

February 21, 2021 Sermon by Lori C. Morton  
Uncertainty - "The Gifts of the Dark Wood"  
Genesis 9:8-17 1 Cor 13:11-12 Mark 1:9-15

North Idahoans know dark woods ...

I thought I knew the woods, forests,  
but, it wasn't until I moved here that I got the sense of Dark Woods.

Tremendously tall, looming trees  
forests that come right up to the roads on both sides  
so thick, you cannot see into them.

Hiking, undergrowth steadily encroaches the trail  
threatening to swallow it up  
or in the old cedar groves, barren  
because all the light has been blocked out.

This Lenten worship series invites us to consider

the elements of entering the Dark Woods that any one, who spends time  
in the out of doors, always has in the back of their mind  
the wildness, the unpredictability of being in the woods  
how quickly the weather, encountering a large animal  
getting lost or injured  
can change this place of refuge into something very different.

Dante, philosopher and Italian poet, describes the Dark Wood in *The Divine Comedy*<sup>1</sup> as  
somewhere to avoid, if you can. For Dante, the Dark Wood offered an allegory for his  
midlife crisis. Suddenly, he could no longer see the path he thought his life was headed.  
Instead, he awoke in a Dark Wood where everything felt threatening, empty, and  
strange creatures lurked.

The Christian mystics had a very different take on Dark Wood places

and moments in our lives. These times of "challenge, struggle, purification,  
and testing",<sup>2</sup> disrupting and taking us off course ...  
They saw the Dark Woods as times of opportunity.

Times when we tend to be the most able to receive revelations

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<sup>1</sup> Elnes, Eric; [The Gifts of the Dark Wood](#) (Abingdon Press, 2015) p 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> Lose, David; blog [In the Meantime](#) 2015, Lent 1 B Wilderness- Faith

from God and be transformed by the Holy Spirit.  
That there are gifts to be found here,  
if we but pay attention and let go  
of insisting upon finding our own way  
out, through or to tame  
what we are experiencing.

The Dark Wood is the first place the Holy Spirit drives Jesus after he is baptized  
in the Jordan River. A wild place of its own merit  
Where John the Baptist hung out  
eating locusts and honey, wearing camel's hair.

In the Gospel of Mark's very abbreviated way of telling Jesus' story,  
immediately after the Holy Spirit comes upon him, the Holy Spirit drives him -  
the word here, is best envisioned like scenes in Old Westerns  
where unruly patrons get tossed out the swinging saloon doors.  
Not gently. And, not willingly.  
Jesus is driven further into the desert  
where only beasts, Satan, and angels roam.

For 40 days. Tested. In the Dark Woods.

Yet, Mark's Gospel doesn't tell us any of the details.

It is left to our imagination.

How were the beasts with him? Like Isaiah's peaceable kingdom?

Creatures and creation in harmony with one another? Or

Did the angels keep them at bay? The roars and howling  
heard at night, but unable to cause Jesus harm?

How did Satan test Jesus? Luke and Matthew fill in details.

But, What might cause him to question the identity he just heard  
declared in his Baptism?

How many days before Jesus began to wonder

if God was ever going to help him

live out his calling; his place in this world?

Why not send him straight to work, announcing the kingdom of God, healing people,  
teaching, casting out unclean spirits?

The Christian mystics argued that these Dark Wood times, wandering in the wilderness  
help us gain clarity about who we are and who we are not.

Before Jesus could start his ministry, before the crowds started calling out his name, before the fame and danger threatened his ministry or frustrations with his disciples caused him to shake his head he needed time, without all the distractions to be clear about who he was and he was not.

He needed to discover  
how God would help him  
with the daily mind, body, and soul  
challenges and uncertainties he would face  
in this messy life we live together.

Filled with beasts, tests, angels and the Holy Spirit.

It is not always easy to tell them apart.

Oh, we try.

During this pandemic ... a Dark Wood, if there ever was one  
we had hoped 40 days would be the longest we'd have to deal with it.

Yet, the pandemic persisted,  
as uncertainties out numbered what we can say for sure  
we tried to take control of the Dark Wood.

Many are forcing a way back to where we came  
wanting what we know, rather than being transformed into  
what we don't know ... even if it is the Holy Spirit  
driving us to change, be healed, and remember who we are; Beloved.

Because, I think the gift, the Holy Spirit really needs us to discover is Uncertainty. "John Ortberg observes in his book *Faith and Doubt*, "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 honors the freedom of persons and makes possible growth and intimacy that certainty alone could not produce."

Certainty is at the heart of most of our conflict these days. It requires us to hold on so tightly. And, I have come to realize it is what is driving so much of the reactive behavior. The ultimatums and assertions, especially by religious institutions that they know the way out. In particular, the statement I hear many assert; defending their response to the pandemic, "We live by faith, not fear." And, it sounds so correct on the surface. Until, you recognize it is actually a statement of certainty, rather than faith.

But, scripture tells us, the antidote to fear, is love. As it says in 1 John 4:18, “Perfect love casts out fear.” This helped me see why I have struggled so much with bringing us back together in person for worship and other discussions about how to navigate living with the virus. It is not the virus I fear, it is people’s certainty. A certainty that is choking out love. Which makes it very difficult to trust how people will act.

As Paul shared with us today, the conclusion of his beautiful reflection on the centrality of God’s steadfast love for healthy community and relationships; ... he confesses that maturity of faith is recognizing the dimness in how we currently see.

So much of this messy life is an enigma, a mystery, including God<sup>3</sup>.

Love does not insist on its own way. It doesn’t try to solve life or God.

Instead, it invites us to accept uncertainty as a gift.

Which, in turn, helps us become more receptive  
to what the Holy Spirit wants to teach us.

To help us do this each week, we will take some time ... the length of a song ... to reflect and listen for how the Holy Spirit is trying to help you receive the gifts of the Dark Wood. On part of the bulletin or piece of paper you received, write down something you feel uncertain about; maybe is worrying you. As you leave, there are nails you can pierce them outside each exit.

Instead of trying to solve this uncertainty or control it; ask God to help you remember who you are.

Yes, even if you currently cannot see a way out.

Even as you hear the beasts growl and you feel tested  
and all you see in this world seems barely livable ...

In this wild place, there are also angels tending to you and the Holy Spirit ready to talk, when you are; Beloved of God.

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<sup>3</sup> Elnes, Eric *Ibid.* pg 26-27.