

Sermon Gifts of the Dark Wood Week 5 The Gift of Temptation March 18, 2018

Now Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wild. For forty wilderness days and nights He was tested by the Devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when the time was up He was hungry. The Devil, playing on His hunger, gave the first test: "Since You're God's Son, command this stone to turn into a loaf of bread." Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: "It takes more than bread to really live." For the second test the devil led Jesus up and spread out all the kingdoms of the earth on display at once. Then the Devil said, "They're Yours in all their splendor to serve Your pleasure. I'm in charge of them all and can turn them over to whomever I wish. Worship me and they're Yours, the whole works." Jesus refused, again backing His refusal with Deuteronomy: "Worship the Lord your God and only the Lord your God. Serve God with absolute single-heartedness." For the third test the Devil took Jesus to Jerusalem and put Him on top of the Temple. He said, "If You are God's Son, jump. It's written, isn't it, that 'God has placed you in the care of angels to protect you; they will catch you; you won't so much as stub your toe on a stone'?" "Yes," said Jesus, "and it's also written, 'Don't you dare tempt the Lord your God.'" That completed the testing. The Devil retreated temporarily, lying in wait for another opportunity. Luke 4:1-13

A Contemporary Reading: "The Spirit beckons us not to be good, but to be human - humble, of the *humus* - which ultimately means finding your elemental waters, which are connected to God, and living into your fullest energies. You can (and will) do a lot of good by walking the path that brings you most fully alive in this world, but in order to stay on this path, you must learn to say no to doing a great many 'good' things. Jesus' purpose and true power was not realized through feeding the hungry or practicing politics or performing miracles, even as each of these surely was a part of His path. God called Jesus to something far higher. Part of Jesus' calling was to live more fully into His human identity than anyone else had ever done before. In so doing, Jesus reveals how much the rest of us resemble Pinocchio by comparison - how much we're not our true selves. Jesus also reveals that the more we draw from the Source of our highest energies, thereby living into our true identity, the more we resemble actual divinity. That's because in order to follow our best path in the world, we've got to move off the path of common wisdom and start following a path marked by God's lightning flashes and thunder claps - those gut-hunches and reverberations of peace and joy that emanate from the Holy Spirit."

Gifts of the Dark Wood - Eric Elnes

This is the fifth week of Lent, these 40 days that echo Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, where He fasted and prayed and was tempted by the devil. Each week during Lent we've focused on a gift of the Dark Wood. The Dark Wood is a place of vulnerability, the unknown, an unexpected path, and a place where what the rational mind knows needs to take a back seat to intuition, imagination, and to the nudges and warnings of the Holy

Spirit. The Dark Wood is a place of revelation... it can be a time when all our tricks and talents and coping mechanisms are exhausted, and we have to rely on something else... or Someone else... the Dark Wood is a place to find God. In the Dark Wood (of being lost, or empty, or uncertain or thunderstruck or tempted) you and I might see more clearly who we are. The Dark Wood can be an invitation from God to put aside our habits, our masks, our persona, and be more authentically who we are... because in the unexpected and unknown and frightening places of life... when our tried and true ways of controlling and coping fail... we are more open to God. We are more open to following Jesus and learning what He has to teach us about living fully and authentically and vulnerably as the flawed and gifted children of God we are.

On the well-worn path, the comfortable and expected path we'd choose to stay on if we could, there are not as many lessons and challenges... not as many opportunities to become more like Jesus - who gave up His divinity, even suffering on the cross, so that He could be as fully human and as vulnerable as we are - there are more opportunities in the Dark Wood to learn from, and to find, Jesus.

With all our flaws and disguises, we are in a reflection of the God who made us. In the Dark Wood you might find that what you've told yourself about who you are isn't true. We're more than our strengths and our flaws, our careers, our possessions, and our successes. We are unique expressions of God's own Self, made in God's image, designed to reflect God's love and grace in the world.

I've always understood this story of Jesus' encounter with the devil to be more about the devil than about Jesus, and that the devil was tempting Jesus with the devil's power and Jesus' vulnerability. I like the picture on the front of the worship program with

the devil (in the devil's favorite Halloween costume) in conversation with Jesus. It tells me something different about this story that I know so well. Luke's gospel says that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. Mark's gospel tells us that the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness but in Luke's gospel it's more an open door that Jesus chose to go through. In his book, *The Gifts of the Dark Wood*, Eric Elnes explains Jesus' temptations as the things Jesus said "no" to so that He could say "yes" to His true calling. "Jesus' purpose and true power was not realized through feeding the hungry or practicing politics or performing miracles, even as each of these surely was a part of His path. God called Jesus to something far higher."

