

Last Sunday, I spoke a little about my struggle at the first church where I served as Associate Pastor. One day, after three and a half years there, a church member made a comment that hit me with such a horrible jolt that I knew in that instant it was time for me to leave. That jolt was what I call God's thundering wake-up call! On my last Sunday, a church member who was a photographer offered me the gift of one of his prints: either a beautiful photograph of colorful sunflowers, (I love sunflowers), or this one here of a path leading into a misty woods. This photograph expressed exactly where I was at that time, moving into an uncertain future. Thanks to the persistence of the Spirit, I discovered the courage to get up out of my stuck place and go deeper into the Dark Wood. It was time to trust in God for healing and for guidance in finding my true path.

For 11 years, this print has been hanging where I can see it, for it is a powerful reminder that fear or grief or failure never has to be the last word. In the midst of uncertainty, we can find unexpected divine love right there reassuring us, challenging and changing us.

But uncertainty as a gift? Hmm... Uncertainty is scary, disruptive, extremely hard because we want to see the path clearly; when things are feeling shaky, we want answers and solutions and guarantees! In our Call to Worship, we heard Abram struggling as he keeps waiting and searching and praying for signs that God's promises will indeed be fulfilled. "A deep and terrifying darkness" falls upon Abram in his sleep. And there, right in the midst of Abram's terror, God gives him a visible sign affirming those promises (*see Call to Worship at end of this sermon).

In his new book, Rev. Eric Elnes writes: "To many, if not most people, uncertainty seems more like a curse than a gift. When we cannot see the endpoint of our journey, or the path ahead is not clearly marked, we get nervous. If we don't have rock-solid assurances that everything will be O.K. and that the path ahead is.. safe, we tend to dig our heels in... Faith is not exempt from uncertainty and struggle... But we can grow in a faith that embraces life as a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved, a faith that accepts uncertainty as a gift." (*Gifts of the Dark Wood*, Chapter 2). Our fear of uncertainty can cause us to make hasty decisions and terrible mistakes in an effort to feel secure.

Rev. Elnes invites us to imagine going to a movie that's totally predictable, a film where the hero knows exactly what to do and always succeeds. For most adults, we prefer films in which people are faced with difficult challenges and are forced to make choices, with the outcome uncertain. Now, I'm not saying that if I were given the opportunity, I wouldn't be tempted by predictable outcomes, continual success and no big challenges in my life. Every sermon I preach would be hailed as outstanding, everyone I ask to volunteer or come to our church would say yes, everyone I visit and pray for would be healed...But, well, if I wouldn't pay to watch such a movie, not even of my own life, why would I want to live this life?

In Psalm 27, we encounter the human struggle between honest faith and real fear, between trust and doubt. The first words express a confident faith: *The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?* The psalmist envisions how God will protect him from his enemies; set safely on a high rock, he will sing and make melody to the Lord with shouts of joy!

Then suddenly fear and doubt erupt: *Hear, Lord, when I cry aloud, answer me; don't cast me off or forsake me! Come, my hearts says, see God's face. Don't hide your face, Lord!*

It seems to be one of the great paradoxes of our lives, that God is right here with us and yet we have to look for God in order to recognize and feel that Holy presence. Looking or listening with our hearts is especially needed in the midst of struggle, when fear and doubt threaten to shut us down. The Spirit reveals that uncertainty can unexpectedly open the way for awakening, giving us the freedom to discover who we are and what path we are to follow.

Author and pastor Eric Elnes writes that 'the great saints of old experienced significant doubts and struggled with imperfections. They didn't, however, become saints by moving from uncertainty to clarity. **They moved, rather, from uncertainty to trust.**' (*Gifts of the Dark Wood*, Chapter 2).

That is why the ending of Psalm 27 is even more beautiful than its beginning. *Teach me your way, O God, and lead me on an even path because of my enemies.* In the midst of terror and uncertainty, the psalmist recognizes his great need for God and moves deeper into the Dark Wood, where he discovers or rediscovers TRUST.

