

The Gift of Emptiness

A sermon in the 2016 Lenten worship series

“Gifts from the Dark Wood”

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Recently I read an essay in which the author proposed that people don’t know how to be bored anymore. In our day and age we are scared of having nothing to do. We’ve grown to fear empty time. Picture this: it’s a Wednesday night. At Avon Lake United Church of Christ where my wife works, Wednesday night is choir rehearsal night. So dinner’s my responsibility. I stop at Pizza Hut to pick up dinner. Now, imagine I arrive at Pizza Hut before my order’s ready. What do you think I do? More often than not I’ll pull out my cellphone to see if anyone has emailed me in the five minutes since I logged off of my computer in my office. I’ll see what my friends have posted recently on Facebook or Twitter, and might end up watching a brief video of cavorting baby goats or a skit from Saturday Night Live. That’s how I might fill those “empty minutes” of waiting.

But in my defense, I’m hardly unique. It seems everybody does it. When I chaperoned the high school band trip to Walt Disney World last year, I was struck by how common it was for people standing in line to be staring at their cellphones as they slowly, slowly inched toward the boarding area. It seemed that almost everybody did it: kids... adults... seniors; friends... siblings... newlyweds...! Some were engrossed in what they were viewing; some actually carried on conversations with each other as they scrolled and strolled.

We certainly seem to fear emptiness, empty moments.

But Jesus showed us another way. Jesus showed us that emptiness is not something to be feared but to be embraced.

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In Lenten worship this year we’re considering how we might discover unexpected gifts from God when we feel our lives have entered a “dark woods.” That’s the term coined by Dante in his classic work “The Divine Comedy.” He said that when in our lives we experience periods of uncertainty, or when we feel like a misfit, or when we see temptation seemingly at every turn, it can feel 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.

In periods where we’re feeling particularly 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 might not discover any other way. Today we consider how emptiness could actually be a gift from God.

For some, it might be hard to imagine that “emptiness” could actually be a gift from God. After all, “One of the strange paradoxes of the gift of emptiness is that it appears [to the average person] as a negation of self-worth and identity.” But for a moment, imagine if we were to stop being filled with anxiety--anxiety about things like...

- success;
- what we look like;
- having it all together.

Imagine if we were to stop being filled with anxiety about...

- what others think of us;
- the future;
- the past.

Imagine being emptied of anxiety about...

- health;
- wealth;
- dying... and living.

Imagine if we no longer relied on being defined by all that baggage we carry around....

Imagine being free of all that... who would we be? What would we be?

We'd be empty... and that's not a bad thing. Being emptied of the worries and anxieties that eat up so much of our thought and energy and time... being emptied would make way, make space for God to mold our hearts and inspire our thoughts.

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If we listen to the Bible expecting an instruction manual offering step-by-step guidance in simple, concrete terms, we're going to be frustrated. For instance, consider the confusing, challenging words of Jesus we heard from Luke's gospel this morning.

Let me set the scene. The disciples had been living and traveling with Jesus for some time now. The honeymoon was over, so to speak – the initial period of cautious politeness had worn off, and they were able to be more open and frank with each other. One day Jesus asked his disciples what others were saying about him, in other words, what the "word on the street" was, or as the musical "Jesus Christ Superstar" phrased it, "What's the buzz? Tell me what's happening?" After the disciples told Jesus that many folks figured he was a prophet of old, perhaps even a reincarnation of the prophet Elijah, Jesus turned the question on them: *What did they think? Who would they say Jesus was?* That's when the bold, outspoken disciple Peter declared, "You are the long-awaited messiah; you are the Son of God."¹

I wonder if the disciples hadn't realized it until Peter said it out loud: that, indeed, their leader was none other than the messiah, God's chosen one who the Jewish people had been seeking and awaiting for centuries. Centuries! Yet there he was, in their midst. Did that awareness suddenly change how they felt? I have to think so. Here's why.

Many of you know that our oldest son Kevin and his wife Katy live in New York City. They commute to work on the subway. From time to time they'll tell us that on the way to or from work they'll notice in their train car some famous musician or a movie or TV star or Broadway actor. Usually dressed casually. Hat pulled down low, probably. Sunglasses, maybe, even in the subway. Naturally, Kevin & Katy don't approach or even acknowledge the person – that's not "cool." Still, spying that celebrity out of the corner of their eye gives their ride home new life, excitement, vibrancy.

Maybe the disciples felt new life, excitement, vibrancy when they heard one of their own, Peter, tell Jesus to his face, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." Maybe they thought, "Hey...! Being seen with Jesus could reap some benefits after all: maybe people will show us a little more respect... maybe we'll get free food or a comped room at an inn... might even impress 'the ladies'...." The disciples might have been imagining how hanging with Jesus could make life a little easier, a bit more comfortable.

¹ Luke 9:18-20 paraphrased

That's when Jesus uttered some confusing, challenging words: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."²

"...Those who lose their life for my sake will save it." What does he mean by that? It occurs to me that Jesus "lost" his life long before he died on the cross. I think Jesus "lost" or surrendered his life when he decided that he wasn't going to allow his life to be filled with concern about whether he was popular or comfortable or conventional. He wasn't going to be consumed by desire for access or wealth or power. He emptied himself of such concerns. As a result of that emptiness, Jesus was open to receiving the Spirit of God. When he "lost" or surrendered worldly concerns, he "saved" or set aside his life to pursue God's will for the world. *"...Those who lose their life for my sake will save it."*

If it was a natural thing – being able to empty yourself of worldly cares – everybody would do it. But our human nature fills us with worldly concerns. "Losing" our lives for the sake of Jesus doesn't come naturally. "Losing" our lives for the sake of Jesus means we let go, we stop clutching at things that have no eternal value. When we elect to "lose" our lives we refuse to allow this or that petty matter to control us. Instead, we surrender our lives to God.

My guess is that God's gift of emptiness rarely occurs all at once. I think we progressively learn to let go just a little bit at a time.

I suppose this is a silly example, but I'll give it anyway. My hair had been thinning for many years. I hadn't resorted to a comb-over of "Trumpian" ("Trump-tastic"?) proportion, but I still was able to brush hair to cover much of my scalp. From my point of view, I will still a hairy beast. I remember the first time someone said to me something about my being bald... and I was shocked! It hurt! *Me? Bald??* Can't he see all the hair I *do* have? Well, it took a few years but eventually I was able to accept the fact that dormant follicles have won the war. I let go of that bit of vanity just as my scalp had let go of my hair. Mostly.

So I've been able to empty myself of *that* vanity about my hair that used to occupy some small measure of my thoughts. "Losing" that trivial preoccupation has freed up a tiny space in my being. Now I have the opportunity to take that new little opening in my soul and repurpose it. It used to be preoccupied with one of my rather petty desires. Now I can surrender it to be used to seek God's desire for my life.

Some of us at some point may find ourselves in the "dark woods" of being consumed with the smothering preoccupations of daily life. In that dark woods the way forward may not be easily seen. But with God's help we can take stock of where we are. We can examine our lives. We can see how well or poorly we do at surrendering our lives to God's will – at "losing our lives for Jesus' sake." And we may discover that God comes to us with a gift: the opportunity to empty our lives of preoccupations so we can more fully embrace God's will.

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² Luke 9:23-24 New Revised Standard Version