

Gifts of the Dark Wood - The Gift of Uncertainty: Luke 4:1-13

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Have you ever awoken and found yourself in the midst of the Dark Wood? You wake up one day and realize that the career that has provided a healthy paycheck for years has also been sucking the life out of you. Your marriage that was supposed to last forever is falling apart all around you. A bad test result at the doctor. A middle of the night phone call. No matter how hard you try, you just can't feel happy. No matter how hard you try, you find it hard to believe anymore...in yourself...in God.

Maybe everything around you still *seems* fine. No tragedy or trouble. And yet...yet...you feel like you're sinking, still, and you can't explain why. You've been juggling life so much, you're just exhausted. Tired of being something that's not, fully, you. Tired of living your life for someone else.

Maybe all the things you believed in, about God and yourself, are not really true, and waking up to this new truth has you feeling like you are sinking, like the whole world is crashing on top of you like the waves of the sea.

The middle ages Italian poet Dante wrote about these times of life. In his famous work, *The Divine Comedy*, he wrote a now famous line, "In the middle of the road of my life, I awoke in a Dark Wood where the true way was wholly lost." Have you ever awoken in the Dark Wood?

But what is this place, really? For Dante, the Dark Wood was a place of confusion, emptiness and stumbling that we enter as punishment for our sin. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante's famous allegorical poem, he imagines the afterlife, and takes readers on a tour of hell, what he calls *the Inferno*. Most of our modern imagery of hell and satan come from Dante's imagination, not from scripture. And "Dark Wood" is the name Dante gives to the entrance to the Inferno.

Sometimes it feels like the Dark Wood is leading us to hell. But I think Dante gets the Dark Wood all wrong. What if the Dark Wood is not a place we go on a journey away from God, but the very place where God is best found?

Our guide into this Dark Wood is the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. Like most Dark Wood experiences, Jesus did not choose to enter the wilderness. Luke tells us, right away, that the Holy Spirit led Jesus there. And while he was there, for 40 days, he was tempted by the devil.

"The devil" in my Bible is not capitalized, because in the original language it is not really referring to the Satan as pictured in Dante's picture of Hell, but to a devil--any devil--that would tempt us to cheat on life.

This wilderness devil sends three temptations Jesus' way: to turn stones into bread, to worship the devil and be given all the kingdoms of this world, and to wow the world into following him by throwing himself off from the pinnacle of the temple, only to be caught by an angelic parachute.

Though they numbered three, they are really all one big temptation - the temptation of certainty. Before Jesus begins his ministry, he must journey through the wilderness. That's why the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness, a place of uncertainty and desolation, where you don't know where you will find your next bite to eat or your next drink of water. It is a place of unknowing. Of upheaval. And this is exactly where Jesus, according to the Spirit, needed to be at this point in his life.

And at every turn along the way, this devil tries to convince him otherwise. Why worry about your next meal, if you can just turn stones into bread? Why engage in the cosmic fight against injustice and evil if, in one act of devil worship, you could cause all the devils of this world to lay down their power? Why die on a cross to win humanity by love, when you could throw yourself off a temple and be caught by angels, and convince humanity of your power?

This devil offers Jesus certainty. A way out of the wilderness. A way to avoid the cross. The easy path of ministry. But this is not the way the Spirit is leading Jesus. Jesus' ministry must begin in the wilderness.

I wonder how many of us spend our lives resisting the Spirit, taking, instead, the easy way out? We crave the firm foundation under our feet. We can't handle the mystery of the wilderness. We need the certainty that comes from knowing all the answers and what the next turns in life are.

Living in certainty works...until it doesn't. Eventually, you find a question that doesn't have an easy answer. Life sends you a devil that knocks you down for the count, and the certainty you thought your life was built on begins to crumble beneath you.

But then, and only then, when certainty is gone, can you begin to trust again. Jesus was able to resist the devils that came his way not because he had certainty, but because he had trust. Trust that the very Spirit that led him this way would protect him and take him where he needed to go.

