

Sermon Gifts of the Dark Wood Palm Sunday March 25, 2018

When Jesus had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, He sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as He had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As He rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying...

**Everyone: Blessed is the King
who comes in the name of the Lord!**

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, order Your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." As Jesus came near and saw the city, He wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!" Luke 19: 29-42

A Contemporary Reading *Gifts of the Dark Wood, Eric Elnes*

"Jesus' first words were: 'Change your whole way of thinking! Heaven is already here!' I can hear Jesus' ancient audience responding with cynicism. 'Are you insane, Jesus? How can heaven be here when the Romans are on our backs, oppressing our people and taxing us into poverty?' Or 'How can heaven be here now when my father just died?' Still another asks, 'How can heaven be here when there is so much oppression and so little justice?' Jesus offers examples of people who find deep blessing in this world (and in the Dark Wood) including those who are poor in spirit, mourn, hunger and thirst for righteousness, peace in the midst of conflict, persecuted, and slandered unfairly. If heaven, or 'God's Kingdom' is really here and available right now - perhaps not in its fullness but in some significant, meaningful way - then we do indeed need to change our whole way of thinking to believe the good news. If heaven may be found here and now, then heaven cannot be merely found in the *absence* of struggle as most of us assume, but *in the very heart of our struggles*. If Jesus' message is true, then our deepest challenges may offer our most profound opportunities. Heaven is found in the Dark Wood!"

Today is Palm Sunday, the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Crowds of people had come into Jerusalem for Passover, and as Jesus came down the road, people lined the it to see Him, and shouted "Hosanna to the King!" Every observant Jew would have known the prophecy from Zachariah that the messiah would arrive on a

donkey, and Jesus' reputation for teaching, healing, and performing miracles, had gone before Him. The crowds went wild, praising God for the new king. They hoped that Jesus would be a sword-swinging king, come to kick the butts of their Roman oppressors, come to restore Israel to its former glory. It must have been a bitter-sweet ride for Jesus, hearing the crowds cheer for Him, but knowing that His kingdom and authority would be rejected, because He didn't come to triumph over their enemies... He came to triumph over sin and hell and death.

This is the last Sunday of Lent and the beginning of Holy Week. During these 40 days of Lent - 40 days that mirror Jesus' 40 days of being tempted in the wilderness, and 40 years the Israelites wandered in the dessert - we've been exploring the gifts of the Dark Wood: the gift of uncertainty, the gift of emptiness, the gift of getting lost, the gift of being thunderstruck, and the gift of temptation. All of these are gifts we'd rather not receive because they force us off the well-known path, the paved sidewalk, and into places where we have to face (as Jesus did when He was tested by the devil) we have to face our frailty, our vulnerability, and our pitiful attempts to be self-sufficient.

Somewhere in our history American independence and Christian koinonia have gotten mixed up with each other. Koinonia is a Greek word that means Christian communion and fellowship. It's a word used throughout the New Testament to describe the Body of Christ... all of us together, sharing this life, relying on each other, as followers of Jesus. Today's gift of the Dark Wood is the gift of companions. There's no way we can walk through the Dark Wood without companions, any more than we can walk alone in a physical dark wood. It's too easy to get lost in the Dark Wood without a companion... it's too easy to feel hopeless and abandoned without someone to walk with you. And so these

cultural sayings like, “cowboy up” and “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” have no place in the Christian vocabulary. We were created to be dependent... on God, on each other. Paul wrote to the early church about our connectedness with each other as the Body of Christ: we are like a human body, every part working together, every part dependent on every other part. When we find ourselves in the Dark Wood we can realize how dependent we are, on Jesus, and on each other.

At our women’s retreat last January our facilitator talked about the importance of soul-friends. A soul-friend is someone who holds a lamp, and maybe holds your hand, while you walk through the Dark Wood. A soul-friend stands in place for Jesus, reminding you of His love, and helping you recognize the signs of His presence. A soul-friend, or a koinonia-companion, is someone who’s familiar with the Dark Wood, who’s self-aware enough to listen and not give advice; someone who can be with you as you suffer and not try to fix you. A koinonia-companion walks with you and seeks God with you. A group of this kind of soul-friends is sometimes called a faith-sharing group... and sometimes it’s called the church.

Listen again to today’s scripture from Luke’s gospel, this time from the Message translation, with a couple of additional sentences. “Right at the crest, where Mount Olives begins its descent, the whole crowd of disciples burst into enthusiastic praise over all the mighty works they had witnessed: ‘Blessed is He who comes, the king in God’s name! All’s well in heaven! Glory in the high places!’ Some Pharisees from the crowd told Jesus, ‘Teacher, get Your disciples under control!’ But Jesus said, ‘If they kept quiet, the stones would do it for them, shouting praise.’ When the city came into view, Jesus wept over it. ‘If you had only recognized this day, and everything that was good for you! But now it’s

too late. In the days ahead your enemies are going to bring up their heavy artillery and surround you, pressing in from every side... Not one stone will be left intact. All this because you didn't recognize and welcome God's personal visit."

