

## Gifts of the Dark Wood: Being Lost - *Psalm 42*

Norwalk Christian Church, March 5, 2016, Gifts of the Dark Wood Series, Lent 4, Year B

---

“Lost” by David Wagoner

*Stand still. The trees ahead  
and bushes beside you*

*Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here. And you must treat it as a powerful  
stranger. Must ask permission to know it and be known. The forest breathes. Listen. It  
answers.*

*I have made this place around you.*

*If you leave it you may come back again. saying Here.*

*No two trees are the same to Raven.*

*No two branches are the same to Wren.*

*If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you. You are surely lost. Stand still.*

*The forest knows*

*Where you are. You must let it find you.*

Let us pray: God of the uncertain, the forsaken, the Empty, the Thunderstruck...God of the Lost, we come now, in the midst of our life journey, searching for you. Open our eyes to see your lightning. Open our ears to hear your thunder. Open our hearts to sense your Spirit, leading us in your way. Amen.

Look back at your life. Think about those times when you found your way, when you found yourself right where you knew you were supposed to be. Most likely, these sweet-spot moments in life were arrived at after a time of being lost.

In church, we like to talk about “being lost” as a bad thing. It is the word we use for those without Christ. But you can’t be found, until you’ve been lost. You can’t find your path--where you were born to be--until you’ve spent some time lost in the Dark Wood.

Gary Fox has a real-life story of being lost to share with us, but perhaps in listening to Gary’s story, we will also find our own spiritual story. Gary:

---

*Our Lenten Season series on the Dark Woods has been of great interest to me, in large part because it has caused me to reflect back on an experience my oldest son Andy and I had nearly 20 years ago in the very dark, very scary, very deep woods in northern Montana. Andy had just finished his freshman year at Iowa State, and we were excited to have him go with us for one last family vacation to Glacier National Park in Montana. Andy and I are avid fly fishermen for trout, and one of the best, but brief, times to catch them is at twilight. This potential to have some great but brief evening fishing is what led us to end up deep in the dark woods.*

*In driving back and forth from our campground we had spotted a place where a waterfall dropped into a deep pool, and it looked like an excellent place to catch a few nice, big trout. Our plan was to catch as many fish as we could before it got too dark, climb up and around the waterfall, and then hike back along the stream to camp. We had a large topographical map of the park, and we knew that the stream went about a mile from our campsite to this spot, and we were pretty experienced hikers. In hindsight, we might have been more cautious, but gripped by fishing fever, we were more concerned with how many fish we might catch than details of our planned hike back to camp.*

*We fished for about 45 minutes, and did not catch even one small fish. Discouraged but undaunted, we set out to climb up and around the waterfall, in our fishing hip boots, complete with 9' long fishing rods and other fishing gear. The climb was much more difficult than it had looked, and when we finally worked our way back to the stream above the waterfall, it was still a very steep cascade of water, not at all suitable for walking back to camp.*

*So back into the woods we went. After 20 minutes or so of extremely difficult thrashing through the brush and over rocks and fallen trees, we found the overhead electric line that supplies power to the camp and followed it back to the stream. But when we got to a clearing at the edge of the stream, even though it was getting quite dark, we could see that the stream was in a gorge several hundred feet below, with no clear path down, or back to camp for that matter.*

*Extremely tired and thirsty, we sat down to ponder our fate. We wisely decided that trying to climb down to the river was just too risky, that one or both of us would probably fall to our death or at least serious injury, especially since we were still in our fishing boots. We also ruled out spending the night holed up in the woods to wait for morning, because in addition to being tired, discouraged and thirsty, we were scared. In a wilderness, there are wild animals, such as huge moose or elk that can trample you and kill you if you disturb them. Even worse, there are also grizzly bears, black bears and mountain lions that might not only kill you but eat you. By process of elimination, that left only the option to head back into the deep, Dark Woods to try to find a very narrow hiking trail that we had hiked on and knew led to camp.*

