

Gifts of the Dark Wood
Part 2: The Gift of Being Thunderstruck
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Scripture: Job 37:1-5

I. Thunder and Lightning

Do you ever wonder why God doesn't seem speak with people anymore like in the Bible? I mean, from cover to cover, the Bible is chock full of claims that, "The Lord said this ..." or "the Lord declares that ..." or "the word of the Lord came to so-and-so saying ..." It creates an impression that, in biblical times, the relationship between God and God's people was much closer than it is today. Like, if a prophet, sage, or other godly person asked for divine direction, they would literally hear the Divine voice in plain and simple language, dictating holy scripture word-for-word.

When was the last time *you* heard the literal voice of God? Chances are, if you're hearing voices when no one is around, you should seek a therapist before acting on what you hear!

This does raise the question: Were biblical figures merely experiencing hallucinations? Or has divine communication ceased since the biblical era? I say "No" to both questions. Biblical prophets and sages were not struggling with mental illness just because they claim God "spoke" to them, and God continues to speak to the world just as God did in the Bible.

The problem lies in the fact that we tend to take literally what the prophets and sages of the bible meant figuratively. When they wrote, "The word of the Lord said such-and-such ..." the ancient people they wrote to weren't thinking that God spoke in an audible voice. They understood that "spirit speaks to spirit." Biblical prophets and sages were giving voice to messages from an internal source.

Now, we human beings hear plenty of internal messages all the time, don't we. We're like walking committees! It seems like there's no decision we make, no matter how small, that our inner committees don't weigh in on.

"I'm hungry," we say to ourselves. "Should I have a piece of fruit or a candy bar?" Suddenly our brains light up with the voices of nine or ten internal committee members, all-too-pleased to offer us strong, often contradictory, opinions.

We ask ourselves, "I wonder where our country is headed?" Suddenly, our internal committee has increased in both membership and volume. "We're headed over a cliff!" one voice insists. "You're being overly dramatic," another counters. "We need to vote the right person into office!" cries another voice. "There is no 'right' person," says another. And so it goes ... How does one discern the "voice of God" amidst all the internal voices insisting that their opinion is definitive?

The ancients struggled just as much as we do with these internal, contradictory messages. Yet, over the centuries, a general consensus arose in the ancient Near East about how to sort out the wheat from the chaff, so-to-speak. Applying certain filters to the internal cacophony yielded surprisingly helpful results – so helpful that some of these messages were recorded in the Bible literally with the preface, “And God said ...” or “Thus says the Lord ...”

Which begs the question: What was their technique? When it comes to our own Bible, what filter did the prophets and sages – and maybe even Jesus – use sort out the voice of the Divine from all the others swirling around in their head?

Their filter wasn't perfect – because we human beings are imperfect. But it worked well enough that it was used not only in Israel to discern the voice of the Divine, but in every culture surrounding Israel. To put this filter – or “gift” – in modern language: the ancients were familiar with the Dark Wood gift of being *thunderstruck*. Let me explain.

In the ancient Near East, every culture, including Israel, depicted their highest god (or only God) as the wielder of thunder and lightning. In Mesopotamia, the god Marduk was frequently depicted as throwing lightning bolts and beating a thunder drum. In Greece, Zeus is depicted as hurling lightning bolts from the sky and shaking the heavens with his thunderous voice. Among the Anatolian cultures in what is modern-day Turkey, it was Tahundi or Ivriz, depending on your locality. In Egypt, it was Horus. Among the Canaanites, it was Baal.

While the Hebrews made no physical representation of Yahweh, they too understood Yahweh as the wielder of lightning and thunder. Take, for instance, Job 37:1-5:

*At this also my heart trembles, and leaps out of its place. ²Listen, listen to the **thunder** of [God's] voice and the **rumbling** that comes from his mouth. ³Under the whole heaven he lets it loose, and his **lightning** to the corners of the earth. ⁴After it his voice **roars**; he **thunders** with his majestic voice and he does not restrain the **lightnings** when his voice is heard. ⁵God **thunders** wondrously with his voice; he does great things that we cannot comprehend.*

Why is the high god of every ancient Near Eastern culture depicted as wielding lightning and thunder? The conventional assumption has long been that "primitive" cultures invented such myths to explain the origin of these atmospheric phenomena. However, this assumption is more the product of modern scientific imagination than ancient mythological imagination. The ancients didn't depict their gods as wielding lightning and thunder to explain where storms came from. They were conveying their understanding of how the voice of the Divine may be discerned from all the other voices in our heads.

Symbolically, they were representing the notion that God's voice often comes in momentary flashes of intuition or awareness that are followed by waves of sensation that reverberate within us like thunder.

Have you ever been thunderstruck? That is, have you ever experienced a sudden “flash” of insight or awareness that “rocked” your whole world and set you on a better path?