Certainty and trust don't go together. When you're certain about your foundation, you don't need to trust in anything or anyone. But when all that you could rely on in life begins to crumble beneath you, when your feet can no longer stand firm on their own, it's then that you learn to trust.

But trust is scary, and too often, it seems, we're too scared to risk trust, and so we never really live. We are like Rilke's Swan in the poem we read a moment ago. On the firmness of the ground, a swan is awkward, waddling around slowly. A lot of us live in that awkwardness. But how does the swan cure its awkwardness? Not by beating himself on the back, or trying his hardest to walk faster, or organizing himself better. No, the swan cures his awkwardness by moving toward the water where he belongs. And the water can be terrifying, it's not as certain. But it is where the swan belongs.

There, Rilke says, the water...

*... gently receives him,
and, gladly yielding, flows back beneath him,
as wave follows wave,
while he, now wholly serene and sure,
with regal composure,
allows himself to glide.*

Rilke calls this move, "our dying...releasing ourselves from the ground on which we stood." And it's only in this dying, that we find ourselves, our place in this world, our life.

For me, it was my 2nd year of ministry when I began to lose certainty. This year marks 10 years I've been in full-time ministry of some sort, and I wouldn't change my life for anything. I love what I do. But there was a time when I thought about giving it all up.

See, when you leave seminary, you have all the answers. Faith comes easy, and you can't wait until you can lead a church. But then, well, then you're there. And there's no one to tell you what to do. You get asked questions you don't know the answer to. You have to wrestle with devils you didn't even know existed.

I remember sitting in my office on a Thursday afternoon, and instead of finishing the sermon I needed to finish, I was looking at job postings for other careers. Maybe I should be a teacher, instead. Or what about a social worker. Maybe I should go back to school, get another degree.

It wasn't that I was bad at what I did, nor was it that I didn't like the people I was ministering to--it was that I wasn't sure that I believed it all anymore. For my whole life, faith came easy. I was born into it. But now, now that it was my job to speak of the things I claimed to believe, I wasn't sure what I believed anymore. I was a pastor who didn't know if he believed in God. And I felt fake. I was in the Dark Wood.

Within a year from that time, I would leave congregational ministry and become a full-time community organizer. It was still ministry, I just didn't have to speak of my faith anymore. I thought if I couldn't save the world with the church, maybe I could do it through politics. And you know what? The strangest thing happened.

As I stepped away from the church, I began to trust again. We did a lot of reading as organizers, and one book we read was called *Ill Fares the Land*, by Tony Judt, a sort of final word by a dying man. And what touched me wasn't what he wrote, so much, but the quote that he centered his book on. It was a quote he lifted from George Orwell: "*To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle.*"

Once I read that, I couldn't get that line out of my head. "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle." See, I was giving up on the struggle. I had assumed that life, and faith, and ministry should be easy. That standing up here and speaking about God should be easy.

How could this be easy?! How could it be simple, trying to understand and speak of eternal truths? God may be right in front of us and all around us. Truth may be right on our nose. But you don't get there through simple answers and easy effort and certainty, but through constant struggle.

That's the wilderness. That's the Dark Wood. It's constant struggle.

And it's a gift. It's a gift to not have to have all the answers. It's a gift to not always know the right thing to say. "I don't know", is a gift. Yet, even though we don't know, God is still worth trusting.

I think Dante got it all wrong. The Dark Wood, this isn't the path to hell. This is the door to God, a God that is bigger than all our certainty, a God that cannot be contained in what we think we know and understand. A God that we must trust, because it's only when we do, that we can finally let go of all that has been holding us back, and find our place in this world.

Like a swan leaving the awkwardness of the land, and finding it's "regal composure" as it glides upon the uncertainty of the water, may our journey into the Dark Wood lead us to find our place in this world, where everything comes together and we can be our fullest self.

Amen.