

The Gift of Uncertainty

A sermon in the 2016 Lenten worship series

“Gifts from the Dark Wood”

by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

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- [Psalm 46:1-3, 7](#)
- [1 Corinthians 13:11-12](#)
- [Sermon-in-a-sentence](#): Seeing uncertainty as a gift from God teaches us to let go of all concerns but the ones we truly face.

Jesus healed a guy against his will. Really. It’s a story in the gospel of John (chapter 5). A crowd – some sick, others paralyzed or blind – sat on the porches surrounding a pool called Bethzatha (sometimes Bethesda). They were there because a local legend held that from time to time the surface of the water in the pool would be “troubled,” that is, it would become stirred up and rippled, supposedly because of the action of an angel. The legend contended that after the surface had been angelically stirred up, the first person to enter the pool would be healed of his or her malady. One fellow around that pool had been there for thirty-eight years. You heard me: thirty-eight years.

One day Jesus passed by the pool and sensed that this fellow had been there a long time. Many assume Jesus read the fellow’s mind. But Jesus was an astute observer. He could see the age of the man, the distressed condition of the mat on which the fellow was lying, the threadbare condition of the man’s shirt and tunic and cloak. Jesus could also see that this fellow had the prime location for begging. Anyone coming to the pool for water or simply passing by could not help but see the beggar. That sort of prime spot was not attained by chance; surely this fellow had achieved some sort of seniority over all the other people gathered there.

When Jesus asked the man what seems like a silly question – “Do you want to get well?” – the man didn’t say, “Are you crazy?? Of course I want to be made well.” No, instead the fellow gave the excuse, “I don’t have anyone to lower me into the pool, and by the time I can do it myself, someone has beat me to it.” Think about that: over the course of thirty-eight years, *no one* ever offered to help him? Not a fellow beggar who had become sick and tired of listening to this guy whine every day? Not a neighborhood shopkeeper who came to the pool six times a week to draw water for work? Not a townspeople who passed by the man every day? In thirty-eight years no one had offered?

Or more likely, for thirty-eight years had the man had rebuffed offers of assistance? Why? Perhaps because he was used to the life he lived. He knew his place in life. He knew what to expect. He knew how to get by. He was certain how to function in the life he knew.

But if he were healed – if he was able to go wherever he chose, do whatever he wanted... where would he go? What would he do? Who would he be? The man was paralyzed... not only by muscle and nerve, but by the fear of uncertainty.

We’ve all experienced uncertainty at periods of our lives. Uncertainty, or failure, perhaps, or emptiness.... In his classic work “The Divine Comedy,” the Italian author Dante described such periods as feeling like one has entered a dark woods, a place where one feels lost and disoriented, the path is hidden, the way forward isn’t clear. Dante wrote,

Midway along the journey of our life
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,

for I had wandered off from the straight path.¹

In periods where we're feeling uncertain, or lost, or susceptible to temptation or in other ways feeling uncomfortable, our natural inclination is to try to escape, to get away from the discomfort, to run in any direction hoping to get out of the "dark woods." But the witness of the Bible suggests that God uses those periods when we feel our lives have entered a "dark woods" to reveal a gift that we can't discover any other way. How might we experience uncertainty as a gift from God?

When it comes to living amidst high uncertainty the heroes we encounter in the Old and New Testaments have been there.

- Abraham gathered his entire household and left home for a distant, unknown and foreign land solely because God made a promise to him... uncertainty?
- Moses stood toe-to-toe with the most powerful man in the Egyptian kingdom demanding that the enslaved Hebrew people be freed... for a journey through a wilderness toward a Promised Land they had only heard about... uncertainty?
- The apostle Paul couldn't believe his blind eyes when the voice of Jesus directed him to encourage fledgling Christian believers rather than have them arrested, tortured and killed.
- All his life Peter the disciple had been taught that dedicated Jews like him weren't to eat certain things that non-Jews had no problem eating. But after Jesus was raised from death Peter had a dream where God convinced him that faithfulness was no longer determined by diet but by committing to witness and to serve in the manner of Jesus.
- For that matter, when Jesus himself came to realize that God was calling him to proclaim God's love for all people, Jesus wondered how to go about it. He went off on a solitary retreat in the wilderness for forty days to try to figure it out. And when he realized that he needed to assemble a band of brothers to assist him, time and time again they caused Jesus to wonder if they were sufficiently dedicated and resolute to succeed.