You see, we use similar language for this experience as the ancients did. We speak of “flashes” or “bursts” of insight, or “seeing the light,” or “lightbulb” moments, or being “struck” by an idea that seemingly dropped from the sky. We don’t mean to imply that we literally saw any light, just like the ancients didn’t believe the voice of the divine was literally carried by lightning. We also speak of the after effects these sudden illuminations in language that evokes the ancient symbol of thunder. We say they “rocked” us “or shook us up,” or “hit us in the gut” or “resonated deeply within us” even though nothing physically happens.

When those in the Bible had similar experiences as we do – and if those experiences repeated themselves in a wide variety of ways but conveyed a similar message – that’s when they knew they’d been thunderstruck. That’s when they dared to write, “And the Lord said ...” rather than “The little voice in my head said ...”

Being thunderstruck – even when it happens repeatedly bearing a similar message – is not perfect filter. But the ancients understood it to be a far more perfect filter than our own reason or logic. It’s not that reason and logic are bad. They’re simply limited. They are based on a human-level view of the world, not a God’s-eye view.

All of us are connected to a much larger story than we can see with the human eye, or discern with human imagination. Our stories are intimately connected to other people, whose inner world we cannot perceive. They’re connected to a past and present, that we’re only dimly aware of, and a future we can scarcely predict. Logic and reason are helpful in negotiating the world we can see, touch, feel, and understand, but it doesn’t see or respond to the full picture.

Last year in one of my “getting to know you” conversations with the congregation I was serving in Niantic, CT, a man in his seventies told me of a childhood experience that convinced him of the benefit of daily prayer and meditation. He had been walking in the fog across a frozen pond with a few inches of snow on top of the ice. He knew the pond well, so the fact that he couldn’t see beyond his fingertips, or the ice beneath his feet, didn’t deter him from crossing. But suddenly he felt a sensation of danger. He didn’t feel fear. There was just a quiet, but firm, inner intuition saying, “Stop! Stop NOW!” While I could identify no source of danger, simply turned around and returned from the direction he came.

The next day was bright and sunny. Returning to the pond, he found his tracks in the snow from the previous day. Those tracks stopped just a foot away from a hole in the ice. “I knew in that moment that there is a God,” he said. “And that it’s worth paying attention to intuitions that can see more than I can.”

Before moving on, I invite you to consider your own life. Have you ever been thunderstruck? Have you ever acted on gut instinct – perhaps even despite all logic – and later looked back and been grateful that you’d listened? Conversely, have you ever

followed your gut and later regretted it? What are the differences you can discern between these different experiences?

II. The Holy Spirit or the Pizza?

In ancient times, those who recorded what they perceived to be the words of God were as fallible as we are. They were not immune to misinterpreting the significance of their insights or their consequences. They realized that not every epiphany is of divine origin.

In your own experience, you have likely run across people who adamantly insist that God has spoken to them, or through them. Yet, to borrow words of Ann Lamott, you may conclude that they've simply "absolutized their own hysteria." Or aggrandized their own self-interest. Of course, sometimes we might be that person! A friend of mine used to ask about her own revelations, "Was that the Holy Spirit speaking or just the pizza?" She knew that an earthly delight, like a delicious slice of pizza, can evoke sensations that seem heavenly.

While heeding the metaphorical "lightning and thunder" within might aid us in sifting through the cacophony of our inner voices, our discernment needs refinement before we can fully trust it. Reflecting on my personal "lightning and thunder" moments, I've noticed that those intuitions that prove reliable possess a distinctive quality absent in the rest.

To draw on a sports analogy, I call these more trustworthy experiences "sweet spot moments."

Golf clubs, baseball and cricket bats, and tennis rackets all have "sweet spots." The "sweet spot" on a tennis racket is that place near the center of the strings where the impact of the ball is so perfectly balanced throughout the racket that they cancel each other out. The force is not absorbed by the racket, therefore, and translates directly into sending the ball over the net. Therefore, hitting the ball in the racket's "sweet spot" feels most natural, almost effortless. It allows the players to invest their energies into playing the game, not merely hitting the ball.

When the Holy Spirit calls me into a particular form of action, the action feels like it hits me in my internal "sweet spot." I experience "sweet spot" moments when some internal tension suddenly eases, or when a restless energy becomes tranquil. Other times, "sweet spot" moments feel like something within me that has been sleepy or disengaged suddenly sits up cries, "Yes!"

By paying close attention to these "sweet spot" moments, we find they don't occur in isolation but rather repeat and resonate in various ways, guiding us incrementally. They're like breadcrumbs in Hansel and Gretel's Dark Wood – a single crumb doesn't lead all the way home, but together they mark the path, setting us in a direction that will get us there.

If we persist in following these "sweet spot" moments, we often find ourselves precisely where we needed to be – even if it's not the place we expected. As a member of our

congregation aptly put it, “You know you’ve been touched by the Holy Spirit when you find yourself in places you never dreamed.”

This rings true for me. In 1997, I literally told my father, “Hell will freeze over before I ever use multimedia in worship.” Yet three years later was one of eight American presenters at an international symposium on multimedia and Christian worship in Ulsan, South Korea! I didn’t expect it, but a series of “sweet spot” moments redirected me.