I believe, the psalmist proclaims, *that I shall see the goodness of God in the land of the living.* Then he affirms for himself and for all of us: *Wait for the Lord. Be strong and let your heart take courage. Wait for the Lord.*

Unfortunately, this movement from uncertainty to trust is not what happens to the paralyzed man that Jesus finds begging beside the pool of *Beth-Zay-thuh*, at least not within the story we hear. Maybe you'll recognize some of your story in his. I certainly do!

There are many invalids around this pool, but Jesus first encounters this man, who may have the prime spot for begging. When Jesus asks him if he wants to be healed, he doesn't answer the question directly. Instead, this man complains and makes excuses why he's been there for 38 years. *When I move closer to the pool, others push ahead of me; no one will help me get into the pool at the right time.* For 38 years, not one kind soul? Has he really tried? Or has he become stuck in this place that feels familiar and secure? Apparently he is getting by, he's got a spot that's he can call home, others may even defer to him; his life, it seems, is defined by the limitations of this pool.

And then Jesus comes and heals him, disrupting everything he knows and has become accustomed to in the world. Jesus has taken away his certainty! The man jumps up and leaves

without a word. We get a glimpse of his anger when some priests scold him for carrying his mat on the Sabbath. *It's not my fault; it's the fault of the guy who healed me!*

A short time later, Jesus visits the temple and sees the same man, most likely begging again. *Don't you see, Jesus exclaims, you've been made well! It's time to see the goodness of God in the land of the living, time to follow your own good path!* Instead, the man runs off to tell the priests the name of the one who healed him on the Sabbath---and the persecution of Jesus begins.

Have you ever refused to budge when you know you need to? Ever rejected good advice because it's too hard or scary? So, why does Jesus bother healing this man? Probably for the same reason that the Spirit keeps pushing all of us into places we wouldn't necessarily go ourselves. Jesus wants to free this man from his physical, mental and spiritual paralysis, so that he live fully with all his heart and soul. Oh, it can definitely be a big shock to find our security and certainty suddenly whisked away, like a deck of cards collapsing. Living in the tension between faith and fear, trust and doubt is part of being human. Yes, we may need to "wait for the Lord," but we can depend on the Spirit of God inviting, guiding, loving, challenging, awakening us to the glory of aliveness.

Author John Ortberg writes: "We all think we want certainty. But we don't. What we really want is trust, wisely placed. Trust is better than certainty because it honors the freedom of persons and makes possible growth and intimacy that certainty alone could never produce" (*Gifts of the Dark Wood*, Chapter 2).

This print of a path leading into a misty woods reminds me every day of Jesus' call, of God's call to trust that we are created to be free and fully alive, to thrive in the midst of uncertainty that is unavoidable and even essential for growth and change. I often joke about the fact that after leaving that church position, it took me nine months of struggle in the dark wood (or womb) before I was ready to emerge and step on to a new path, not with certainty, no with a lot of uncertainty, that wondrous gift of the Dark Wood!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

*THE CALL TO WORSHIP (*Responsive*)

Based on Genesis 15

One: God's word came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, I am your shield; your reward shall be great."

ALL: **But Abram said: "O Lord, what will you give me, for I continue childless?"**

One: God said: "I am the One who brought you from Ur to possess this land."

ALL: **But Abram said: "O Lord, God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"**

One: A deep sleep fell upon Abram; a deep, terrifying darkness descended upon him. And God spoke to him again.

ALL: **In the dark, a flaming torch passed through the sacrifices on the altar.**

One: And God made a covenant with Abram.

ALL: **O God of mystery, we gather for worship as your faithful, covenant people. You hear all our questions, and we listen for your call.**

SOURCES

The theme of this sermon is inspired by and based on a book by Rev. Eric Elnes, “Gifts of the Dark Wood,” in particular, Chapter 2, “The Gift of Uncertainty,” and in that chapter, “The Man Who Didn’t Want to be Made Well.” I have a Kindle version of this book, and so the page numbers are not indicated.

Elnes, Eric. *Gifts of the Dark Wood, Seven Blessings for Soulful Skeptics (and Other Wanderers)*. Abingdon Press (Nashville, 2015).