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1 Corinthians 13:11-12

“The Gift of Uncertainty”

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1 Corinthians 13:11-12 New Revised Standard Version

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

CONTEMPORARY READING (Brother David Steidl-Rast)

“You are like Rilke’s Swan in his awkward waddling across the ground; the swan doesn’t cure his awkwardness by beating himself on the back, by moving faster, or by trying to organize himself better. He does it by moving toward the elemental water, where he belongs. It is the simple contact with the water that gives him grace and presence. You only have to touch the elemental waters in your own life, and it will transform everything. But you have to let yourself down into those waters from the ground on which you stand, and that can be hard. Particularly if you think you might drown. … Let go of all this effort, and let yourself down, however awkwardly, into the waters.”

We are in the Christian season of Lent. Lent is a 40-day journey that is an intentional time of self-reflection. Lent began in the early days of the Christian Church when people would fast to prepare for Easter, to inspire a deeper faith experience. Here at Greenland Hills this Lent we will explore what it means to be in the Dark Wood moments of our lives. We are not going to talk about just how to get out of it, as if life is good only when we are not there. We are going to explore what it might mean for our lives to recognize the gifts of the Dark Wood. What if times of uncertainty, failure or emptiness are opportunities for spiritual awakening? This Lenten worship series is called “Gifts of the Dark Wood” and is based upon Dr. Eric Elnes’ book of the same name. We are invited to be on a journey into those times in our lives when we feel disillusioned, afraid, or lost, and to explore how God’s presence remains with us, providing opportunities for new growth and transformation.

This week we talk about the gift of uncertainty. Life is not upbeat 24/7 and it isn’t supposed to be. Life is uncertain. We don’t know if that upcoming operation is going to be successful; we don’t know if we will ever find love; we don’t know if we are going to keep our job; we don’t know if there will ever be peace in the Middle East; we don’t know if we really believe what we think we are supposed to believe, we don’t know who the next President will be[[1]](#footnote-2). We just don’t know.

We love certainty, don’t we? I remember the first wedding that I officiated. I was so excited and when they came in for counseling, they did not act like I thought that they were going to act. The groom was very talkative, and the bride was not at all. I started to worry, it was my first wedding and I was convinced that they were going to get a divorce. We want assurances, we want certainty. We don’t like being uncertain.

In this political season, we are hearing lots of promises from candidates. We turn on the news and we hear assurances from economists to have faith in the market. But we aren’t really sure. We don’t know. In the Buddhist faith tradition they call this the desire for permanence. Life is change and we don’t like it! So, we create bubbles of assurance, of guarantee, of permanence, but the bubbles are illusions. And when that bubble pops we are filled with fear and we try to build another bubble. For the Buddhist the solution is to not build a bubble. Accept that life is change, and love what is as it is when it is, conscious that it won’t always be[[2]](#footnote-3). Jesus said “If you cling to your life, you will lose it. If you lose your life, you will save it.” That is impermanence.

I remember when Lee and I were celebrating our 5th dating anniversary and I sort of exploded at him because all of our friends were getting married and we had been dating forever and were we ever going to get married? So, we went ring shopping and I flipped out. The thought of our relationship changing, the idea of marrying was terrifying. And I couldn’t be certain that we would be happy and be married forever, and it took me a few months before I was able to accept the reality of that uncertainty.

To most of us, uncertainty seems more like a curse than a gift. When we can’t see the endpoint of our journey or the path ahead is not clearly marked, we get nervous. We want to be assured that everything will be okay, and that the path ahead is perfectly safe, and when we are uncertain we become immobilized and we dig our heels in[[3]](#footnote-4)

We like to protect ourselves from uncertainty. I remember when I was going to college and spending time with my church friends at Christmas. I had just taken this class called Biblical Studies and I thought it was fascinating. It was the first time that I had ever thought about the idea that Adam and Eve might not be real. And I told my friend Laura and I was so excited, it didn’t bother me at all to think that it might just be a story, but it bothered Laura. It really rocked her faith. If Adam and Eve might not be real, then for her it was a slippery slope to Jesus not being real as well. I assured her that there was lots of historical evidence that Jesus existed and was very real.

We in the church like certainty. We have all of these doctrines and creeds. But ours is a thinking faith, we don’t leave our brains at the door. The Gift of the Dark Wood is the ability to see that uncertainty is a gift. Maturity is when we embrace the uncertainty, and we don’t avoid uncertainty or fight it. In the Apostle Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 13 he talks about how we thought as a child versus how we think as an adult. We move from childishness as the need for certainty to adulthood and maturity as living with uncertainty[[4]](#footnote-5). When you look at the Bible, all of the heroes of the Old and New Testament lived in the midst of great uncertainty[[5]](#footnote-6). Moses, Abraham, King David, Peter, Paul, Jesus, and they were not exempt from uncertainty and struggle. In fact, it is only the villains in the Bible who placed a high value on certainty and the absence of struggle. Think of the serpent in the garden of Eden who was so sure about what Adam and Eve should do. Or Pontius Pilate who washed his hands of Jesus because he did not want to rock the boat. So, how do we live with this uncertainty? 1 Corinthians begins with Paul talking about love, when we don’t know, when we are uncertain, we can love each other[[6]](#footnote-7).

To be honest with each other about our uncertainty, about our vulnerability, about our bruises and scars, addictions, shortcomings, pain, loss, fears, that is when we love one another by opening our heart to another[[7]](#footnote-8). I remember my first church job as a youth minister, there was a youth having a tough time because his parents were going through a divorce. I was able to share with him about my parents’ divorce and our shared vulnerability was a strength not a weakness.

The gift of uncertainty is a gift to be present and real. We don’t know what tomorrow will bring. And just like the story of the swan, we can’t move faster or beat ourselves on the back or organize ourselves better to make life more certain. But we can touch the elemental water and find where we belong. We can find peace in the uncertainty, and not worry about anything until it presents itself to be worried about[[8]](#footnote-9). You say to me, “Peace in the uncertainty? Are you crazy!” And I say, come and take this journey so that we may be able to find this peace together. May we let go of all concerns but the ones we truly face, giving us the courage and power to face them[[9]](#footnote-10). And may we live with our whole hearts embracing one another.

1. http://www.southmin.org/multimedia-archive/a-reflection-quite-obscure/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. http://www.southmin.org/multimedia-archive/a-reflection-quite-obscure/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. p. 25 in “Gifts of the Dark Wood” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. http://www.southmin.org/multimedia-archive/a-reflection-quite-obscure/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Following sentences taken from p. 25-26 in “Gifts of the Dark Wood” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. http://www.southmin.org/multimedia-archive/a-reflection-quite-obscure/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. http://www.southmin.org/multimedia-archive/a-reflection-quite-obscure/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. p. 39 in “Gifts of the Dark Wood” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. p. 40 in “Gifts of the Dark Wood” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)