*Meanwhile, back in camp, Mary Jo was pretty much frantic with worry, and more than a little angry at us – by which I mean me. She had gone to the ranger station, and the ranger said he would start a search party first thing in the morning, but it was too dangerous to go wandering around in the wilderness in the middle of the night, even if we were dumb enough to be doing just that.*

*Back on the edge of the gorge high above the stream, we had no delusions that anyone was going to come rescue us. So I said some silent prayers, told Andy I was pretty sure how to get back to camp, and off we went again. I didn't know if God had heard my prayers – I certainly didn't hear His voice giving me any answers. But he gave us each*

*other for support and comfort, helped keep us from panicking and just rushing headlong into certain disaster, and also provided a clear night with just enough light to see the steep profile of Rising Wolf Mountain, outlined against the starry sky. I knew that we could use that profile to keep on a heading that would eventually intercept the hiking trail rather than going in circles.*

*For more than an hour, we plunged on, trying to keep a heading toward Rising Wolf Mountain, even though it was so dark that we literally couldn't see our hands in front of our faces. It was physically exhausting and painfully slow, but at least it helped keep our minds off what might be out there all around us. At some point, I tripped over an unseen rock or tree root, and fell into a large pile of brush, tearing a hole in my hip boots, adding a few more scratches to my arms and body, and losing my glasses. Finally, we did come upon the hiking trail, and we were so happy and relieved that our ordeal was almost over. Even on the trail, the going was steep and difficult, and took longer than we thought it should. But finally we made it back to camp and, even though it was after midnight, Mary Jo and Dan and Rob were still up, too worried to sleep, and they were as happy and relieved to see us as we were to see them.*

*After a day of mostly resting up, we went for a 17 mile hike, several miles of it along the continental divide several thousand feet above the valleys below, with a spectacular view of some of God's grandest and most scenic creation. On our way along the same trail around the base of Rising Wolf Mountain, we tried to find the place where we had stumbled out of the wilderness and onto that wonderful trail. Even in broad daylight we could only see 50 feet or so into the thick growth, and could never find our path. But Andy and I both knew that having escaped the deep, dark woods after only a brief encounter, we never ever wanted to go back into them again.*

Thank you, Gary. I love Gary's story, because it paints for us a picture of what it feels to really be lost. It usually happens innocently enough. You step off the path, often for good reasons. You follow a lead...a job. You follow a girl or boy. Maybe you're just tired, and you need a break. Maybe you're bored and looking for adventure. Maybe, it's the promise of that Big Fish.

Whatever the reason, you step off the path, and there you find yourself in uncharted territory. Adventure awaits. And it's great, until it's dark and time to go home. And that's when the fear sets in.

Even after Gary and Andy found the trail, it was so dark they couldn't see their hand in front of their face. So why would we call such an experience of being lost, a gift? We don't like being lost. We run from it. We don't step out in faith, because we aren't sure what path may be ahead. For fear of getting lost, we will waste our life away in safety.

Of course, Gary and Andy were never, truly lost. All around them were the signs, pointing the way. It just took some desperation for them to realize that, if they were going to make it out alive, they had to start paying attention to what was around them.

“Stand still,” the poem *Lost* says. “The trees ahead and bushes beside you are not lost.” “Listen. Stand still. The forest knows where you are. You must let it find you.”

And that’s the gift. When I’ve been lost, be it on a trip, in the woods or in the midst of life, I’m forced to pay more careful attention. When I’m lost, I pray more. I meditate longer. I’m quiet and I listen. I don’t have much to on, so I learn to trust myself again, my gut intuitions. I learn to listen for God’s Spirit, and trust the Spirit’s leading.

Lost on the mountain, Gary and Andy didn’t have a map, but they did have experience. They trusted their instincts. They focused on what they did know, and after going through all the options, they realized that the only way out of the Dark Wood was not to avoid it, but to go back in.

And so it is with us. The only way to find the way out of the dark wood is to enter back into it. Don’t run from it. Allow yourself to get lost. Learn the lessons the dark wood have to teach you. Go deep into the dark, deep into your interior self, until you find your life again and find the path that leads home.

