

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“The Dark Woods: Midway Spirituality”
a series on 2 Corinthians.
2 Corinthians 1:1-11
July 24, 2016

As best we can tell, 2nd Corinthians is at least the 4th letter Paul wrote to this little group of Christians in Corinth.... this little church in their own corner of the Roman Empire. Of course, we don't have all those letters still, but from the clues in 1st Corinthians and here in 2nd Corinthians, we're pretty sure this is at least the 4th letter.

Which means this church, this community of faith, has been around for some time now. Today's version of snail mail would have seemed impossibly fast in their world. Four sets of letters could have taken years to travel back and forth.

So, I've begun to think of 2nd Corinthians as a letter to a church that's past all the excitement of things being new...

...the story of Jesus isn't new to them any more.
...the friendships they've found with one another isn't new.
...the community, the faith, the hope they have known...
 isn't as shiny and exciting as it once was.

Now they are in the grind of real life... living faith in the long haul... and things aren't quite what they expected. There have been disappointments and surprises...
 some very unexpected twists and turns in their life together...
 and in their individual lives.

A lot of us know a bit what that's like, don't we? We're living life and things aren't quite as exciting as we once thought they were?

Or some unexpected curve in the road comes and throws us off course?

A career doesn't go like we expected.

 Family life isn't what it was supposed to be.

 Church life isn't as inspiring as it once was.

 Some goal of ours has faded to the background, maybe.

 Some deep wound has been festering.

I think of 2nd Corinthians as being written to a community of people who are a lot like Dante at the beginning of the *Inferno*, where he writes, **“Midway upon the road of our life I found myself within a dark wood, for the right way had been missed.”**

In other words, this is a letter that deals with some midway through life spirituality, with midway spiritual work for their life together as a Church... the kind of work you have to do when you find yourselves in a dark wood.

It's a place that we will all find ourselves in from time to time. We've been going along half-asleep and suddenly realize that the road we're on is not where we want to be... or maybe we wake up and we're not sure how we got here... or exactly what to do next.

And so, we're going to spend the rest of the summer exploring passages from this letter as a kind of guide for us. It's a way to explore Midway Spirituality. Dante had Virgil. We have 2 Corinthians. There's a lot of deep wisdom here that can guide us through these dark woods if we'll open ourselves up to hear it.

Paul jumps right in by telling us that he's been in the dark wood too... which is good to hear, but a bit surprising, isn't it? I mean we tend to put our spiritual leaders, or those we look up to, on a plane different from our own.

In fact, one of the most common feelings in the dark wood is loneliness. We can't see anyone else around, and we're pretty sure we're the only one who ended up on this road... Because everyone else looks happier than me.

Their job seems to be working out better.

Their Facebook posts look more fun than mine.

Their family less dysfunctional.

Their vacation more exotic.

The dark road is a lonely place because it looks an awful lot like we're in this by ourselves. But that's part of the lie of these woods. It's just not true. And letting go of that lie is an important part of waking up from your slumber. And so Paul says, **"We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced... We were so utterly unbearably cursed that we despaired of life itself..."** (vs.8)

Paul, the great Apostle.

The writer of half the New Testament,

the missionary,

the spiritual giant and mystic...

Paul... has been there too. Deep in that despair where life has lost it's meaning and purpose... and you can't quite picture how to get through the week, let alone the next month.

And the thing is, we don't know exactly what part of his life he's talking about. Scholars have all tried to use every clue and tool they have to figure out what "affliction" Paul might be talking about. But no one knows...

And I think that might just be part of the beauty of these scriptures. Because this despairing... this affliction he's experiencing... it isn't at all about any one individual experience. How he got there doesn't really matter. The point is that he's been there... just like many of you have been there by one road or another.

And he's trying to help you see, you're not alone in it. I know it looks that way an awful lot of the time... especially when you feel trapped, or like there's no one who understands, or nobody around to talk to about it.

