

Home Church Package for Lent 2: Feb 28, 2021

Materials curated/prepared by Rev. Jenn Swanson

Introduction

This Lent we are exploring the Gifts of the Dark Wood, seven blessings for soulful skeptics and other wanderers. The series is based on the book of the same name by Eric Elnes. If you are reading the book along with the series, great. If not, don't worry, each worship stands on its own.

This worship series is about "seeing life through new eyes, recognizing that difficult experiences are as critical for finding our way through life as they are unavoidable. We will see how experiences of life through the "dark wood" are actually clues to our "calling" or "life path." How can the struggles of life be the seedbed of spiritual awakening to the fullness of life?"

We take our next step on our journey through the Dark Wood. We begin to wonder about the times we feel empty inside. We get curious about the times when we fear that there is nothing there of worth.

What happens when we let go of our fears about our own worthiness?

We can trust that if we want to be filled – to find God – we need to allow some empty space. God will find us!

Opening Prayer

Trusted Love, enter our lives
and open us to the gifts
residing deep within the Holy Darkness
of our lives.
Help us to empty ourselves
with every breath.
Make room in us
so that you might take up residence
in the very marrow of our bones.
In your many holy names, we pray. Amen.

Let us continue in prayer:

For filling up our lives with little room for You
Forgive and restore us, O God.
For worry that outlasts trust
Forgive and restore us, O God.
For choosing being right over being in relationship
Forgive and restore us, O God.

...take a moment now for your own silent prayers...

Hear these words of assurance:

God chooses relationship over perfection.
Who you are is "loved by God."
God is with you, forgiving and restoring you to wholeheartedness.
Thanks be to God! Amen!

Scripture Reading: Mark 8:34-36 (NRSV)

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, Jesus said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever would save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a person to gain the whole world and forfeit their soul?"

Contemporary reading

"Like a wild animal, soul is tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive in hard places. I learned about these qualities during my bouts with depression. In that deadly darkness, the faculties I had always depended on collapsed. My intellect was useless; my emotions were dead; my will was impotent; my ego was shattered. But from time to time, deep in the thickets of my inner wilderness, I could sense the presence of something that knew how to stay alive even when the rest of me wanted to die. That something was my tough and tenacious soul."

- Parker Palmer (57)

Reflecting on the Readings

by Rev Jennifer Swanson

These readings access a depth that we don't often speak about...that dark place where all we can do is put one foot in front of the other and trust that grace will prevail. This is a difficult, terrible place to be in but then in hindsight, it is a place of growth and transformation too. God doesn't intentionally put us in these places; life happens. Biology goes bad. Accidents happen. People struggle in ways that often we don't even know about. If you have ever been in the Dark Wood, you know this place. What kept you going when you were in the Dark Wood? What insights or graces did you become aware of during or after that time?

None of us wants to be in this place of uncertainty and emptiness...and yet it is from these challenging and often painful times that new life begins.

And all the while, whether we notice or not, God is with us there, loving us beyond our wildest imaginations...loving us when even we cannot. We are not alone, not ever.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Contemporary Lord's Prayer

Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,

Source of all that is and that shall be,

Father and Mother of us all,

Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!

The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!

Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!

Your commonwealth of peace and freedom

sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.

In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.

In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.

From trials too great to endure, spare us.

From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love,

Now and for ever. Amen

Benediction

You have a place in this world...
May the Spirit of the Living God,
made known to us in life's Dark Wood:
Go before you to show you the way;
Go above you to watch over you;
Go behind you to push you into places you may not necessarily go yourself;
Go beneath you to uphold and uplift you;
Go beside you as your constant companion;
...And dwell within you to remind you that you are surely not alone,
And that you are loved—loved beyond your wildest imagination.
And may the fire of God's blessing burn brightly upon you, and within you,
Now and always.
Amen.