

# The Gift of Being Thunderstruck

A sermon in the 2016 Lenten worship series

“Gifts from the Dark Wood”

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- 1 Kings 19:8-13a ...And after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”
- Acts 16:11-15 One of those women was Lydia, a Gentile God-worshipper from the city of Thyatira, a dealer in purple cloth. As she listened, the Lord enabled her to embrace Paul’s message.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Often God gives us a brief glimpse of unexpected insight that resonates with us for a long while – insight that points us in a direction we might not have imagined we needed to go.

*“Why doesn’t God ‘speak’ to us today like God spoke to people back in Bible times?”*

Have you ever wondered about that? The Bible’s full of passages proclaiming, “Thus saith the Lord....” Folks like Noah... Moses... Abraham & Sarah... Samuel... David... the stories of those folks feature instances where God “spoke” to them: “*Build an ark... Lead your people to the Promised Land... Become the father of many nations... Pick the youngest son to be king.*” And prophetic leaders like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Habakkuk... their calling to be prophets was based on the assumption that God was telling them what to say to the Israelite people: “*Stop worshiping other gods! Return to me!*”

But nowadays, God “speaking” to people? Not so much. Oh, sure, there are some who claim to have heard the Almighty’s dulcet tones in their ears on a regular basis. Ernest Angley said that God spoke to him to tell him to spend \$24 million of church offerings to buy a Boeing 747 and to avoid some additional costs by registering it in Aruba rather than in the United States.<sup>1</sup> And sure, Pat Robertson claimed in 2004 that God spoke to him to assure him that Mr. Bush would win re-election by a landslide (though 2004’s presidential election turned out to be the tenth-closest in history).<sup>2</sup>

Let me suggest that people today don’t actually “hear” with our ears an actual voice from God. What’s more, people in ancient times didn’t either. But that’s not to say that they didn’t receive inspiration from God, or that we don’t. The ancients used a metaphor to describe the experience of receiving guidance from God. I’ve read that in every ancient Near Eastern culture, the phenomena of lightning and thunder were understood to be instruments that convey the voice of God.<sup>3</sup> For instance, note the references to thunder and lightning in this passage from the biblical book of Job:

<sup>2</sup> Listen, listen to the thunder of his voice  
and the rumbling that comes from his mouth.

<sup>3</sup> Under the whole heaven he lets it loose,  
and his lightning to the corners of the earth.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Rev. Ernest Angley: Modest house, big plane (Boeing 747)” by Bob Dyer, *Akron Beacon Journal*, October 18, 2014, <http://www.ohio.com/special-projects/the-rev-ernest-angley-modest-house-big-plane-boeing-747-1.532859>, accessed 2/22/2016

<sup>2</sup> “As God Told Me” by Andy Rooney, CBS Television’s “60 Minutes” broadcast of February 19, 2004, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/as-god-told-me/>, and “Ten of the Closest Presidential Elections in United States History” By Jackie Hicken, *Deseret News*, Monday, Nov. 5 2012 in <http://www.deseretnews.com/top/1093/10/2004-George-W-Bush-vs-John-Kerry-10-of-the-closest-presidential-elections-in-United-States.html>, accessed 2/22/2016

<sup>3</sup> Eric Elnes, *Gifts of the Dark Wood: seven blessings for soulful skeptics (and other wanderers)*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015, 66.

<sup>4</sup>After it his voice roars;  
 he thunders with his majestic voice  
 and he does not restrain the lightnings when his voice is heard.

<sup>5</sup>God thunders wondrously with his voice;  
 he does great things that we cannot comprehend.<sup>4</sup>

We may have assumed that ancient cultures invented such myths that lightning and thunder are the voice of God to explain where storms come from. (It's sort of like when you were a kid frightened by thunder, and someone tried to comfort you by explaining that thunder was "just the angels bowling.") It's much more likely that ancient peoples created such myths not to explain where storms come from but to explain "where the voice of God comes from, and more important, how it comes to us through intuition."<sup>5</sup>

So in ancient times you didn't think of lightning or thunder as meteorological phenomena associated with certain types of storms. You knew thunder and lightning signaled that your god was "speaking" (so to speak) – flashes of lightning and the crash and rumble of thunder signaled God was providing guidance or warning, pronouncing judgment or offering assurance. The visible was lightning; the audible was thunder; the message was from God. "Lightning and thunder" was a metaphor for divine inspiration and insight or, to use another metaphor, for the "voice" of God.

