

“The Gift of Being Thunderstruck”

March 4, 2018

Gifts of the Dark Wood series – 3rd Sunday in Lent – Holy Communion

Some of you know that camping isn't my favorite thing. I'm not talking about camping in the comfort of a camper. I mean tent camping, where the slightest bit of precipitation can make for a very challenging experience. Wet tents and wet clothes are not something I enjoy.

Glenn Chilson shared one of his experiences of camping with Boy Scouts where a storm came and really challenged the Scouts to use the skills they had learned. Many of the Scouts didn't see it as a great experience, but the leaders saw how the kids had really learned and used their skills.

So this idea of *being thunderstruck* may move us in different directions. I thought of being outside in a storm. If you're of a certain age, you might be thinking of an AC/DC song from the early 1990's when I say "thunderstruck." If you're younger than that, you might be thinking of a more recent song "Thunder" by Imagine Dragons. I've looked at the lyrics of both songs, and trust me, what we're talking today - *being thunderstruck* - is different than what the songs convey.

Maybe you have a camping experience of being caught in a storm or a bad storm that came. I thought of a time when we lived in Cedar Springs. We were actually gone on vacation. A daytime storm came, and when it seemed like it had passed, lightning literally struck a large tree in our backyard, blowing it apart in a thousand pieces that flew even into the neighbors' yards. There was damage to the garage, and it was strong enough to shake the parsonage and knock down pictures off the wall inside. Our neighbors were on the local news showing our yard to a reporter. I was actually grateful we weren't home for the excitement!

Maybe you're someone who enjoys storms and is fascinated by them. I am - at least when I'm not stuck in one! It seems that people have been fascinated by thunder and lightning since the beginning. The ancients used these natural phenomena to describe the way in which God speaks. We heard it in Job today. And we continue to use that image of "seeing the light" with a sense of insight, understanding, or epiphany when it comes to our relationship with God. We live differently because of the experience.

I have a love/hate relationship with thunder and lightning. I've seen the power of it up close. It's fascinating for sure, but those loud claps can make me jump out of my seat! Thunder can be heard and felt. We see the flash before we hear the thunder

because of how fast light travels, but it's really an amazing thing to witness. It's a full sensory experience.

Thunder can rattle the sturdiest home. And lightning - an average bolt of lightning striking from cloud to ground can contain one billion joules of energy. That's enough to power a 60-watt lightbulb for six months plus a forgotten open door refrigerator for a day.

I remember as a kid having my own rationale for the power of thunder and lightning. God was bowling, and a particularly loud thunder clap or bright bolt of lightning was surely God getting a strike. But it's interesting to consider how we understand and describe God speaking to us today.

We don't hear as much of a sense of being thunderstruck anymore. Are we not so moved anymore or aware of God's voice? I wonder if, in the fullness or noisiness of the world, we've drowned it out. Perhaps we've lost or forgotten the metaphor that Eric Elnes reminds us of: "the voice of the divine often comes through momentary flashes of intuition or awareness that trigger sensations that reverberate within us like rolling thunder."

I've had many conversations with people wondering if God speaks to us audibly or others describing how they've felt God speaking to them in powerful ways. Maybe you have your own. Part of the power of "God moments" that we share each week is hearing many different ways that God speaks to us and reminds us of God's presence. But the truth is - it takes some attention on our part.

It would seem that these "God moments" would be wonderful and welcome, but sometimes they scare us. They can be overwhelming to our senses. I've shared with you before a moment of feeling completely in awe of God's creation riding on an airboat looking for alligators in Florida. It was a strange thing - all of sudden to be overtaken by a sense of reverence and wonder at water and the sky.

It made me wonder why those moments don't happen more often. Perhaps it's because I don't always make room for them. I don't always think, "How will God show up today?" How many of us prepare for worship that way? Do we get up every day and get ready to see God at work? But maybe if I was looking or anticipating it, I'd see it more clearly.

We may struggle to claim these moments because we're afraid of what others will think. Will they think I'm strange? Will they believe me? And sometimes we don't claim them as anything more than coincidence or luck. But what if we held them as sacred moments of connection with God? What if we were even more expectant for them?

Perhaps you've had a moment or two in your life when God's presence and voice was clear. I've had a few - sometimes directly affirming God's call in my life, and sometimes pointing me in a new direction or reminding me of God's will and way in the midst of uncertainty or tension.

We know that our faith ancestors had them - Moses and the burning bush, Elijah listening for God's "still, small voice," Isaiah's experience of worship in the Temple and hearing "Holy, holy holy!," Mary hearing God's invitation to bear the Christ child, the two men walking to Emmaus and meeting the risen Jesus on the way, and Saul being knocked down on the Damascus Road, beginning his transformation from a persecutor of Christians to a bold Christ-follower.

But I want to be clear that these moments of being thunderstruck don't necessarily have to knock us down on our duff. They don't have to be a specific conversion experience or a moment that we can point to when everything fell into place. Sometimes they can be a word received at the right time or a sense of an answer that we've waited for. Probably for most of us, they are many "small" moments that have buoyed our faith along. Being thunderstruck is a different gift that we encounter in the dark wood, different than uncertainty or emptiness. But we can claim it as a gift of connection to God and an experience of God. Even though it might overwhelm us, a moment of insight and understanding carries us along on the journey to be transformed and to live life to its fullest.

I invite us to think about those moments today as we come to the table that Christ invites us to. When have you felt thunderstruck? Maybe it was a time when God's presence was particularly real to you, a time when you had to make an important decision and felt God's help, a moment when you felt awe at the beauty around you, or a time when you experienced peace and joy.

I thought of a time when I was serving Communion. A young man came up as he did every time, but when he took the bread from my hand, he said, "Thank you." I don't know why it struck me so powerfully, but I felt like he was really saying thanks to God for the gift of grace. It was a thunderstruck moment for me about the meaning of this sacrament – this holy meal.

Even if it was just for a moment, give thanks for that experience and remember how God is moving in your life as you come to receive God's grace at the table.

MOVE INTO GREAT THANKSGIVING