service this year, I decided today would be a good time to share them...

I always shared these rules on graduation Sunday because I believe if nothing else....these are the values we should instill in our young people while they are with us....

1. Do No Harm
2. Do Good
3. Stay In Love With God

Our first two rules....Do No Harm and Do Good..... seem, at least on the surface pretty straight forward....they are rules that pretty much anyone.....whether they are a church goer or not....whether they believe in God or not can get behind...

But then there is that third rule.....Stay in Love with God....

I would argue that at the end of the day Staying in Love with God is the most important rule....

Why? Because when we stay in Love with God....when we stay connected to the vine...it gives us the ability to stay nourished...and continue to do no harm.....and continue to do Good.

It's what makes our efforts of doing no harm and doing good sustainable...

It is what keeps us going.....it allows our cup to stay filled....It allows us to be open to the next moment when that flash of lightening....that crash of thunder might rattle our souls and lead us into our next calling or our next mountain top experience.

My prayer for us today is that we can embrace those moments and allow ourselves to be fully engulfed when God is speaking to us....whether it is in that flash that comes with a new idea....or the way our heart aches for a certain cause...or it is a restlessness in our soul that is leading us into a new outlook on life....

May we do our best to Stay in Love with God.....nourished by the vine that is in Jesus so we may Do Good in the world in partnership with our creator, redeemer and sustainer...

May we embrace the gift of being Thunderstruck.

Amen.