Earlier, we read Psalm 42. It’s a desperate song. A deer, thirsty, panting for a stream of water. Day and night, tears for food. Doubt and questioning, “Where is your God?”

The Psalmist is lost, but it’s there, in the midst of being lost, that she remembers the way. She remembers her God, and how God once led her people through the wilderness. From her desperation, she cries out, deep calling to deep--her deep desperation calling out for the deep waters of God. And it’s in that cry, that the song begins to turn from desperation to hope, and the Psalmist begins the journey home.

Of course, at the end of the Psalm, she’s still asking, “Why are you so downcast, my soul?” She hasn’t, yet, found the way out. She’s still lost. But being lost has taught her what she needed to learn most in life: “Hope in God,” she says. That’s the path.

Jesus told his disciples, whoever wants to find their life, will lose it. In other words, getting lost saves our life. Our souls depends on it. In the midst of a safe, comfortable, secure life, we forget how to trust--in ourselves and our own instincts, in those who are traveling with us, and in our God who leads the way.

But when we are lost, we have no choice but to learn to trust again. We see, perhaps for the first time, the small signs of the Holy Spirit all around us. We learn to take each step carefully, with intention. We learn to rely on those who are journeying with us.

And there, as we are lost in the midst of the Dark Wood, we find ourselves again. Our life begins to come together with God's call, and we realize that we've never been more awake and more alive.

May you find the blessing of being lost. And being lost, may you wake up to your life, and see that wherever you may be, you are, as the poet says, Here, and Here is where Jesus always is, walking with you.

As we find our way once again to the table of Christ, let us sing, verse 1 and 2 of *I Want Jesus to Walk with Me*.

---

As we approach the Lord's Table, would you join me in our prayer of confession by reading the words in bold:

### **Prayer of Confession**

One: For plunging ahead without listening to You,

**All: Forgive and restore us, O God.**

One: For not recognizing Your still small voice within us,

**All: Forgive and restore us, O God.**

One: For forgetting to ask for assurance—your greatest gift,

**All: Forgive and restore us, O God.**

### **A Moment of Silence**

### **Words of Assurance**

One: Hear these words of assurance:

Lost is not lost to God.

You are not lost to God.

God is with you, forgiving and restoring you to wholeheartedness

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

And now, let us continue our song, with verse 3.

---

### **Communion:**

We have found our way again to the table of the Lord. Today, we will leave our seats and come forward for communion. I know, some of us prefer communion to be served in our seats, and some of us like to always come forward to the front. That is part of our journey as one church worshipping in one service. Sometimes, it feels like we are lost in our worship. Things are new, different. Maybe we encounter something we do not like, or something we fear.

In this midst of this disorientation, I ask you to pay attention. In the midst of the different and the new, you may discover something new, about your church, about

yourself, and about your God. If we always go down the same path, doing the same things, we may miss out on God's blessings.

So, today, we are going to go on a journey, a journey to the Table of God, where we are reminded again that no matter what path we may be on in life, it always leads us to the Table of God. And after we receive communion at God's table, we will go on another journey, a journey where we will discover our church family.

After you have communion, we ask that you not return to your seat, but form a circle around the Sanctuary. It will take some coordination. You're going to have to pay attention to your surroundings, to the people in front of you. We will need to make sure everyone is included in the circle.

Today, we will learn again that even when we may be lost in life, Jesus is always here with us, preparing us a table, and giving us one another, companions on the journey.

And so we break bread, as Jesus broke bread on the night he was betrayed. This is my body, he said, and even this I give to you.

And we share in this cup, as Jesus shared in the cup with his Disciples. This is my blood, he said, and even this I give to you.

There, in that dark moment, Jesus gave them this table, and reminded them that where ever they were in life, he would always be with them.

These are the gifts of God, given to us in the midst of the dark wood of life. Let us give thanks for these gifts.

### **Prayer - Don Darnell**

*We now invite everyone, as they are able, to come forward to share in communion. When you come forward, please bring your offering with you and leave it in the plates at the front of the aisles.*

*For those unable to come forward, a deacon will come to you and serve you and receive your offering.*

All are welcome at the Lord's table. Let us come!