

Gifts of the Dark Wood: Being Thunderstruck - Gen. 12:1-4a, Job 37:1-5

Norwalk Christian Church, February 28, 2016, Gifts of the Dark Wood Sermon Series, Lent 3, Year C

We continue today our journey through Lent, which is taking us into the Dark Wood. The Dark Wood is those times in life when you feel like you're lost in the middle of a thick, dark wood. We often fear these moments, but what if we saw these times as a gift? That even though we may be in the darkness, God is actually there with us, blessing us.

Today, we find in the dark wood the gift of being Thunderstruck. And I didn't realize until this week that there is an AC/DC song called "Thunderstruck." That is *not* the gift we are talking about today, though the song is a good starting point. The heavy metal lyrics give us a good picture of what being Thunderstruck feels like.

*I was caught In the middle of a railroad track
I looked round And I knew there was no turning back
My mind raced And I thought what could I do
And I knew There was no help, no help from you
Sound of the drums Beating in my heart
The thunder of guns Tore me apart
You've been...Thunderstruck*

Now, in the song, was leaves them feeling "thunderstruck" is a wild party in Texas. The party is so good, they're frightened, in a good way. Scared, but loving it.

But that's not always, or even often, how "being thunderstruck" happens. I looked up the word's definition in a few dictionaries, and here's what I found: "Thunderstruck is being extremely surprised or shocked; dumfounded; to be stopped in your tracks; suddenly surprised as to be unable to speak; flabbergasted; to be astonished by something terrible; overcome with consternation; confounded; completely taken aback."

That doesn't sound like a gift. That doesn't sound like anything I'd look forward to.

We don't talk much about being "thunderstruck" anymore. The ancients, however, talked about such things all the time. We get the term from them. To the ancients, being thunderstruck was the means through which the divine spoke to you. In almost every ancient religion or mythology, in their art as well as in their literature, they envision their deities speaking to them most often through thunder and lightening.

The text we read from Job, a very, very ancient poem, describes being thunderstruck perfectly.

*At this also my heart trembles, and leaps out of its place.
Listen, listen to the thunder of God's voice and the rumbling that comes from God's mouth.
Under the whole heaven God lets it loose...God thunders wondrously with God's voice;
and does great things that we cannot comprehend.*

For the ancients, it wasn't just that God's voice sounded like thunder--it was that thunder *WAS* God's voice. We can dismiss this idea as primitive, pre-modern cultures trying to give meaning to something unknown and terrifying like thunder and lightning, but I think they were onto something.

Turn on the Christian radio station, and you would think that hearing the voice of God was all roses and lilacs. But read scripture, and when God speaks--things shake. Mountains quake. Thick clouds form. Even when angels show up (and "angel" is simply a Hebrew word that means "messenger from God"), everyone is always deathly afraid.

I'm not saying every--or even any--thunderstorm is God trying to speak to us--but I am saying that if and when God tries to speak to us, it probably feels more like standing under a loud clap of thunder, then like the sound of a gentle breeze.

Your stomach jumps. Your hair stands up. Your knees shake. But none of this can compare to what happens to your life. For what really leaves you thunderstruck, is not the sound or method that God speaks, but the implications of God's voice on your life.

God speaks to Abram, in what way, we do not know. But the thunderous reverberations of what God said to him are still shaking through time: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." And, surprisingly, Abram goes. And this encounter with God, this hearing of God's voice changes his life--and human history--in profound ways, forever.

Like the sound of a loud clap of thunder, the reverberations of God's voice go on and on. And from the thunder, Abram hears his calling in life, and takes the leap of faith.

Maybe you've realized it by now, but the journey into the Dark Wood isn't a journey to some place far out from us, but it is, in fact, an inward journey. A journey into ourselves. An interior journey where we confront our own doubts and uncertainties, where we face our fears and insecurities. But there's something else inside us that we avoid. Often our doubts and insecurities terrify us. But have you ever been scared of your own potential?

Have you ever avoided the dark wood journey because you know you're avoiding you're calling, you're avoiding taking that "leap of faith", you're avoiding following after your dreams.

You avoid the dark wood, because once you're there, you know what you will see. You will see the lightening flash and will hear the thunder sound, over and over again. You've been hearing it for a while--maybe you're whole life--but you've drowned it out with your doubts and the noise of your life.

Chances are, though, if the lightning keeps flashing in the same location, you should probably head in that direction. Chances are, God may be speaking to you.