I also vowed never to broadcast my sermons or worship services on television. Yet, I ended up hosting Darkwood Brew (www.darkwoodbrew.org), an innovative internet television program I hosted for five years in Omaha, Nebraska. During the pandemic, my church’s Sunday services aired on a local CBS affiliate, soon attracting more viewers than their sports programming. And now, I welcome broadcasting services through platforms like Zoom or YouTube that allow anyone to join us from a distance. These shifts were all guided by “sweet spot” moments.

Curiously, it was “sweet spot” moments that brought me to the church in Omaha, despite my prior insistence that I would never live in the Midwest. They also led me to serve a church in Niantic, Connecticut, though I had limited my search exclusively to the West Coast. They are also responsible for me pausing my rush back to the Pacific Northwest after I finished up in Niantic in order to serve here. It wasn’t the allure of sunny weather and sandy beaches that drew me. Frankly, I have previously insisted that I’d never live in Florida! But, when a veritable cascade of “sweet spot” moments overwhelm your preconceived notions and prejudices, they have a way of getting your attention! And I love it here!

In my experience, it seems that one of the surest predictors of my future direction is considering where I’ve vowed never to go and what I’ve sworn never to do! When I find myself drawn in the opposite direction of my initial resolve – when the lightning strikes repeatedly bearing the same message, and the thunder hits me in waves of peace, joy, and a feeling of “home” even if it’s not my physical home – that’s when I’m assured that the Holy Spirit is calling me forward, not “the pizza.”

This is the Dark Wood gift of being thunderstruck. As we affirm in our final blessing each Sunday, the Spirit of the Living God “pushes us into places we would not necessarily go ourselves.” And bestows blessings upon us there that we can scarcely imagine.

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For those who wish to go further down this road, here’s a resource I developed from my own experiences of listening to that “still, small voice” of the Spirit and following those “sweet spot” moments:

**TEN PRINCIPLES FOR LISTENING TO THAT
“STILL, SMALL VOICE”
by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.**

- 1) Be willing to hear the Holy Spirit's voice, and willing to move in whatever direction the Spirit leads. This, incidentally, is the hardest part!
- 2) Avoid, as much as humanly possible, being in a rush to decide whether some thought is from the Holy Spirit or not. Also avoid like the plague any notion that one must be in a hurry to make a decision based on what one has "heard" in prayer. This is one of the easiest ways to get tripped up ("You must decide right this moment or all is lost ..."). Remember: very small errors can have very large consequences when we are in a rush. God rarely desires or needs us to rush.
- 3) When the Holy Spirit is trying to move us in a particular direction, that direction is **ALWAYS** marked by a sense joy and/or deep peace – "sweet spot moments" – however slight, even if the direction involves extreme difficulty, pain, or even death.
- 4) God never asks us to do anything that is against our true self-interest; never asks us to do anything that runs counter to our benefit – even if we are asked to do what the world calls a "selfless act."
- 5) God normally invites us to move in small steps which cumulatively may be quite large but individually may seem so small as to be insignificant. We are rarely asked to take a giant leap of faith without being moved to the edge of the precipice in very small steps (The only exception I can think of is when we stumble into a situation that endangers us and the Spirit works to "get us out quick").
- 6) Our intuition is generally sharper than we give it credit for. Provided we're staying open to the Spirit's voice (rather than fixating on our fears and prejudices), if we've "got a bad feeling" about something, generally it's accurate. Similarly, if our gut fills with peace and joy – a deep sense of "ah ha!" – we are often on the right track.
- 7) Once you've taken a step forward believing it's where the Holy Spirit is calling you, don't keep second-guessing yourself. Tell God, "I'm going to move with confidence in this direction until or unless you start sending signals to change course." Then, stay open to those signals in case they come. The Spirit normally starts throwing us confirming signals when we've made a good decision, though they may not come in the forms we expect.
- 8) God does not use "strange coincidences" as signs nearly as often as God uses gut hunches, "ah ha" moments, deep intuitions, mental images, and just plain old logic (be careful with this one, though, as frequently the Holy Spirit's bidding defies logic, at least until one has the benefit of hindsight).
- 9) Asking "What would Jesus do?" doesn't get us very far. God is concerned about what *you* should be doing, not Jesus. While Holy Spirit will not call you into un-Christ-like action, the mere fact that Christ did something long ago does not mean the Spirit is necessarily calling you to do the same thing. (e.g., Don't feed the poor just because Christ did. Do something if you sense Spirit calling you to do it and if it does not contradict Christ-like behavior).

10) The fact that you have accurately discerned where the Holy Spirit is leading you to go does *not* guarantee the success of whatever it is the Spirit is calling you to achieve. Because God respects human freewill, God's purposes *can* be thwarted by others, in the short-run anyway. Sometimes even God has to switch to "Plan B" (and "C" and ...). Also, be aware that God may have a different end result in mind than you do.