



Gifts of the Dark Wood 1: The Gift of Uncertainty (1 Cor. 13:11-12)

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Today we embark on a new series that will take us through the Sundays of Lent, called “Gifts of the Dark Wood,” inspired by the book of the same name, written by Eric Elnes.

It’s a curious title: “Dark Wood” feels all gloomy, which seems an appropriate ambiance for Lent, when we’re supposed to engage in introspection and self-examination (isn’t it funny that most people automatically think of such things as unpleasant, or at least uncomfortable?). We’ve often been told by religious people that there is good stuff to be found in these disciplines, but, frankly, there’s plenty of gloom around right now; why go looking for more inside ourselves? I get that. And that’s where the other part of the title rescues us: “Gifts.”

There *are* gifts, God-gifts, in a careful examination of our lives and their trajectory - gifts well worth receiving.

The idea behind the title comes from Dante Alighieri's classic work, *The Divine Comedy*. Those of you who had to study it in college are thinking, "Oh, great! Now we're going to have a series of lectures on sixteenth-century Italian literature!" But that's not it at all. You who actually read it may remember how it begins: "In the middle point of my life, I found myself in a dark wood where the true way was lost." That's where we're starting from.

The dark wood we're entering is your own. If you've ever felt like you've lost your way, or that life isn't what you expected, or dealt with one of life's curve balls, you will recognize these woods. I think that includes all of us! What I pray you find as we explore this familiar territory together is that God and the Holy Spirit have not left you alone (as you may feel); not only have they been there with you in the dark wood, but left gifts for you to bless your life and your future in ways you never expected.

So come along as your pastors try to show you a path in the dark wood of your life.

The first thing is that certainty is overrated. Oh, sure, we may think we'd like to know exactly what's going to happen, with no surprises, but I'm not sure we realize what we're asking.

Certainty is what a child craves: A child likes predictability. Mom's there when you fall asleep; Mom's there when you wake up. When you're hungry, there's food. Your bed is your bed; your toys are your toys and where you want them when you want them. A bit of surprise is good for a grin and a laugh, but don't mess with the fundamentals – more than one kid has gotten seriously cranky when she's missed her nap or can't find a toy! The whole world is upset.

But as adults? We should know better. There are, we're told, two certainties in life, death and taxes, neither of which is particularly pleasant. Why should we want everything else to be that predictable?

Sure, almost everything around us has some degree of predictability, but even a formulaic movie (one of those boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back types) can hold our attention if the details have enough suspense, enough uncertainty in them.

So it is with our lives, and so it is with our experiences of uncertainty in the dark wood. We want to know how things will go, but in fact we already do: the same God who brought us into the world will be waiting to meet us as we leave it. It's the details that hold the key: the details that are the gift.

When Valerie and I were first getting to know each other (this is early on; it's been almost twenty-six years and we're still in the process of getting to know each other), in the middle of some conversation we

were having I told her that I'd already got her birthday present – several weeks early.

“What did you get me?” she asked immediately.

Well, that took me by surprise a bit: no one ever asked me that before, and I wasn't sure how to answer. So I treated it like a joke: “Wouldn't you like to know? It's great!”

“No, really, what did you get me?”

“You're kidding, right? You really want me to tell you what I got you?”

“Of course! It's all right. I want to know!”

Well, after quite a bit more of this to-and-froing, she convinced me that I should tell her what I got her for her birthday. (By the way, I don't remember what it was!) So, I told her.

“Why did you tell me?”

“Well, because you told me to.”

“But that doesn't mean you really should have!”

And people wonder why I have gray hair. But this is a great example of how important uncertainty is to our lives. We want to know, yet we're fascinated by not knowing (or sometimes haunted). But in the end, the getting there is more important than actually arriving. We think

we want to know what's coming, but when we find out, we realize it was the anticipation that was most important: the life lived in between.

My friend Karl Travis is another example. You may remember him; he was the guest preacher for our Consecration Sunday a couple of years ago: probably fifteen years younger than me, full of energy, deep faith and commitment to generosity in everything he does.

Well, Karl loves to ride and race bicycles as well as preach. Seems like nearly every picture I saw of him on Facebook showed him in bicycling clothes!

But Karl had a medical issue with blood clots in his legs. For months I followed his struggles on Caring Bridge, a special website supporting communication and care for people facing long-term challenges. He was in hospitals in Dallas, at Duke University – and nothing was working. Surgery after surgery, and the clots kept coming back. The short story is that he finally ended up undergoing amputation of part of a leg – and then, a final surgery to clean that up as well.

So, here is this vibrant, energetic, athletic, exuberant pastor of a large, active church, who's now spent months in fruitless, painful treatments (talk about a dark wood!). Now he's had to rearrange his entire life: from racing bicycles to navigating a wheelchair in just a few weeks; pastoring a huge and vibrant church, always on the go, to preaching sitting in a wheelchair.

For Karl, nothing went the way he could have predicted – but he was ready to see God working in the process.

Karl wrote an entry on Caring Bridge last week, saying it was his last because now he is well into recovery after the clean-up follow-up on his amputation. And what he wrote as a blessing for those of us who'd been following him on his journey was this:

“May God be obvious in your life, but subtly so, because an obvious God would be predictable and boring.”

“When I was a child...but now that I am an adult...Now we see in part...”

We do not need to know, except that which we already know – that God is underneath all that life brings our way. Does that make uncertainty easy? Fun? No – even anticipating good things can be stressful. But the gift of adult wisdom for the person of faith in uncertainty is that God is there with you, in the little things and the big ones, the good surprises, the support, the love, and the tragedies. And another gift it brings is the opportunity to focus on what is truly important and let go of those things that can be worried about another day – as Jesus said, “Stop worrying about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Mt 6:34)

So the gift of uncertainty is, paradoxically, certainty: that God has us taken care of. And in the uncertainty that passes between birth and death, we can look for glimpses of God walking with us.

Unexpected love – the Holy Spirit – shows up in our uncertainty, as we face the abyss of the unknown, the dark wood. It appears subtly, invisible to most, but always there for those who have ears to hear, eyes to see, hearts to feel.

The Jesuit paleontologist, philosopher, and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once wrote:

“Above all, trust in the slow work of God...it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—and that it may take a very long time... Only God [can] say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.”

It's part of our brokenness that we would chose a second-rate certainty to the unlimited potential of God's grace. Our humanness would prefer to remain predictable, but it's the Spirit that pulls us into what might be. And it is what might be – in all its mystery, worry, and promise – that is the gift that is uncertainty.

