

February 28, 2021 by Lori C. Morton
Sermon - Gift of Emptiness; Lent 2
Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16 Psalm 22 Mark 8:31-38

On Wednesday, I headed up to Schweitzer to ski in the morning. Glorious blue bird conditions as I arrived in the parking lot. By the time I started down my third run, clouds had filled up from below and came over the west ridge, socking in the middle of the mountain.

Granted, it was not as bad as it could be,
but it definitely changed the way I skied.
It made me think of the Dark Wood;
one everyone who skis Schweitzer, eventually finds themselves.

Very quickly, clouds - more like dense fog - can shut out all visibility.
Not just flat light, but it can get to where you cannot tell uphill from downhill
or even if you are moving.
You can feel both claustrophobic AND in the middle of vast emptiness.
You know the trees are nearby, other skiers,
even the snow and sky are somewhere
but, all you really know is nothingness; a formless void of gray.
And, complete disorientation.

Martin Luther speaks to this nothingness,
“God created the world out of nothing,
and, as long as we are nothing,
God can make something out of us.”¹

It sounds like good news,
but, I am definitely not thinking happy thoughts
as I try to make turns
and find my way
through this emptiness.

Yet, it appears to be a core part of what Jesus came to show us
these verses Jesus teaches to his disciples and the crowds,
“³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake,
and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

¹ Elnes, Eric; The Gifts of the Dark Wood (Abingdon Press, 2015) pg 41.

Spoken after Jesus predicts what awaits him in Jerusalem
and Peter is not pleased.

The Messiah, arrested, put on trial, suffering, and dying?

This cannot be! Peter pulls Jesus aside, clinging to him.

Jesus rebukes Peter, telling him ... his focus is on human things,
instead of the things of God.

So, how do we know what is of God and what is not?

How do we lose our life ... become nothing ... so God can do something with us?

Especially, when this emptiness ... this nothingness
feels so disorienting, alone, and abandoned.

Even Jesus experiences the fullness of this emptiness ...

this experience of the complete absence of God
on the cross ... the ultimate Dark Wood.

In the midst of this emptiness, he reaches for scripture.

Begins praying Psalm 22.

Today, we hear the conclusion of the Psalm, but it starts out,

“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Proceeds to describe how everyone has turned on him,

mocks him and taunts him with, “Where is your God now?”

So, how did the Psalmist get from this place of emptiness and abandonment
to the praise and full confidence we heard today?

Rolf Jacobsen² of Luther Seminary, starts his commentary on this Psalm
by mentioning, a once strong debate about this Psalm.

At one time, Bible scholars argued that there was no way that the same
person wrote the beginning of the Psalm

and the ending; the verses we heard today.

Perhaps, someone didn't like all the emptiness;

the possibility that anyone

would claim God abandoned them.

Yes, editor would allow a Psalm to end with, “Save me from the lion's mouth!

From the horns of the bull!

Many argued, someone added a happy ending.

Quickly resolving the Dark Wood described in this Psalm.

² Jacobson, Rolf; <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/second-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-psalm-2223-31-5>

Midway through verse 21, a drastic pivot
without, even a pause to breathe,
“You have rescued me. I will declare your name to my people.”

Or perhaps in that emptiness

In the Dark Wood, the Psalmist discovered that sweet spot.

That thin place, where they suddenly recognized how they clung to
friends, right and wrong, justice, the institutions of society ...
all failed them; the Psalmist had nothing.

Which maybe allowed them to discover
they had everything.

And, that is the struggle. We cannot hold onto or prove or explain those moments.

Some try to do it for Jesus on the cross

that he didn't really feel abandoned by God

that he knew the ending would lead to all generations' praise.

Which says, we aren't really okay with the full

humanity of Jesus ... or the empty places in our lives.

Because the truth is, the cross and all Dark Wood experiences
look like foolishness to those outside of it.

Paul explains this to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:18).

The cross, Jesus' teaching about losing your life in order to save it ...

“It sounds like the negation of identity and self-worth and power.”³

But, when you are inside this emptiness,

when you are at the base of the cross

when you realize how much you are “wholly other than God”⁴

it frees us to discover

where our identity and self worth truly come.

Once we recognize we are nothing

then, we are ready to recognize the fullness of God dwelling within.

Letting go of all of our efforts to survive, be right or be perfect

all the things we think make us worthy;

empty of all these things

then, God can fill us with healing, love, and

help us become fully aware of who we are; human.

³ Elnes *Ibid.* pg 45.

⁴ *Ibid.* pg 43

Yes, in the fog ... on the cross ... during a pandemic
when so much of our time and energy and routines
suddenly became empty, with nothing we could do.

How did you handle that emptiness?

How did it make you feel when events and groups and schedules
were cancelled?

Uneasy; identity and sense of purpose come into question?

Yes, much of our identity, how we measure our self-worth,
our sense of what is right and wrong
has been challenged, questioned, shown to be lacking, incomplete.

As God does, every Sabbath,

God invites us to wonder about what we will fill our lives.

Will we let ourselves linger in this nothingness, so we can discover
we are embodied by One, who is so much more than we can imagine?

Will we let the God who seeks to “bring the discordant
and chaotic cacophony of a rebellious creation into
relational harmony with the Lord, fill our lives?”

as Prof. Rolf Jacobson describes the reason for the praise filled ending of Psalm 22.

It is not easy to make room for this kind of fullness of life.

Letting go of illusions we have of this world and each other.

New life, change, being emptied, so we can be healed

... often feels like dying

before it feels like life.

To help you discover the gift of emptiness, I invite you spend this time in reflection with
God. We have the song, “Be Still”. I invite you to write down something you need to let
go of, that needs to die in order that you can live fully.