

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on March 10, 2024.**

LIFTED UP

<Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; John 3:14-21>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

The middle of the story is often the “dark forest” section of the story. It’s the place in the story when the main characters are bogged down in the midst of a difficult and trying situation, where the forward progress toward the goal is in question, and they must either push ahead and persevere or succumb to the elements of the situation and give up. It’s often bleary and dark, and sometimes hard to read through or watch; it’s most often the point where a story gets set aside.

In J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, the dark forest is almost literal: Bilbo and the dwarves are in the midst of Mirkwood Forest. The tone for Mirkwood is set from the outset, described by the author thusly: “The entrance to the path was like a sort of arch leading into a gloomy tunnel made by two great trees that leant together, too old and strangled with ivy and hung with lichen to bear more than a few blackened leaves. The path itself was narrow and wound in and out among the trunks. Soon the light at the gate was like a little bright hole far behind, and the quiet was so deep that their feet seemed to thump along while all the trees leaned over them and listened.” Mirkwood is a gloomy and foreboding place, sapping energy and purpose, seeming to suffocate our main characters.

It is well understood that, in writing *The Hobbit*, and then expanding the story to *The Lord of The Rings* trilogy, J.R.R. Tolkien was, in part, working through his own experiences of World War I. Particularly with *The Hobbit*, and the scenes of Bilbo and the dwarves lost and confused in the sunless gloom, we can understand how Tolkien must have felt lost and caught up in darkness, without direction or guidance there in the trenches of France. With such an understanding of the realities Tolkien was wrestling with, it is no surprise then that the encounter described in the Mirkwood Forest would have the ability to represent the common struggle we all have with difficult questions and despairing situations.

Daily headlines of war and atrocity. Extreme divisiveness present within our communities, often punctuated with maligning speech. A mother dealing with the reality that her 7 year old daughter was buried yesterday. The dark situations of the world certainly could be inferred in the lengthening shadows of Mirkwood Forest.

I do not think it is mere coincidence or happenstance that, as we move through the very heart and depth of the season of Lent, we have the reading of John’s gospel wherein Nicodemus seeks out Jesus in the middle of the night.

The case can easily be made that nighttime is the time of difficult questions and wrestling with complicated issues. Quite often, when we think of a person engaged with such questions, it is within the middle of the night; we consider the things that keep us up, that keep us from sleep, that keep us tossing and turning as our minds try to work through them to the other side. And Nicodemus clearly has questions.

We enter this encounter in the midst of it. By this point in the reading the questions are already voiced, and we are beginning to hear more of the response. But we would do ourselves a disservice if we gloss over the reality that Nicodemus approaches Jesus in the night. With questions he can take to no one else, and fearful of the implications of being seen, wrestling with a seemingly unmanageable situation, Nicodemus comes to Jesus. He is in his own dark forest. He is caught in the wilderness wandering.

And understandably so. His questions are complex and, to use one informal term, “sticky.” Who is Jesus? What is he about? What does all this mean? And before Nicodemus can get much further than, “we know you are a teacher sent from God” - affirming that there is a recognized authority from which to begin - Jesus begins teaching about being “born from above.” We often translate this as “born again,” but could likewise be referred to as born anew or born of the Spirit. Regardless, it is an answer which raises more questions, and leads to more confusion about how to move forward, how to proceed, how to make sense and continue along the path of growth and development.

And to try and elucidate for Nicodemus just how to continue moving forward in faith through these questions and uncertainties that might bog us down, Jesus refers to the people of God in the wilderness.

By now, any story of the people of Israel in the wilderness should seem somewhat...familiar. After all, they’ve begun to fall into a pattern: they travel in the wilderness for a while, they complain to Moses and Aaron about how bad things are, they doubt God’s providence and care. Then, God intercedes, the people are satisfied, and they continue in their journey. Until time passes and they complain and doubt again. Wash, rinse, repeat.

This time, however, the old pattern will not suffice. God is seemingly vexed by their constant doubting and complaining, of not learning the lesson, that God sends venomous snakes among the people to bite them. Literally translated, “fiery snakes.” And many people die. So now, the people are no longer complaining about whether God is leading them, they’re complaining about the snakes that have come among them. Again, Moses intercedes, and again, God provides.

But not in the previously understood way.

An early elementary teacher was having difficulty gaining the attention of the classroom. No matter what, there always seemed to be the distraction of some students not hearing the teacher’s voice due to other activities in the room, and so instructions were missed and the teacher was frustrated. One day, the teacher came up with a new way to get the class’s attention. In an elevated, but not shouting voice, the teacher called out, “1-2-3, eyes on me.”

And the activities of the room stopped. The attention of all the students was now firmly and completely on the teacher. A new reality had taken shape.

God needed to finally gain the full and undistracted attention of the people there in the wilderness. As the plague of snakes continued, rather than remove them and their threat all-together - as if they had never truly existed - God told Moses to create a bronze snake and lift it up on a pole. Then, any Israelite who was bitten need only look to the image of the snake, and they would be healed.

More so, they would be reminded of who was truly leading them. Who was providing for them. Of who they were and, even more importantly, *whose* they were. From that time, the only way through their trial in the wilderness was...through; they had to go through it to get to the other side.

Jesus uses this example for Nicodemus to offer an example of how the old patterns of God and the people being in relationship were about to change. But first, Nicodemus needed to let go of his own understandings, let go of the questions on which he was hung up, and open himself to what was to come. Whatever questions he had carried with him to Jesus needed to be set aside, so that he might then, as Jesus put it, be “born from above.” Unfortunately, he then got hung up on that phrase, and Jesus had to reframe the conversation. Nicodemus was looking for a one-time fix, of a clear and specific answer, but Jesus was not and is not a “one-time fix.” Jesus was going to bring about life, dynamic and vibrant, ongoing. A new thing.

The people of Israel, there in the wilderness, needed to suspend their doubts, fears, and insecurities, to set aside their complaining, in order to receive from God what was to come and be led through their moment in the “dark forest.” When the people prayed to God for deliverance, this time God does not remove the danger, but promises a remedy to look to when danger threatens. Ongoing witness, ongoing solution...one time fixes get forgotten, but a dynamic, ongoing reality remains in one’s mind.

And as we now move to the second half of Lent, with our own spiritual wandering and growth, we likewise are called upon to set aside - even just temporarily - anything on which we get hung up on in order to redirect our gaze and, thus, the direction of our steps.

Because when we’re in the dark forest moments of our lives, when we’re bogged down and uncertain, we are tempted to latch on to an easy and quick solution out. But in truth, the only way out is through; we must go through the trial, through the uncertainty, to find the way. But there is hope. The hope, to both the people of God in the wilderness and to Nicodemus in the night, the hope even for us in the full depth of Lent, is to look up.

As theologian N.T. Wright puts it, “If you want to know who God is, look at Jesus. If you want to know what it means to be human, look at Jesus. If you want to know what love is, look at Jesus. If you want to know what grief is, look at Jesus. And go on looking until you’re not just a spectator, but you’re actually part of the drama which has him as the central character.”

There in Mirkwood Forest, Bilbo climbed a tree and looked up, and he saw the way forward and through. In the wilderness, the people of God, when bitten by a snake, would look up and see the deliverance God had provided, healing them and leading them through. Jesus, in response the questions asked and those unasked, told Nicodemus of the life that was to come to all the world as the Son of Man would be lifted up for all to see. We, today, are still called and invited to look up, and to be led forward.

1-2-3, eyes on God. Amen.