

United Methodist Church of Monroe
Monroe, CT
March 12, 2017
10:00 a.m. Service
2nd Sunday in Lent

“The Gift of Emptiness”

Text: Mark 15: 22-38 (CEB)

No, you are not mistaken, we are not in a time warp, it isn't Good Friday already. But yes, that was the story of Jesus' crucifixion. The verse I am focusing on today is:

From noon until three in the afternoon the whole earth was dark. At three, Jesus cried out with a loud shout, “Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani,” which means, “My God, my God, why have you left me?”

But first, emptiness...Last week uncertainty was the gift, today it is emptiness. We don't always think of emptiness as a gift. But I can think of times when emptiness has been a gift, like after all my family left after Christmas...But somehow I don't think that is the type of emptiness that Elnes was contemplating when he wrote about it in his book *Gifts of the Dark Wood*.

Many of you know that my favorite place on Earth is upstate New York where we have a summer cottage. When I was a kid my friends and I used to go up through the woods and although there was a path, it wasn't all that straight or well cleared, because it was made only by our foot traffic. Usually the first time we'd go each summer it was quite treacherous, we'd end up with scratches from the overgrown path or downed trees. But the battle was always worth it because it would lead to a beautiful clearing and a lovely waterfall. On a sunny day it was always amazing when we would emerge; the sun our face.

That clearing is the type of emptiness that Elnes is referring too. As he says, this “place is beyond notions of wrongdoing and rightdoing...it's a place where our fractured humanity finds its most intimate connection to divinity and an astonishing fullness is discovered without our deepest emptiness” (page 42). That emptiness can hit us full in the face when we realize how big our universe is and how small we are. And then, if we begin to count off all the faults we have we can really begin to feel empty.

I remember being in that clearing once alone as a teenager and realizing just how insignificant I was. I was looking at all the trees that surrounded the clearing, all the leaves on the trees, I was hearing the water tumble down, I looked at all the wildflowers underfoot. “Who am I in the scheme of life?” I pondered. I'll be gone in less than eighty years I thought but some of these trees have already been here for a hundred and will be here for a hundred more after I'm gone. Then I began to contemplate all the things that I wasn't happy with in my life—it was during that awkward teenager time when you feel like you never measure up to anyone else.

But then something strange happened, and you know, I had forgotten all about that experience until I began to write this sermon. What happened was I looked around again and I realized that God made all those beautiful trees and leaves and wildflowers and how God made that clearing right there by the waterfall. Then I realized that just like God created all those beautiful things God created me too. Unfortunately my faith wasn't to the point it is now where I could get over my faults, well, actually I don't think my faith is there yet. But that is what the gift of emptiness offers us. It offers the opportunity to clear ourselves, not of our faults, but of our fear of them.

Jesus says, in Luke 17:33 *"Whoever tries to preserve their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life will preserve it."* That is the emptiness we are striving for, in which we empty ourselves of all the negativity, of all the worry, of all the judgement. We empty ourselves of everything that is not of God. Much easier said than done.

Elnes suggests that what Jesus was referring to about losing your life and then preserving it was moving from a place of fear to flow. That flow is when "you stop obsessing over your need to survive or be right or be perfect and discover that you have been given distinctive gifts and abilities" (page 46). I was very close to that that day in the clearing. Jesus offers that if we do in fact empty ourselves of all that we will be given something amazing—life. That emptiness will be filled with love, with compassion, with wisdom and knowledge. And then, what will happen is that it will naturally flow out of us. Like that waterfall I was so fond to sit by, once we are filled by Christ we overflow. It just spills out of us and can't help but touch others in a positive way.

If it was a mild winter and a dry spring the waterfall was sometimes just a trickle. Not enough melted snow or April showers to feed it. It was empty, but not in a good way. I think that might happen to us too. We can become dry and empty when we are not connected to our water source. In John chapter 4 Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well that he is the Living Water. When we drink of that water we are never thirsty. Fear definitely wins over flow when we are disconnected.

That is what happened to Christ on the cross. He felt his fullness of humanity in the passage we read from Mark. He felt empty, he felt like God had left him. So, even Jesus, who proclaimed to be the Living Water felt disconnected from God. *"My God, my God, why have you left me?"* Jesus felt utterly empty, he was in pain, he was humiliated, he was at about the lowest point that a human could be. In his humanness he felt like God had left him. How many of you have felt that? We talked some about that during our love series. It's an awful feeling.

But the good news is that is not the end of the story, because the cross is empty. Jesus died and then God found him! Jesus rose from the dead and because of that we too are given life. God found Jesus in the emptiness. I will end with this quote from the Elnes, *"If you yearn to find God, get empty! Let God find you"* (page 61).

I invite you to take some time to reflect; think about the things that fill you up—like ego, fear of being unloved, worry of not measuring up, and ask the Living Water to empty you so that you might live. Imagine that Living Water just flowing over you, clearing the way. Feel the water in your very being, replenishing you, re-energizing you, opening you up to new life and new possibilities.

Amen.