In the picture on the front of the worship program - in the discussion between Jesus and the devil - it's clear that the devil is not in the position of power, and that Jesus was not threatened or intimidated by the devil's seductive offers of food and fame and fortune. Every arrow of temptation the devil (whom Luke refers to not as satan or the devil but "the adversary") shot at Jesus, Jesus countered with a scriptural explanation - and with clarity - about who He was. Last Sunday I invited everyone to think about a guiding scripture; a scripture to use as a shield against the devil's arrows. Did anyone think about this, and look for a scripture shield? Who travels without some kind of map... without following some kind of signs, like cairns [karens] (these stacked rocks) that show the way? A guiding scripture isn't a talisman, or magic, but a kind of map, and a defense against the devil's favored arrows of pride and shame. Pride reminds you that you know a lot - possibly you know more than God - and so you don't need God. And shame reminds you that you've failed so often that God's gotten tired of you and has moved on. A guiding scripture is a shield against these arrows of pride and shame... and a guiding scripture

invites you to be open, especially in life's Dark Wood, to an experience of God. Decades ago when I started into therapy (I thought at the time it was to be a happier person but God's intention was that I come to know Jesus more fully, and to know myself more fully) I had to give some kind of theological reason that I wanted counseling at the Lloyd Center at San Francisco Theological Seminary. The scripture that came to me, when I was in my early 20's, still guides me today. "Jesus said, 'I have come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly.'" When the devil slings an arrow at you like: "you're not all that", or "you'll never succeed", or "just give up", or "if people really knew you", your guiding scripture can shield you. You might find yourself in conversation with the devil, just as Jesus conversed with the adversary, instead of feeling threatened and fearful.

Many of us in the church today, grew up in a time when the emphasis in Christian theology was learning and accepting a set of beliefs, an intellectual consent to faith. But our congregation's mission statement tells us something different. Our mission as the church, and as individuals, is to "Experience Christ's love." Experience is what sustains us as we follow Jesus... a map or a cairn [karen] that we can trust in the Dark Wood, when life forces us off the comfortable path and into the unknown and unexpected, and we are tempted by fear and pride and shame.

In this season of Lent we've explored the gifts of the Dark Wood of uncertainty, of emptiness, of getting lost, of being thunderstruck, and of temptation. Each of these gifts can lead us into a fuller and more authentic experience of Jesus, and His love for us, and our true path. Temptation can be a tool to help you define and refine who you are, and who you are meant to be. Rather than a test of your willpower against chocolate or wine or gossip or hatred (of yourself or of others) temptation can help you say "no" - just as

Jesus did in his conversation with the devil - say “no” to things you’re not called to do and be, and to say “yes” to those things that bring you joy, and help you to experience Christ’s love more fully, and that bless other people.

This is a quote from *The Gifts of the Dark Wood* about the gift of temptation. Eric Enles writes, “The question is not ‘Are you saved?’ but ‘Are you used?’ In other words, have you given yourself over to the Holy Spirit in such a way that you are willing to allow the Spirit to lead you on your path and bring you to fullness of life? Are you willing to move beyond the protestations of your logical, strategic mind, and [the temptation of] your desire to figure out everything for yourself, [and instead] to follow the sweet-spot moments [the revelations, the a-ha’s] that reveal where your soul yearns to travel in this world with God? Many people never allow themselves the joy of following their best path because they think it would be too enjoyable and therefore selfish. They assume it is more godly and self-sacrificing to follow a path that is not central to their deepest yearnings, never considering that God has placed these yearnings within them for a reason. While they may not know the reason, God does. When scripture speaks of becoming a new creation in Christ, it means surrendering to God’s intention for our lives by following the path of our greatest aliveness... where we engage with life wholeheartedly.”

In the Dark Wood (a place imagined by Dante in his poem, *The Divine Comedy*, and to Dante, a hellish place of suffering, torment, and punishment) we might be tempted to frantically retrace our steps back onto the sidewalk, but the Dark Wood (again, places of uncertainty, of emptiness, of being thunderstruck, of getting lost, of being tempted) can be a place where the Holy Spirit leads us... just as the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness... to learn to rely more fully on God, and to learn who we are and why we’re

here. Instead of looking at this as some kind of cosmic test (Who am I? Why am I here?) remember that Jesus said you're here to have abundant life, a full life... full of joy, full of love, fully of mercy, full of compassion, full of peace, full of hope... and that you're to love, to recognize and thank God, with everything you are... and you are to love others into the fullness of life as well. This is a lifelong journey, of going through the open door of the Dark Wood, of trusting that the Holy Spirit leads you and goes with you, and of relying on your experiences with Jesus Christ to sustain and comfort you.

Katie, would you once more sing to the invitation to the Dark Wood? [Katie sings]

On the top of page 4 of your worship program is *A Time for Reflection*. It says, "Each week we are taking time to reflect, accompanied by music. This week, you have a finger labyrinth in your worship program. Labyrinths are an ancient Christian practice that was designed for an experience of pilgrimage. You are invited to slowly follow the path with your finger, opening to and listening for the intuition, the small voice inside of you nudging you in the path that brings your life the most fullness."