

“The Gift of Uncertainty”

February 18, 2018

Gifts of the Dark Wood series – 1st Sunday in Lent

Sometimes I get people who have questions. They ask, and sometimes I have answers. But some of you know that many times, the answer is “I don’t know.” That surprises people, but honestly, there are very few faith things about which I am certain on any given day.

My certainties include these things: God is real and is Creator (but that’s not a scientific certainty; it’s a faith certainty, so I believe there’s plenty of room for science and reason to work with our faith.) Jesus is God Incarnate - God in the flesh - fully human and fully divine. The Holy Spirit is alive and well in our world, and I have those moments that remind me of God’s presence. And one more certainty: God loves me and God loves you - more than we can even imagine.

And let me clear: these certainties don’t take away the uncertainties I have. So if you want answers to all of the questions that you have, I’m not the one to ask because I have just as many questions. I ask “why?” a lot. I asked “why?” this week amid the news of another school shooting.

I have a list of “why?” that I’d like to ask God. My guess is that I probably wouldn’t like the answers or even understand the answers because I’m not God. But I have a list nonetheless. Maybe you do, too.

So how can we possibly look at uncertainty as a gift and a blessing? How can those moments or even seasons of uncertainty help us to grow closer to God and to be transformed? Our theme for this series comes from a book by author Eric Elnes, and his intent is to help us embrace the real moments of life as a part of our faith journey rather than avoid them. The tradition of Christian mystics is one where the dark wood can be a place of incredible transformation where we meet God in a new way.

That doesn’t mean we gloss over the struggle of what it feels like to be in a dark wood - uncertain, disoriented, alone, afraid. But how do we bring them to God? How do we bring all of ourselves to God?

Elnes reminded me, too, that the ones we call “saints” didn’t have it all figured out. They didn’t move from uncertainty to clarity, but they moved to trust. And it’s not that we’re called to move from failure to success in terms of our faith life; we’re called to move to faithfulness.

Perhaps part of the goal is simply to admit that we do struggle. We have moments and even seasons when we’re uncertain. They can be personal - illness, grief, loss, betrayal, aging, moving, marital and relationship struggles, parenting,

and lots more. For me, uncertainty has come when I was learning (and still am learning) to be a parent and when I've moved to a new church and community.

I remember a conversation with a faithful man about his father's life and death. He was worried about his dad's relationship with God - his dad's salvation. His father didn't share his level of commitment to the church or spirituality. It wasn't that he was convinced that his father wasn't faithful, but his death brought about those questions and wonderings. In the end, he said, "I guess we really don't know." For me, it was holy uncertainty that could lead him to deeper trust in God's presence and God's care - and a freedom to know that his dad's life was wrapped in God's love.

Uncertainty can be communal, too, and we certainly feel it in the midst of politics - immigration reform, gun violence, equal rights, and more. We feel it in the church as we seek God's way forward on how we live together as a global church. We feel it in our communities when there's inequity, strife, struggle or economic downturn.

Being uncertain can feel like we're on shaky ground, unsecure footing. If you've watched any of the Olympics, you've seen incredible examples of uncertainty. If you're like me, your heart beats a little faster when you're watching. This week, I watched the first two skiers on the Men's Super G ski out of the course. And it's no wonder - they don't get to see the course before they make the run!

Uncertainty is uncomfortable, especially when we might feel like we should be more certain because we claim faith in God. We are Christians - *aren't we certain of everything?* Friends, there are moments when "*The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.*" doesn't offer what we need. **SLIDE:** Voltaire said, "Uncertainty in an uncomfortable position. But certainty is an absurd one."

Paul's words to the early Christians in Corinth aren't just for weddings, but they also remind us that certainty isn't necessarily a part of a maturing faith. Yes, we grow in our trust in God, but we're not moving toward "this or that" thinking. We're actually moving away from it and embracing the mystery of God. The word "dimly" is *anigmati* in Greek (think enigma - mystery).

Though we might feel like certainty is a great thing, it really doesn't serve us well in faith or relationships. We need to grow in trust, not certainty, to allow for transformation. **SLIDE:** "It is how we embrace the uncertainty in our lives that leads to the great transformation of our souls." Brandon A. Trean

We all know the uncertainty, and we feel it, but there's power in standing before God and each other and offering the uncertainties of our lives. It stands against so much of religious culture that seems to call for certainty. And yet we know that uncertainty is at the root of our faith.

Eric Elnes uses the example of Peter, who struggled to keep his eyes on Jesus when he was called onto the water, but then called to be a leader in the church, to remind us that uncertainty can create deeper trust in God in us. Elnes says, "Sometimes... you need to step away from the security of your boat onto the stormy sea of your own awakening to discover that a sinking stone is a far firmer foundation than you ever have imagined."

So we join people over the centuries to move through Lent - these 40 days (not counting Sundays) to explore *all* the places where we find ourselves—not just the seemingly stable and "blessed" places, but even the places when we feel like we're on very shaky ground. These are the places where Jesus says "Do not be afraid, it's me calling you out here to find the depths of your very soul. And if you begin to fall, I'll reach out a hand."

Faith is not certainty; it's being certain of what we don't see. That's a strange tension to live in. Having faith in Jesus isn't a guarantee of certainty or clarity at every turn. In fact, faith means that we live with a lot of uncertainty. We can look at our ancestors in Holy Scripture. **SLIDE:** "Uncertainty is life's way of saying that there are only a few things you can control." I like control.

We can look at the people we know - the saints who have gone before us - and know that faith doesn't save us from hardship or struggle. Faith doesn't save us from anything, but it does provide us with a foundation on which to stand. I thought of that this week when I offered Holy Communion to someone who was nearing the end of this earthly life and carried the certainty of God's love and eternal life.

I offer all this after a week when we've started this journey called Lent - a time of claiming the uncertainty of our mortal lives and walking with Jesus toward the cross. I say all this after a week when we've witnessed another act of violence in a school that has claimed lives.

The image of two weeping women - one of them marked with a cross of ashes is etched in my mind from this week. A woman who may have heard the words "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return" found herself embracing someone as they waited for this nightmare to end, except it didn't end.

And I've struggled - maybe you have, too. I don't have complete answers, but I hope and pray that we can all agree that we don't want this to happen. Because with all of the uncertainty that we carry about a lot of things, I'm very certain of one thing - God does not want this to happen. God grieves it. God weeps at the loss of life. God cries at our culture that perpetuates violence and use of weapons as a way to solve problems.

God desires that we care for one another well, and quality, accessible mental health care is a part of that. God calls us to think about how we relate to

each other as human beings - not equating strength with violence or glorifying violence, but looking at one another as someone's child, brother or sister, friend. God calls us to reach out to each other in love that we've been shown from Jesus.

And I truly believe that God weeps when we who are followers of the Prince of Peace do nothing. So, I'm preaching to myself today. What will we do? How will the anger and uncertainty we have become prayer and how will our prayers turn into meaningful action?

No matter where we stand on issues of gun control or healthcare reform and other issues (because I'm very aware that we're not all in the same place), how will we hold onto the truth that God does not want this for us, and how will we seek God's Kingdom?

So, I've struggled with uncertainty. I've prayed and thought, and I looked again at what our Social Principles say offer about gun violence: "In the name of Christ, who came "and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near" (Ephesians 2:17) and challenged all his disciples to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9), we call upon the church to affirm its faith through vigorous efforts to curb and eliminate gun violence."

So I still have questions. I'm uncertain. But I pray for myself and for all of us that we'd make this journey and embrace where we are. We can be certain: Jesus will offer a hand and keep walking with us.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE - *Come and Rest*