

Gifts of the Dark Wood
Part 3: The Gift of Emptiness
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Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church
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*And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice,
"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" That is,
"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*
Matthew 27:46

I. When Seeing Eyes Are Blind

Our scripture reading this morning might seem unusually brief, consisting of a single verse with just twenty-five words. Yet, paradoxically, it's precisely twenty-five words longer than the renowned Flower Sermon in Zen Buddhism. In that narrative, Buddha summoned his disciples for a lesson of paramount importance. However, rather than uttering words, he simply raised a flower in silence. This gesture left his disciples confounded as they grappled with its significance. Among them, only Mahakashyapa grasped the unspoken communication. And what was that message?

[... moment of silence ...]

Indeed, the most profound messages in life are sometimes perceived in the absence of language, when we relinquish words, concepts, and presuppositions, becoming so receptive that life's essence can be truly embraced — as it is, rather than as we presume it to be.

This principle is mirrored in another Buddhist anecdote where a Japanese Zen master hosts a university professor eager to understand Zen. As the master pours tea into the professor's cup, he continues even after it's full, causing an overflow. The professor's plea to stop is met with an illuminating reply: "Like this cup, you are brimming with preconceptions. To show you Zen, you must first make space by emptying your cup."

These stories from Buddhism suggest that even with a wealth of knowledge, we may be blinded to deeper truths by that very knowledge.

Christianity echoes this wisdom. Consider the words of Jesus: "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it." (Luke 9:24, also see Matt 16:25; Mark 8:35; John 12:24-25) This teaching, while seemingly about the unhealthy way we cling to physical life, speaks more profoundly to the release of our old selves in the face of transformation. Jesus invited his followers to relinquish their rigid notions of existence — and even their notions of the Messiah's identity — to truly perceive and experience the life he offered.

Of course, Jesus was right. Israel expected its long-expected Messiah to be not just a religious leader, but a military one. He would make things right with Israel's oppressors – those being the Romans in Jesus' day – through the use of overwhelming force. No one expected the Messiah to die on a Roman cross, forgiving his own crucifiers. Would you? Many Christians these days have a hard time accepting the life Jesus was inviting them into, vastly preferring a Christ who will lead the righteous to victory over the unrighteous through force and coercion rather than forgiveness and compassion.

Speaking of the righteousness, there is a curious story in the Qur'an that cautions us against placing faith in righteousness alone as a path to God, or even righteousness as a way to live a godly life. It's the story of the Fall of Satan, or Iblis as he is frequently called in the Qur'an.¹

According to the story, after God created humanity, God commanded the host of heaven to bow down, not to God, but to *us humans!* At first, heaven's angels object. They can see with crystal clarity that humanity is flawed. "These humans will sin," the angels protest, "even commit murder!"

God's response, "I know things that you do not," was sufficient for the angels, who immediately prostrate themselves, emptying their imaginations of preconceived notions to fully respond to God's ineffable nature.

The only one refusing to bow is Satan. In Islamic mythology, Satan is not actually an angel but a *jinn*. That is, a spirit being who has freewill. In Islamic mythology, angels have no freewill, but only ever act as perfect reflections of God's will. Since we human beings have freewill, we are more like Satan than angels in this regard.

Only, we are so much lower down the spiritual totem pole than Satan is that Satan used our lowly status and sinful nature as justification of his refusal to bow before us. He objects, "I am made of smokeless fire! These humans are made of mere dirt!"

Do you remember that expression, "Johnny was right. Dead right. But now he is as dead as he was right"?

Satan was right about his own perfection. As a spiritual being whose abode is in the heavens, Satan is far more spiritually advanced and righteousness than we lowly earthly are. Incidentally, this understanding is reflected in certain Christian mythology about Satan, too, where he is conceived as having been the highest of God's angels before he disobeyed God and fell from heaven. So, Satan was dead right to recognize the distinction between him and us. But his *self-righteous indignation* toward us led him to be dead wrong about what truly mattered. That is, God's love for us.

¹This story is recounted in bits and pieces in seven places in the Qur'an: *Al-Baqarah* 2.28, *Al-A`Rāf* 7.11, *Al-Hijr* 15.29, *Al-Isrā'* 17.61, *Al-Kahf* 18.50, *Tā' Hā'* 20.116, and *Al-Qasas* 28.71

What the Islamic story is trying to show us is not just how Satan originally fell away from God, but how we, too, fall away. The story shows us that *the root of all evil is self-righteous indignation*. This includes indignation toward others who are verifiably less righteous than we are!