The Bible is filled with examples of people who find their lives have entered into a dark woods. Sometimes people found themselves in the dark woods, feeling disoriented and unsettled, "through an ecstatic experience of profound awe and wonder... or through a life crisis."² You realize that your life is in a dark woods because what's going on is often unclear; next steps are uncertain; the way forward, the way out is usually anything but obvious.

On a practical level, feeling uncertain makes us uncomfortable. We think it's an imbalanced state that seeks balance, an unresolved situation that calls for resolution. But living the life of faith assumes a measure of uncertainty. Indeed, people whose religion is based on a profound need of being absolutely certain tend to be the most frenzied, hysterical, and intolerant. But we recognize that living with mystery, with uncertainty, is part of what it means to have faith.

Earlier we heard familiar words of St. Paul reflecting that he thought and acted like a child when he was a child, but now that he's an adult, he's able to put aside childish ways like the need to have things "black-and-white," absolutely certain. Referring to life now versus eternal life Paul wrote, "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."³ In the phrase "for now we see in a mirror, dimly," that word "dimly" is a translation for the Greek word "anigmati," which is where we get the English word "enigma."

¹ Mark Musa translation at <http://people.virginia.edu/~jdk3t/ComparativeOpenings.htm>

² Eric Elnes, Gifts of the Dark Wood: Seven blessings for soulful skeptics (and other wanderers.) Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015, p. 23

³ 1 Corinthians 13:12 NRSV

Enigma means “mystery.” Enigma is “puzzling, a riddle, ambiguous, difficult to understand or interpret.” What Paul is saying is that a mature faith is one that embraces life as a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved — [a mature faith] accepts uncertainty as a gift, not a curse.⁴

On Thursday Mary and I were at Playhouse Square for the Broadway Series presentation of the touring musical “If/Then.” The play cleverly intertwines the stories of the life a woman lived *and* the life she *might* have lived... if at various points she had made “that” choice instead of “this” one. Eventually the character comes to terms with the uncertainty of *not* knowing what *might* have happened had she made different choices throughout her life, singing at one point

You learn to stand alone at last
So brave and bold and strong and stout
You learn somehow to like the dark
You even love the doubt.⁵

One way we can react to uncertainty is to worry. “What ifs” play in our head, often causing anxiety about possible outcomes. I know I worried the afternoon last year when I got the phone call confirming that our son Eric had been diagnosed with Stage 3 testicular cancer. I was setting up for a Seekers class. Mary called me with the news. Knowing this might be the case, we’d done some research. We knew that his cancer has one of the highest cure rates. But “what ifs” flooded my thoughts even as I spoke on the phone. Sad what ifs. Scary what ifs. Infuriating what ifs. Tragic what ifs. Depressing what ifs. I felt like a zombie sleep-walking my way through leading the class that night. The uncertainty of his situation, his future, our future had me tied up in knots emotionally and intellectually.

The next day, though, I sensed some words that seemed to be whispering in the back of my mind. They were familiar words... words of Jesus. But in that dark woods of high anxiety and uncertainty they glimmered with new meaning, faintly at first, then brighter and clearer:

- “Do not worry about your life....”⁶
- “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”⁷

In times of uncertainty, how often we tend to tie ourselves in knots with the anxiety and worry of “what ifs.” Yes, absolutely there are times when negative outcomes materialize out of things that were uncertain; there are times when the possibilities of harm or hardship come to pass. Faith does not exempt us from uncertainty and struggle any more than faith spared the great figures of the Bible from hardship or doubt.

And yet, how often the “what ifs” that we fill our minds with never come to pass. Still, it’s so common for us to make ourselves “sick over all the horrors that *might* happen long before they ever *could* happen.”⁸

Uncertainty is part of the enigma, the mystery of a life of faith. Uncertainty can be what characterizes our living in those periods when we find ourselves in the “dark woods” where the way forward isn’t clear. But seeing uncertainty as a gift from God “teaches us to let go of all concerns but the ones we truly face, giving us the courage and power to face them.”⁹

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⁴ Elnes, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27

⁵ From “Learn to Live Without” in the Broadway musical “If/Then.” Libretto by Brian Yorkey, theatrical score by Tom Kitt.

⁶ Matt. 6:25 NRSV

⁷ Jn. 14:27 NRSV

⁸ Elnes, *op. cit.*, p. 38

⁹ Elnes, *op. cit.*, p. 40