

Lent is not an easy time for us. It is a time when we ponder the mystery of the Son of God; Jesus Christ; Immanuel; God with us. Jesus, who comes to us as a human and follows a narrow road leading to his suffering, humiliation and death. It is difficult for us to follow this path and to understand why it happened this way.

It is dark, foreboding. We don't like darkness in our life. We don't equate darkness to goodness. We want to know who we are – where we are – and where we're headed. Maybe, there is a gift in the darkness, in losing our way.

I was young and newly married. My older brother had been married the year earlier and already had his first child. We could barely scrap together \$10 dollars on a Friday night to get a large pizza for our two families. My brother would complain about our poor state. I told my brother, "Well, at least there's a light at the end of the tunnel." His response, "What tunnel? I haven't found the tunnel."

Robert Browning wrote, "God help all poor souls lost in the dark" (*The Heretic's Tragedy*).

It's no fun being in the dark, or worse, getting lost in the dark woods!

The real struggle as I see it, is that we don't acknowledge where we are – It seems to be our human nature to not admit defeat – to not admit being lost – And men, you know exactly what I mean! "What, me lost? I just need more time. I'll get us out of here. I am not lost."

Who wants to acknowledge that I'm at this place in life, when I expected to be over there? In fact, my mind thinks I'm really doing quite well when the truth is, I'm not doing so great. I'm fumbling around in the dark – I've lost the enjoyment of life.

The author of Psalm 143 is complaining. He's lost, crying out for God's mercy and guidance. And he blames others, "The enemy...makes me dwell in darkness" (v.3). Whenever we find ourselves in the Dark Woods, we don't want to admit it is our own mistake...we blame our enemies. In relationships we blame the other – in the workplace we blame those with the most responsibility - in politics we blame our elected leaders. We point the finger away from us even as we direct our prayers to God,

**“God do you know where I am -- what I'm up against -- how I'm doing -
- Do you care?”**

The psalmist says he's meditated on God's word, he thought about all the things God has done and he's prayed fervently, but his spirit fails because God hides his face from him. God doesn't answer his prayers fast enough. We sense his frustration with God because even knowing “no one is righteous before God, the psalmist pleads with God to look at all that he's done for God and still he's in darkness.”

He asks for morning light to show him God's love – he asks for God to show him the way he should go. In a feeling of powerlessness and helplessness the psalmist turns his life over to the grace of God. He knows that he is unable to walk in the way of God by himself. Lord, show us and teach us when we lose our way, for it is only in you that we can trust our life.

Henri Nouwen wrote, “The mystery of God's presence can be touched only by a deep awareness of his absence.” When we are struggling our way through the Dark Woods of our lives, when we have lost our way, when we feel God has abandoned us, it is in those moments when we can truly become aware of God's presence in our lives. But, that isn't easy.

In this world of GPS, Google Maps, and AAA Triptiks, it is easy to go from destination A to destination B. We don't get lost driving the highways and country roads of this land. What I'm talking about is getting lost from here (head) to here (heart). Not very far apart, but it's within our spiritual journeys where we lose sight of the narrow path Jesus has showed us. It is in our spiritual journeys where we often find darkness and that feeling of helplessness.

The gift, however, is the true reality of the presence of God. The gift – even when we are lost, is that God knows where we are. We are not alone, although the Dark Woods feel lonely. The gift from God is that God wants us to be in a place of

shalom, a place of well-being. God knows where we are, always, and at all times and God provides us the way forward – IF WE BUT TRUST GOD!

This spiritual journey, from head to heart is the hardest and longest journey of our lives. It is moving **from “I know. I know God loves me. I know Christ went to the Cross for me. I know Christ wants to save me,” (all in the head)**

TO “I know. I know God’s love. I know God cares for me. I know God is with me. I am not alone.” (heart/trust knowledge)

A young boy was camping with his family. He woke up early and noticed his older brother was not in his sleeping bag. His mother woke up. She looked out her sleeping bag and to her son who said, “Where’s Mark?”

“Shush!” his mother said. “He’s down by the river fishing.”

The young boy said quietly, “I want to go fishing. Can I go fishing? Can I?”

He pestered her with his yearning to join his older brother. The mother hesitated but finally said, “Okay, but don’t go anywhere else. Go straight down to the river from the tent and find Mark. Don’t get lost.”

The young boy was so happy. “Okay.” He got dressed, got his square fishing line and headed out the tent. He went directly down to the river. He looked from his brother but couldn’t find him. He looked and looked but he was nowhere to be seen. Unsure what to do, he decided to fish by himself.

He got his fishing line out and crept up to the shoreline. He threw his line in the flowing river, but somehow fumbled with it and it fell into the river. He could see quite easily in the clear water. He looked at it a long time and bent over to pick it out of the water. It's right there, I can get it myself, he thought. But his arm wasn't long enough.

He was frightened. He was looking for someone to help him but there was no-one. His brother was gone – his fishing line was gone – he was alone, anxious, not expecting help from anyone

He tried one more time and immediately felt himself falling into the cold rushing river. A hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back. He turned around but no one was there. He didn't understand.

Slowly he backed away from the river's edge and started walking to his family tent. "That's not it," he said to himself. He kept looking and looking but couldn't find his family.

A Park Ranger met up with the little boy some time later and said, "Hi, young man. What's your name?"

"Paul" the boy said.

"Paul what?" asked the ranger.

"Paul Phillips."

"Do you know where you family is?"

At that moment the boy realized he was lost but he didn't want to admit it. "Yes," he replied. "They're just over there," pointing to some tents pitched about fifty yards away.

The ranger said, "Let me help you find your family. Come with me."

And I went with the ranger that day and was reunited with my family. Show me the way I should go

I can't explain why that happened to me. I didn't tell anyone that story. But, I do know this, God knew where I was. Someone pulled me back from the river's edge. Only thirty, forty, fifty years later have I come to understand God was a reality, a true reality in my life, even if I didn't know it back then.

God is the only true reality – whether we experience God's presence or not – the reality still exists. God is here in the midst of the Dark Woods wanting to show us the way out. That is a gift, that although we may feel lost, God wants us to know wholeness and wellness and love and his mercy. God knows exactly where you are at this moment! Feel his gift of presence. Know his steadfast love for you. Be encouraged and strengthened for you will find your way out of the Dark Wood with God's Spirit leading you and by acknowledging your dependence upon the One who will find you.

Hallelujah! Amen.