This negative appraisal of the self-righteous is reflected in Jesus' life and teachings throughout the gospels. For instance, when a group of scribes and Pharisees bring a woman caught in adultery before Jesus, reminding him that the Law of Moses commands such people to be stoned to death and demanding a response, Jesus offers them a mini-version of the Buddha's "Flower Sermon." (John 8:1-11) He says absolutely nothing at all. Instead, Jesus bends down and starts to write on the ground with his finger, as if the answer would become apparent if everyone would simply get quiet and let go of their self-righteous indignation. When the crowd keeps pressing Jesus for a response, he finally says, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

That shuts them up! Having experienced the Dark Wood Gift of Emptiness – in this case emptying themselves of confidence in their own righteousness – they drop their stones and leave the woman unharmed.

Before moving on, let's take a moment to ponder the Gift of Emptiness in our lives. Consider who you may regard with self-righteous indignation. Even if your position is justified and theirs is not, consider what accusations or judgments — symbolized by stones — Jesus might encourage you to release. Reflect on the emails poised at the brink of sending, or the gossip that is on the tip of your tongue, that Jesus might be guiding you to hold back? What misconceptions about their morality, or even your own, might you be called to relinquish to see the situation with greater clarity and respond with greater grace?

II. The Gift of Emptiness

If Emptiness is indeed a gift, our Milky Way galaxy is quite gifted! Consider that the nearest star to our Sun, Proxima Centauri, is about 4.24 light-years away – which translates to 25 trillion miles. That's a lot of empty space. It's a pretty typical distance between stars in our galaxy. All this empty space between stars and the planets that orbit them translates into the Milky Way being about 99.9% empty space.

And yet ... despite how empty our galaxy is, by another measure it seems quite full. Astronomers estimate that the Milky Way contains approximately 200 billion stars. Some even place the number at 400 billion. Let's be conservative and take the lower number.

Our Sun is an average-sized star in our galaxy. Yet, if the sun were a not a star, but a jar, it could hold 1.3 million earths! One of the largest stars visible to the naked eye is one called Betelgeuse. Betelgeuse is 1,000 times larger than our sun. If it were a jar, it could hold 1.3 billion earths. Betelgeuse is so large, in fact, that if it were placed in the center of our solar system, it would extend out to the orbit of Jupiter or beyond. And Betelgeuse isn't even the largest star in our galaxy!

If your brain hasn't been stretched by this point, let me offer you one more interesting observation about our galaxy. If you take a typical 16 oz. can of Morton Salt, and each grain of salt in the can represents a single star in our galaxy, then you pour this salt on the floor of your kitchen until the number of grains of salt represents the number of stars in our galaxy – the conservative number – you had better have a very large kitchen, and a Costco-sized inventory of salt cans. For, you will need to pour out 76,000 cans of salt on the floor! That's the equivalent of about 100 bathtubs worth. If you wanted to represent the stars not just in the Milky Way galaxy, but in all the galaxies in the universe, it would take approximately 25,000 bathtubs ... for every person on earth!

The vast majority of the known universe may very well be empty space, but there's an astonishing fullness within that emptiness. Maybe we should coin a new word to describe it, like "emptiful"!

Now, given how vast the universe it, and how "emptiful" it is, does it not make your brain explode if you try to figure out how God could possibly be aware of the likes of us, must less love us all as God's creations?

You can parse the math a hundred million times and still not come up with any reasonable explanation for how God could be aware of us. You can employ every form of human logic and reasoning and never come close to describing how such a form of consciousness might work. You can probe the human heart in every direction and never find a love so great as to include all the people of earth – "the good, the bad, and the ugly" – not to mention the whole universe.

As the Buddha's Flower Sermon reminds us, we will not find our way to God through a preacher's eloquent words. As the story of the Zen master's tea cup reminds us, we will not find God by becoming so full of knowledge that we finally crack the code and discover God, nor by reasoning our way into the presence of the Divine. As the Islamic story of the Fall of Satan, cautions us, even if our righteousness exceeds that of all other human beings, this alone does not mean we will find God, or be following God's will.

As Christians, Jesus shows us the surest route to God. It is through the Dark Wood Gift of Emptiness. The kind of emptiness you experience when life has pulled the rug out from under you, both heaven and earth appear to conspire against you, and you have lost faith in humanity, and, dare I say, when you have even lost faith in God. "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" cries Jesus from the Cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

In that great and terrible moment of emptiness, not even Jesus – God's very Son and anointed Messiah – not even he could find God. Yet for the last two thousand years, Christians have insisted that the Cross is not the end of the story, but the beginning of a glorious new one. Why? Not because Jesus found God as he stared from the Cross into the vast "emptiful" heavens, but because from within this Great Emptiness, God *found* Jesus.

Yes, there's an astonishing fullness within emptiness. As Christ's Dark Wood path shows us even at its darkest point, if you want to find God, get empty! Let God *find* you.