If you think about it, even today we use expressions rooted in the physical senses to try to capture the experience of brief moments of inspiration or insight. We say things like:

"The lightbulb went on...."  
 "I saw the light...."  
 "That was a flash of brilliance..."  
 "Something resonated deep with me..."  
 "My world was rocked..."  
 "I had a brainstorm..."  
 "I was thunderstruck...."

When God comes to us with guidance, inspiration, encouragement, caution, creativity, we struggle to describe this profound but internal experience. So in our attempt to capture the ineffable experience of divine inspiration and guidance we resort to metaphors of the outside world – referring to things we can see and feel and hear.

During this season of Lent our worship series itself uses a metaphor, suggesting that when our lives seem to feel lost or uncertain, when we feel like we're empty or that we've failed, it's an experience that the Italian poet Dante described as being like walking in a "dark woods." When we're mired in a "dark woods" we are uncomfortable and want to get out of there as quickly as possible. But in a book called "Gifts from the Dark Wood" pastor and author Eric Elnes proposes that there are God-given gifts that we may discover especially in those disorienting, uncomfortable times. One of the gifts God gives when we feel lost in the dark woods is what Elnes calls the gift of being thunderstruck. By that he means we receive a brief glimpse of unexpected insight that resonates with us for a long while – insight that points us in a direction we might not have imagined we needed to go.

When we think of nature's phenomena of lightning and thunder we think of power. A college friend told me that when her house was hit by lightning she watched as a fireball rolled across her bedroom ceiling and dissipated when it smashed into the wall. Someone (I forget who) saw the same thing happen in the hallway to Walker Chapel when lightning struck our church's spire about twenty years ago. I think I've told you about a time when I worked for a summer in St. Louis during college. After work I was hoping to get home before a brewing storm I could see racing in from the west let

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<sup>4</sup> Job 37:2-5 New Revised Standard Version

<sup>5</sup> Elnes, op.cit., 67.

loose. I reached my stop, got off the bus and was taking a shortcut through a vacant lot when thunder and lightning struck simultaneously, seemingly directly overhead, with an explosive sound and concussive force that literally threw me to the ground before I could even realize what had happened.

One reason lightning and thunder is an appropriate metaphor for the voice of God is that most moments of insight we have are brief, momentary, a glimpse. Think of the experience of watching a lightning storm at night. The storm produces that eerie strobe effect of ever-so-briefly illuminating the darkness with that brilliant flash of daytime-like light. For a sliver of a moment you get a glimpse of what's been hidden from view. Although the glimpse is brief like the flash of lightning, the memory of the image lingers in your mind in the same way a thunder crash continues to echo through the clouds and rumble across the landscape.

Sometimes insight or intuition we receive from God through the gift of being thunderstruck *is* as dramatic as the flash and crash of lightning and thunder.

And sometimes the term "thunderstruck" might not be the best description of how we experience God's guidance. In today's Old Testament reading we imagined that famous scene where the prophet Elijah had been challenged, threatened, chased—he was stressed out! An angelic messenger sent Elijah to the middle of nowhere, to Mt. Sinai, where he spent a night in a cave. Then Elijah perceived that God wanted to reassure him. The Bible says that God "spoke" to him, telling him that God would "pass by." As that occurred, a tremendous wind whipped up the soil and splintered rock... but all that commotion wasn't God. When the wind stopped, the earth quaked... but all that tumult wasn't God. When the tremors subsided, wildfire ravaged the place... but all that smoke and fire wasn't God. After the smoke cleared, there was a sound: a sound... of sheer silence. And it was in that silence that Elijah perceived the reassurance of God's dependable presence. God didn't speak through the earthquake, wind and fire. But Elijah glimpsed a flash of the divine in the experience of utter calm and quiet.