For me, often when a thunderstorm is on the way, I can't even hear it, with the noise of life all around. But our dog, Maggie, can always hear it. The moment she hears thunder, no matter how faint, she will leave the room. The closer it gets, the more nervous she becomes. She crawls under furniture. Hides behind toilets. She shakes. Thunder terrifies her. And often, she's scared to death, and I haven't even noticed the storm.

That's why being thunderstruck is a gift of the Dark Wood. Our modern lives are too noisy to even hear a storm, and even if we did, we certainly wouldn't be listening for God to speak to us in the midst of it. But when you're out in the dark wood, with no shelter, no sounds but the sounds of creation, you can hear the storm. You can feel the storm.

Out of nowhere, darkness is sucked up by an immediate flash of light. And the flash is soon followed by a rumble that leaves you thunderstruck for sure, ducking and running for cover, knowing that from the thunder God is calling to you.

I had a dark wood thunderstruck moment, once. Well, really it was more the woods at dusk, but it was a moment when the thunder sounded and it's been reverberating through my life ever since.

For reasons I still don't understand, I felt drawn to take a personal retreat when in college at a monastery, the Abbey of Gethsemani. It was home to the famous monk and writer Thomas Merton, nestled in the beautiful rolling, bluegrass hills of Southern Kentucky. At college, I heard a guy tell his story of visiting there, and in that moment, I just knew, I needed to go there.

So, I went. Twice. My first trip was awkward. I was nervous and didn't know what to do. The silence of the monastery was too much for me. I wasn't ready to hear the thunder. So I enjoyed the food, read a book, and had some nice walks. But that was about it.

But the second trip was life changing. I went with a bit of an agenda. College was quickly ending, and I had some decisions to make. Two, in fact. First, would I accept an internship the following year at a church in Montgomery, Alabama, or would I go directly to seminary as my professors were advising me to do. And, the second decision...would I ask Marti to marry me.

I guess you know what I decided... But I'll remember the moment I decided, forever. See, I really wanted to hear from God on these things. I knew my entire life would be influenced by these decisions. And one day, on the grounds of the monastery, a mile or so from any person or building, deep on a wooded trail, I found myself at dusk at a stream. Someone had built a narrow stone bridge over the stream, and I walked out on it, and sat down in the middle, my legs dangling over as the water rushed underneath them.

And I just sat. I don't remember saying anything. I don't remember hearing anything. But I remember feeling like I was on holy ground. And there, in that moment, I knew. The thunder sounded. The lightning struck. I knew what I needed to do. I knew the life God was calling me to.

A few months later, I was driving along Interstate 20 in Texas, heading for the first time to the West Texas town of Abilene. In front of my car was another car, that my just-married bride, Marti was driving. Behind me was a UHaul trailer, which held all our earthly possessions, possessions we would soon put into our new home, where we would live while I was in seminary.

And I will never forget what we saw. As we were nearing the town of Abilene, which we had never been to until the day we moved there, the wide expanse of West Texas was all around us. And stretched across the wide horizon, we saw three separate thunderstorms. I would soon learn to fear a Texas thunderstorm, but that night, it was so incredibly beautiful.

We didn't know everything...we weren't sure what was ahead...but in that moment I knew, in so many ways, I was witnessing the thunder of God's voice, telling us we were on the right path.

I don't know if or where the lightning is flashing and the thunder is roaring in your life, but if it is, you should listen. And maybe, maybe you should follow. Something --someone--maybe trying to tell you something. Something--someone--may be trying to lead you somewhere. On a journey you've never been. To a land God will show you. To that place, where everything comes together and you become a part of God's seamless whole.

We may not use the word "thunderstruck" to describe these moments. Usually we say "the lightbulb came on" or we had an "aha moment" or "a flash of genius" or "something clicked into place." But if you were to ask Job what to call it, Job would say, "Listen to the thunder of God's voice." And I think Job was onto something.

Amen.

And now, let us join together in this prayer of confession, printed in our bulletins, reading out loud the words in bold:

One: For being too busy to be wonder-struck by Your works,

All: Forgive and restore us, O God.

One: For filling the holes in our spirit with things that cannot truly feed us,

All: Forgive and restore us, O God.

One: For denying the world our best selves,

All: Forgive and restore us, O God.

A Moment of Silence

During this moment of silence, reflect on the lightning and thunder in your life. Where might God's thunder be sounding? What journey is God's lightning pointing you towards? Step into the dark wood, step into your interior self, and allow yourself to be thunderstruck by God's voice, speaking to you.

Words of Assurance

One: Hear these words of assurance:

God is already making a wonder of you.

You are a part of this awesome creation.

God is with you, forgiving and restoring you to wholeheartedness.

All: **Thanks be to God! Amen!**

Communion Song: 430: Lo, I Am With You