Jesus' descent into Jerusalem was His descent into the Dark Wood of Holy Week... where the crowds quickly turned from praising God and welcoming Jesus to calling for a scapegoat, for someone to take the blame for the sin of all the world. Jesus wept over Jerusalem, for the disaster that was to come to them, because, He said, "You didn't recognize and welcome God's personal visit."

In the Dark Wood, when none of the ways you cope or try to control your inner world, or your outer world, or other people, work... you need a companion to help you recognize all the ways God shows up with personal visits. During Holy Week - the last week of Jesus' human life - all of His companions failed Him. They would betray Him, lie about knowing Him, and abandon Him to face, by Himself, the Dark Wood of torture and crucifixion. Jesus went through the Dark Wood of death - a criminal's death, an excruciatingly painful death on the cross, and He emerged from the tomb as the Resurrected Christ. He found His companions and invited them into a deeper relationship with Him, where they would share His ministry of healing and revealing God to the world. The church was founded by these failures, these "companions" who ran away, who lied, and who betrayed Jesus in His bleakest hour. And because they knew the Dark Wood of failure... they could tell others what it was to love, to fail, and to be forgiven by the Risen Lord. This was the beginning of the Christian church. Our beginning. Founded on failed and redeemed sinners, who recognized the Risen Christ as God's personal visit. The best companions in the Dark Wood are people who love Jesus and have failed Him; who

accept His forgiveness and live redeemed lives; to tell others about knowing the love and mercy of Jesus Christ in the Dark Wood.

Today's scripture reading takes us into Jerusalem, and in the coming week, on Holy Thursday, we'll go to Gethsemane with Jesus, where He was betrayed, and arrested, and condemned to death. Palm Sunday reminds us that life can turn on a dime. We can go from praising to cursing God in a heartbeat. We can go from the safe side of the street into the Dark Wood with a single step. Palm Sunday reminds us that there is no redemption without failing, there is no joy without sorrow, there is no resurrection without death. Today we celebrate the people who walk with us in the Dark Wood, our koinonia-companions, who help guide us by their prayers and presence, who help us recognize and celebrate "God's personal visits."

I want to tell you about something that happened yesterday, about one of God's personal visits. Shanena Gunn and I had breakfast together yesterday morning. Shanena's mother, GeeGee recently died, and although Shanena and I have texted, we haven't seen each other since GeeGee's death. Shanena laughed and cried through breakfast as she told me about her mother's illness and last days. I prayed that Jesus would help me be a koinonia-companion, to listen, and to help Shanena see and celebrate "God's personal visits" in the Dark Wood of her mother's death. I'd had several cups of tea over the course of two hours and I excused myself for a few minutes. When I came back, Shanena was in conversation with the family who were sitting next to us - an older woman and her husband and their adult daughter - who had been listening to our conversation. All four of them were in tears. The family at the next table had just buried their daughter and sister. The man apologized for eavesdropping, but he said, they'd

needed to hear what Shanena and I talked about (they needed to hear that out of death comes resurrection, out of sorrow, joy, and out of the Dark Wood, a deeper and truer understanding of who we are and why we're here. My words, not his.) We stood in the restaurant with this family for several minutes, talking crying, hugging, and being amazed at the ways God shows up. While we'd been eating breakfast I told Shanena how much I'd enjoyed GeeGee coming to worship here, in her bright orange sweater, her bright smile, and her outgoing personality. The woman who was sitting at the next table in the restaurant, who had just buried her daughter, hugged Shanena and comforted her, even while she was in tears herself. She was wearing an orange sweater. It was such a "God-thing" ~ a grieving woman and her pastor and three strangers in a restaurant, sharing laughter and tears and joy and sorrow at the ways God shows up for us in the Dark Wood. Another reminder that we can't walk this life without each other, that we are dependent on others to help us make our way through the Dark Wood. Sometimes our companions are strangers, and sometimes they're close friends, and sometimes they're the people we share the pews with every Sunday morning. Lord, may we be mindful of people who walk in the Dark Wood, who need us to be companions, compassionate friends, guides, and good listeners.

In the worship program, at the top of page 4, is *A Time for Reflection*. It says: "Each week during Lent we have taken time to reflect, accompanied by music. This last week, you are invited to write on the thank-you note provided in the worship program. Thank someone who has been a koinonia-companion, who has been with you at times in the Dark Wood journey of your life."