Yes, sometimes being "thunderstruck" by an awareness of God's guidance is characterized more by sheer silence than flashing lightning and booming thunder. We heard another example from today's New Testament reading. In the big city of Philippi there was a woman by the name of Lydia. Apparently not married, Lydia was distinctive because she owned her own business and she owned her own home. Lydia was a merchant in the textile trade. In fact, she dealt in high-end fabrics for the well-to-do. We're told that she was a God-fearing woman, though with a Greek name Lydia probably was not of the Jewish faith.

The apostle Paul arrived in Philippi, along with Luke the gospel-writer and Paul's assistants Silas and Timothy. Several days after they had come to this largely pagan town, the Jewish Sabbath day came around. Paul and his companions went to a place down by the Krenides River, outside the city limits, where local authorities permitted the small number of Jews living in that area to gather for prayer. It's unlikely that there was an actual synagogue built there; more likely, it was an isolated place conducive to prayer.<sup>6</sup> Because there was no ritual (since there was no actual synagogue) Paul probably engaged the women in informal conversation. Then he began to share the message of the gospel: that the savior for whom the Jewish people waited was this Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified and was raised to new life.

Now, from what the Bible tells us we cannot know any specifics about Lydia's belief system before this episode. But we are told that she was a woman of faith. We must assume that at various points in her life she had experienced flashes of insight that drew her to embrace faith in God, even if her faith was rather undefined, unspecific. At different times she had caught glimpses that persuaded her that belief in God was something to be valued.

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<sup>6</sup> New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. X: Acts-Romans. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002, 230a.

But in this moment—in hearing the testimony of Paul—in this moment Lydia had a flash of inspiration that resonated in her heart. In Paul’s words she heard a message meant for her. The Bible says, “The Lord opened her mind to pay attention to what Paul was saying.” Although the Bible doesn’t say, “The Lord said to Lydia...,” it’s as though God was speaking to her, telling her that this was the truth she had been seeking. Not only did Lydia embrace it and welcome Paul’s invitation to be baptized into the community of faith, but Lydia in turn extended an invitation to Paul and his companions to be guests in her home while they were in town. On that ordinary Saturday afternoon Lydia was thunderstruck: she received an unexpected insight that resonated with her. That brilliant flash of insight moved Lydia to extend hospitality and support for new brothers in the faith, even though there was no way she could have imagined this result.

Receiving the gift of being thunderstruck is not limited to the faith dimension of our lives. Some of you will remember Reed and Kathie Roig, a couple who were members of this church for many years before they relocated to North Carolina. Like Lydia, Kathie also is into textiles, but as a weaver, not a distributor. When I met them, Reed was the chief financial officer for a high-tech Cleveland firm. One day he came to me and told me that he was going to quit his job and go back to school. I was shocked. He enjoyed a six-figure income and stable employment, even if the work of corporate finance was rather “ho-hum.”

But Reed described what amounted to having been thunderstruck over a period of years. He had been catching glimpses of a different future for himself, and each time he glimpsed that flash of a different future, it echoed within his soul like thunder rumbling in the distance. God was helping Reed come to realize that what he really wanted was to teach. Reed wanted to convey to budding students the satisfaction of accounting: its precision, its usefulness in analysis and prediction, and other joys of accounting that, quite frankly, are lost on me. So he left a job where he was successful and respected but which felt empty for him. Got his master’s, then his doctorate. Now he teaches in Charlotte.

By the gracious but persistent prodding of God we might recognize “that experiences of failure, emptiness, and uncertainty are as critical for finding our way through life as they are unavoidable.” Experiences of life through the “dark wood” are actually clues to our “calling” or “life path.”<sup>7</sup> Sometimes God “speaks” to us through moments of being thunderstruck, where we spy glimpses of something new God wants to do in our lives.

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<sup>7</sup> Elnes, *op.cit.*, 2.