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Into the Woods from Matthew 4:1-11
 March 5, 2017

Will you pray with me: God, be with us as we journey into the woods. I pray that this morning the meditations of our hearts and the words I dare speak from this pulpit will be true, honest, and good to your hearing, our God, who leads us through the woods and wilderness of our hearts. Amen.

“Once upon a time, in a far off kingdom, there lay a small village at the edge of the woods...

Into the woods,
 Without delay,
 But careful not
 To lose the way.
 Into the woods,
 Who knows what may
 Be lurking on the journey?
 Into the woods
 To get the thing
 That makes it worth
 The journeying.
 into the woods.”ⁱ

These poetic words come to us from the prologue of the play, *Into the Woods*, which is a musical that combined many of the historic Brothers Grim, Disney, and other Fairy Tales into one epic story with an equally and epically complicated plot. In the end, this story of fairy tales inverts the traditional understanding of black and white good and bad. It shows how that reading of these classic stories is too easy. There are no easy categories of people anymore in a globalized world. *Even our Fairy Tales have to change and make new meaning. It isn't just the Bible with this issue.* *Into the Woods* demonstrates that temptation, passion, wishing for something, death, and the idea of, “happily ever after,” is all much more complicated than they initially appear or that we would like to think. The mores, ethics lessons, and morals of the story are really, in the end of this story of going “*Into the Woods*,” revealed to be as clear as... mud.

Today, likewise, we begin our own journey with Jesus into the woods of the wilderness of Lent. Into the woods without delay... be careful not to lose the way. Like the play, *Into the Woods*, we will see that the idea of Lent and the lessons we are to learn are more complicated than the tales of old and the norms we have accepted and have been led to believe. **Lent is about more than giving stuff up (chocolate, candy, cursing) and proving our worthiness for Easter to God, for it is about journeying into the deepest, thickest, most complicated Fairy Tale Land of all... our own hearts, our own real and true selves, and our own needs. Progressive Churches love to talk in platitudes about finding our “authentic selves,” but we forget to mention that is a very risky business. There are more villains and heroes within each of us than in all of the fairy**

tales ever written down. Lent is about confessing a deeper truth not to each other or even necessarily to God. It is, in my view after studying today's Scripture, about being honest with ourselves about our own inner woods, needs, and growing edges for the year to come.

What is the emotional thicket or briar patch or castle tower (Rapunzel) that you need to let go of or face with truth and honesty this year? Is there someone in your life keeping you captive through manipulation or emotional abuse in a tower who you need to let go of or escape from? Let us venture now, into the woods of our hearts. This is a harrowing journey, brothers and sisters, but together with strength and community we can emerge with new insight and truth on the other side of Lent. Remember that Hansel and Gretel never turned on each other even as they were lost and hopeless. This is no small miracle for siblings. Who knows what may be lurking on the journey of self-discovery?

There is another way to interpret Matthew Chapter 4, verse 1; "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." If we look at the actual original Greek of the Gospel of Matthew, the same verse can be interpreted as reading, "Then Jesus was sent forth by the Holy Spirit of God into the woods, into the wilderness, into the solitude, into the loneliness (sent out into the uninhabited/ desolate/ forlorn places of his own soul) to prove himself to himself, to be examined, to be tested by the adversary alone.

Now here is the interesting thing. In the same way that we assume that Cinderella lives happily ever after once she meets her prince or that Jack is the good and wholesome character in "Jack and the Bean Stock" (while the giants have done nothing wrong...), we also assume from having heard the story too many times (every year in Lent) that Jesus knows who the adversary is throughout this entire time in the woods. We assume that the adversary is a physically embodied devil standing there with Jesus and bringing him to these different tests.

We envision the adversary here a little bit like a host on a game show (something like Survivor)... creating an ethical obstacle course. If we assume that is the case, then it raises two important questions.

First, why if this is an encounter with the adversary... the Devil... is it the Spirit of God/ The Holy Spirit who leads Jesus into the woods in the first place? This runs counter to the popular prosperity Gospel and sometimes even the progressive Christian Gospel that God doesn't want us to be challenged or to dig too deep! God just wants easy and fun in life.

