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Gifts of the Dark Wood 3: The Gift of Being Thunderstruck – Job 37:1-5

Sometimes you are in a place like a dark wood and simply don't know that you are. Life seems to be cooking along nicely, no major clouds on the horizon – and then, wham – the world has changed, or at least the view of your place in it has shifted, and nothing is quite the same.

Life-changing events like this usually are associated with youth: love at first sight, the initial call of life's work, discovering what it is you love to do or even a sense of why you're in the world. What's important for us today is that these moments are not confined to the young by any means.

No matter when this unexpected event happens, you realize that up until that point you were operating in the dark. You discover that one way or another, you had arrived at a place where your path was obscured, but now you have found insight into your way forward. A thunderclap, a flash of lightning changed everything.

Have you ever considered that this may be God speaking to you? It certainly is one way that Scripture and the ancients looked at it.

“Thunderstruck” is the word we’ll call this. It’s one word to describe God speaking to us, but the Spirit’s communication is more than just thunder – there’s lightning in there, too.

Let’s step back a bit and see if we can’t all get onboard this train. Have you ever had a sudden insight into a problem? A flash of inspiration that suddenly made sense out of confusion? These are examples of what I mean by being thunderstruck. The ancients understood the great sounds of nature to be the voice of God – our lesson from Job is a great example – one that appropriately opens with confusion and trepidation!

Two problems with being thunderstruck: first, sometimes the brightness of the lightning flash blinds us, and second, we’re far too accustomed to think that this sort of thing doesn’t happen anymore when you’re grown up like us.

Both of these problems can confound us – one overemphasizing the voice of God, leading us to jump into risky endeavors; the other, dismissing them as irrelevant – maybe even just a touch of indigestion.

This is what we’re talking about, God speaking when we haven’t been listening, and we’re surprised or awestruck or just pushed off-balance when he does.

You can be thunderstruck when a lot of seemingly unrelated events come together. How many times have you suddenly realized why all

these little things were taking place, not paying attention to them as they happened?

You may have felt some of this when you met your best friend in life, or when you first realized what in life brought you joy. And because those things happened so long ago, you may have assumed that the time of such experiences is past.

But it's not. God is still speaking to you. Are you listening?

Of course, as with anything dealing with humans, there's a hitch. You may well have found some sort of enlightenment, but it still may not be completely clear what happens next. That's ok. God's work doesn't always require an immediate response, and sometimes you need to wait for clarification.

Let me share with you some of my own journey. It's always a bit tricky for clergy to talk about this subject, because our "call" to ministry seems on the surface to be so different from what "real people" experience – but, in truth and in our Reformed heritage, we are all called, with the same sort of call, to whatever it is we do, even if those don't look the same.

I thought I loved chemistry as a high school student, but discovered quickly in college that I wasn't following a viable path (nearly flunking helped). Then I discovered that I could put my passion for music to good use, and committed myself to majoring in that.

The problem was, after spending four years and a ton of my parents' money pursuing the dream of living a life of musical beauty, I was rapidly approaching graduation without any prospect of gainful employment afterward. I couldn't play keyboards worth a lick, so couldn't find a job as a school teacher; besides, at that time school enrollments were drying up and there weren't jobs available. I certainly wasn't good enough at performance or composition to make an artist's living.

So, my first dark wood of vocation. Then, I realized that my classmates going to law school hadn't had to follow some course of arcane subjects like the pre-med types, so decided to go into law, since I liked to argue a lot.

But it was in the middle of my senior year, as I prepared to take the Law School Admission Tests, that I was well and truly thunderstruck: over the course of several days, it became clear that the only thing I could do with my life was to go into the ministry.

This was a major surprise to me, and an even bigger one to my family and friends, probably greatest to my childhood pastor.

So, what I did was to try some other, simple things, and see if this call would go away. I did this for two years, and loved what I did. But the call didn't go away, and so I prepared to go off to seminary. Feeling I should get an Ivy League degree, I planned on Yale, but family friends

enticed me to look at Pittsburgh, and another thunderclap happened: Pittsburgh was where I needed to be.

As I interviewed for field work in my second year, I was offered a job as director of funds development for a private school by the headmaster of that school, who was on the committee that interviewed me for a church. Was that another thunderclap? Development work for my college was what I had done for the two years between college and graduate school; was God redirecting me one more time? I certainly loved what I had done then; had I misread my call to ministry as I had misread a career in music? The question was important, and took lots of prayer and careful thought, but I stayed the course. Eventually, of course, I ended up here, among you.

What I have found over these thirty-odd years is that time and again I've been placed in situations where I've figuratively been in the woods, without a clear path in any direction. And every time, I have found myself in a church, doing what I truly love, usually without a lot of warning. Thunderstruck.

So how about with you? Perhaps you bounced around several different careers, or even felt blocked from doing what you were sure you ought to be doing. Not just in things like a choice of career, but in hobbies or avocations or, perhaps, even in love – the love of your life didn't love you back, or people changed. What do you make of pulls

like these? Here and now, you could be excused for thinking you've reached a dead end, and that now you're on the glide path of the final approach of life.

But you're not. God is still speaking to you.

There was a man who was convinced to his very core that God looked after him personally. So, when flood warnings were issued, he stayed put in his house, secure in God's protection. When the sheriff's office sent a deputy to evacuate him, he refused.

Once the waters reached the first floor of his house, he moved to the second floor, still secure in the knowledge that God would save him from this calamity. A team of rescue workers came by in a boat to pick him up, but he refused again, sure that God would bring him safely through.

Then, the waters rose so high that he had to head for the roof. Not long after he got up there, a helicopter crew spotted him and lowered a hoist, but he waved them off. God would save him any minute now.

Well, the floodwaters soon swept him away, and he drowned, astounded that God would let him down so catastrophically. When he reached the pearly gates, he confronted God himself: "Why did you let me drown? I trusted in you, God, and you said you'd never leave me."

“Joe,” God said, “what more did you want? I sent you a car, a boat, and a helicopter!”

How do you know when the Spirit is speaking to you in the thunder and lightning? That’s when the power of discernment comes into play – praying, talking with a pastor, discussing what you think you’ve heard with those whose judgment you value and trust. Who is it who can tell you to get into that darn rescue boat – because God speaks through other people, too. And looking for the connections – how the little sparks come together to light up your path, leading you to new things – or, perhaps, just leading you to see who and where you are more clearly.

God is still speaking to you, soft and loud, gently and with the subtlety of an alarm clock. Just because you’re retired doesn’t mean that God’s given up on you, or decided to let you coast for the rest of your life. There are things left for you to do, people to meet, work building the kingdom that’s still waiting for you. May you find those things and welcome them with joy and thanksgiving to God.