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The Gift of Getting Lost

Part 4 in the series: "Gifts of the Dark Wood"

Pastor Brad

Have you ever taken one of those trips where the airlines take you way out of your way to get to where you're trying to go? I flew from Tucson to Albuquerque one time and they took me through through Las Vegas! Did you know that to take the train from here to Albuquerque you have to go to Chicago and change trains? When Jeremy goes to flagstaff to visit his grandfather, he has to catch the train tin Raton!

Maybe you've noticed, but our journey through life is never a straight shot, even if we are paying attention to those moments when the lightning illuminates our path for a brief moment, or the sun shines down on us in the clearing.

Sometimes it heads in the exact opposite direction. Sometimes we have to change planes to get where we need to go. Sometimes we stay on that plane while everyone else gets off, trusting that eventually we'll get where our ticket promised. Other times we have to get off and rent a car.

Generally, that's fine because I have a ticket or something that tells me when and where I have to change planes or layover. If I can print out some kind of itinerary, all the twists and turns don't cause me any alarm, just annoyance. But God seems to have forgotten my itinerary. At each point in the journey where I have to make another change of direction or transportation, I feel more and more lost.

I can't tell you how many times I've felt lost on my journey. There've been times when I was really lost! My friend Larry would say, "I spent seven years in a quandary, once!" Then we'd laugh and have another whiskey. The way I've lived my life has made 'lost' a very familiar place. At one point, it was a great excuse to pack up and move. One time I sold everything and moved to Hawaii! Pretty sure I wasn't listening to God...

Being lost doesn't scare me so much, anymore, as annoy me, but it gets my attention. I began the process of becoming a Methodist minister 9 years ago. Don't think for second that I don't feel lost and unsure sometimes.

Have you noticed when we're driving and we get lost how we start being much more attentive? We try to turn up our intuition saying things like, "This doesn't feel right" -- and we kind of lean into the steering wheel a bit. Our life path is the same way. Being lost can be a reminder to pay attention; to pray and meditate a little longer; to listen to your gut feelings more closely.

We can even apply our gifts of reason and logic -- although the right direction frequently seems neither reasonable nor logical. Often we talk -- and listen - to friends and

mentors. Eventually, the lightning flashes and the thunder rolls revealing a way forward, confirming our direction. I still don't get it right all the time. I back track. I start over. The point is, even if I'm completely wrong, I'd be even further off track if I didn't feel lost at least some of the time.

We're not alone. There's more to this place – this world – than just sky and land, animals and plants. Strange things happen that seem to add up to more. I've seen it. The great religions were formed and sustained by the people who've discovered this thing and want to know more.

We all have a tendency to focus on the practical aspects of life – good grades, a good job, making enough money to pay rent or the mortgage; we use everything left over to provide comfort and fun for ourselves and for those we love. Anything left goes toward some kind of nest egg or security. That stuff is important, of course, but that's not really what life is all about, is it? We know it's not.

There's a realm of spirit – Jesus called it the Kingdom, or reign, of God. This spirit realm, the kingdom -- on earth as it is in heaven – intersects this physical world. Elnes says it *infuses* the world. It's all here at once, you know? If there's no contact with this Holy Spirit, then all of this – all religion – is a sham. But if there is contact, it's the most important thing you'll ever do.

Synchronicity is a term coined by Carl Jung: “the simultaneous occurrence of events that appear significantly related but have no discernible causal connection.” It's like a coincidence, if you believe in that sort of thing. This strange synchronicity happens when a seeking soul sends a signal to God that it's lost – searching for home like a homing beacon – and the ancients were very aware of it. They were also aware of how difficult it is to interpret the lightning and thunder that connect life's dots to point us in the right direction.

→ *Bruce Almighty* - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_-Y93WVumw

I don't have any doubt that Bruce is serious – here really wants to be found by God. It isn't a lack of asking that keeps Bruce lost, it's a lack in listening. Bruce begs God with his whole heart, but he doesn't listen with his whole heart. He expects the clouds to part and the booming voice of God to echo down from on high somewhere like in the movies or “Touched by an Angel;” where the angel appears out of thin air, backlit with an amber floodlight, speaking gently to the hero with a lilting Irish brogue.

Elnes imagines an old Israelite prophet giving Bruce advice the way Eli gave it to Samuel: “Let God be God, not a movie version of God. If you misread the signals, don't

worry, God's got more; if only you'll watch and listen with as much soulfulness as you've invested in crying out."

Our reading today reminds that God usually acts in much subtler ways than we would hope. Pagers and flashing construction signs aren't really God's thing, right? The narrator wrote the story as if there was an audible voice calling to Samuel. We talked about this last week. Rarely would the ancients associate the 'voice' of God with an actual, audible voice.

Elnes' example is great: it's like when a woman reveals she's interested in a man by glancing at him a certain way, laughing a bit too loud at his stupid jokes, maybe brushing her hair off to the side. When the guy's friend tells the story later he says, "She was practically screaming for him to ask her out! He was clueless!" She wasn't really screaming, but she was. Remember that book "Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus?" It's challenging to hear God's messages sometimes because we speak, hear, and think in different languages. If God called Samuel with an actual audible voice, I'm pretty sure Sam would've known it was God. I wonder how many signs I missed because I was listening for something else. Or not listening at all?

Another thing we can take away from Samuel's story is that the 'voice' came to Samuel when he was alone, in the quiet of the night. People who meditate and pray alone will totally get this. William Blake once said, "There is a moment in each day which Satan cannot find." I don't talk much about Satan; I think he gets more than enough attention. But I think this means that there's a moment every day when we're more likely to notice the lightning and thunder – generally, when we take a few moments to just be quiet.

A third piece we should notice in Samuel's experience is that God didn't quit or give up when Samuel missed the first call – and the second! That's encouraging to me. I don't have to keep wondering all the time if I missed a call from God. God'll call back. More importantly, it's a reminder that if I think I've heard a message from God, it's OK to proceed with caution. What if the voice I heard was one of my own, coming from my own selfishness and desire?

Elnes' metaphor of walking in a Dark Wood is especially appropos in this regard. It's best not to simply charge ahead, willy-nilly. We may be on our path at the moment, but if we just take off running we might run headlong into tree – it is a forest after all – or off a cliff! Author E.L. Doctorow said, "...it's like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way."

Then there's poor Eli. Maybe I shouldn't say "poor" – after all he and his sons have gone against God. Eli's ministry is over. That's the word God gave to Samuel to give to Eli;

and Eli knows it. Remember Samuel was still a child. You know when a child has something they don't want to tell you. Samuel was afraid. Eli encourages him. Spill it, he says, "Don't hide it from me." Eli himself gives Samuel the courage to give him the bad news. I wonder who's more lost Samuel or Eli.

It's encouraging to note that in this story, God's faithfulness surpasses Eli's unfaithfulness. We can be agents of the Spirit's voice even when we haven't done such a great job of following it ourselves. We don't have to be flawless in our faith to be carriers of the Word! Sometimes we don't even know we're doing it! We'll often experience God's call through the most flawed people. Maybe that professor we don't like, or our parents, or an out-of-touch minister. Sometimes it's really difficult to hear the quiet message over the noise of their imperfections.

In the Dark Wood, even those who are lost themselves can be gift-bearers to other seekers in the dark.

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.