The idea that God wants Jesus to go spend time in the woods of his soul problematizes our normal fairy tale reading of this story of Jesus going into the woods. We assume, for some reason, that Jesus doesn't want to be there, but the Bible says that the Holy Spirit led him to the woods rather than it forcing or compelling him against his will. This is a self-willed process. So Lent, Plymouth, is a choice we make to follow the Holy Spirit into something difficult. If this is not a year when you are ready to really do the work of lent, then maybe don't do lent at all. Lent is an intentional space in our year for proving

something new to us and it is lonely. First, God takes us to the woods to learn something, to go deeper, to face our fears and inner selves. It is in the woods where we begin to grow in faith, in healing, and in recovery. **The woods are where denial ends.**

Now for the second problem of our easy reading: Why does it take 9 verses and around a month a half of being tempted and wondering in the wilderness before we reach verses 10 and 11 when, “Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’ **Then** the devil left him, and **suddenly angels came and waited on him.**” It takes 9 verses and well over a month for Jesus to name the adversary and to send these thoughts and tests away.

Why? Who likes being tested? Why would it take Jesus so long to send the adversary (Satin) away? The answer to this can only be found in the woods of our own hearts. The adversary is safe and easy (as popularly depicted with horns and a cape). That which must be overcome is easy to send away, banish, or ignore when we think it is something external, but more often than not... the temptation to give-up on our dreams, to be selfish, to seek power and glory over truth and wholeness, to hoard, to postpone becoming authentically who we are called to be, to give in and to give up to the powers of loneliness of inner woods and forests, to quit, to stop hoping [LONG PAUSE]... those temptations don't (unfortunately) come from a devil in a red cape. **That is simply a fairy tale told to keep our egos safe.**

Second, the temptation is from within most often, and it is only by journeying and facing the true part of ourselves that we emerge in confidence. It takes time for Jesus to face the inner tempter. We are often our own devils. We are most often our own adversaries. We are the internalized tempters who draw our potential for wholeness away from our authentic, whole selves. This is why it took Jesus so long to send the adversary away, for he was hidden in the shadow of the woods.

Isn't the Bible so much for interesting when we take it seriously?

This what lent is all about! Lent is about following the Holy Spirit intentionally into the hard conversations with the latent, unpleasant, and complicated parts of our own hearts. This might not be the year when you are ready for real into the woods work, but when you are Plymouth is here to support you no matter who you are or where you are on your woodland journey.

Hey, Pastor Jake, jeeeeez... I don't attend a UCC church to think about my own loneliness and inner work and spiritual/ emotional self! I leave that touchy feely stuff to the Evangelicals. I am here because I want social justice marching orders with a Divine Imperative that help me feel good about myself without facing the parts of myself that are lost in the woods of despair, hidden depression, deep and very very old childhood shame, lost causes, inauthenticity, and abandoned dreams and hopes. I don't want to follow Jesus into the woods of Lent.

Sister and Brothers, life is not a fairy tale—even in Fort Collins. We willingly go into the

woods of Lent with Jesus not to see things as we always see them (easy, black and white, as presented... good/ bad), but we go to the woods to be challenged with hard truths about ourselves and to work for healing, authenticity, and renewal. With Jesus by our side, we have nothing to fear from this process. Hopefully, with this intentional work of Lent woodland journeying, we will emerge in the meadows of Springtime Easter Morning with a new clarity for the work ahead, the purpose and ethics we are called to and honest work for the year ahead. This is the real work of Church.

“Into the woods
To get the thing
That makes it worth
The journeying...

The way is clear,
The light is good,
I have no fear,
Nor no one should.
The woods are just trees,
The trees are just wood.
No need to be afraid there...”ⁱⁱ

Into the Woods we go now with Christ. Amen.

ⁱ James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim, *Act I Prologue: Into the Woods*, Theater, Theatre Communications Group, Edition 1, 1993.

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