But the reality is, ***you're not alone.***

That's part of the gift of this community by the way. Sure, you can't see it a lot of the time, but let me just tell you... that most of the people in this room either have been or are now in the dark woods.

There is just so much we drag with us into this room each week. The person sitting next to you or behind you in the pew each week is carrying a whole lot more than you might imagine. All of us have wounds and fears and baggage we're dragging into this place each week.

One of the greatest gifts we can offer one another... is to be honest about that with one another... to tell our stories... to say, **"You're not alone."** As Brene Brown puts it, the two most powerful words in the English language is, **"Me Too."**

That of course is what Paul is doing for us... **"I've known despair,"** he says.

"I know what it's like when the road grows dark.

"I know what it's like to be utterly crushed..."

"Me too," he says to us all.

You're not alone in these dark woods... and it's not just Paul there with you, and it's not just other travelers there with you. Christ is there with you too. That's what the cross is saying most clearly to us.

Jesus enters the place of despair. Jesus' great suffering happens, as he's suspended between heaven and earth. And in that moment the sky grows dark. And Jesus cries out, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"**

The Cross is God's own self, entering into the place of God-forsakenness.

And in ***that place***... death begins to be filled with life. It becomes the place of the world's great salvation. And that's the mystery and profound paradox of the dark wood.

***You see, the dark wood can be the place where you feel most alone,
and at the same time,
the very place where you will encounter the grace of God again.***

The place that brings you to the end of your rope,
the place where you're ready to give up,
to throw in the towel,

is exactly the point where you are finally open enough to receive God's grace. Because you're coming to grips with the fact that you cannot do it on your own.

That's why the dark woods are such an important place for us spiritually speaking. Sure, none of us want to be there, but it can become the place of our salvation.

Jesus describes this as the sign of Jonah. There's this moment when the crowds are asking Jesus for a sign. They want something impressive, something showy, something exciting, to prove his authority. But Jesus says the only sign he's give us is the sign of Jonah.

And you remember what happens in Jonah's story. He's brought down, lower and lower.

He goes down toward Jappa.

Then he goes down into the ship.

Then he's thrown down in the sea.

Then he goes down into the belly of the whale...

and there he says... for three days, until finally he's spit onto a new shore.

It's Jesus' metaphor for death and rebirth... for our deepest transformation. This is the only pattern Jesus promises us. We have to go into the belly of the whale before we can be spit onto the new shore of our life.¹

This is commonly called the **pascal mystery**. Somehow new life comes through death... It's a pattern that we have to enter again and again... It's the pattern of cross and resurrection... and it's exactly what Paul is trying to describe to us.

"We felt we'd received a sentence of death..." he says **"so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.... God rescued us from such a terrible death... and will rescue us again. On him we place our hopes."** he writes.

You see, your deepest wounds, your great pain, the suffering you bear, can also become for you *the path to salvation*. It can become the road to your redemption... but it takes time... and it requires walking that road.

Rohr also says that the **"dark periods are good teachers. Religious energy is in the dark questions, seldom in the answers. Answers are they way out, but that is not what we are here for. But when we look at the questions, we look for the opening to transformation."**²

¹ R. Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, 44.

² R. Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, 45.

The dark wood... is where our midway spirituality often begins. The first bit of wisdom and guidance we're given is that our woundedness, may just be the time of your deepest spiritual work.

This place can become the path to your salvation. And the saints will tell us that it may also become your great gift to the world.

You're unique calling to the world,
your great blessing,
your great gift to the world,
may just come from the very same dark woods you find yourself in.

It's the pattern seen again and again.

Julian of Norwich receives her visions, the mystical showings that have meant so much to so many, on her death bed.

Martin Luther's great insistence on pure grace, comes from his deep despair and self-loathing under a rigid, perfectionist religion.

Nelson Mandela's great healing of South Africa's apartheid, came out of his time imprisoned by apartheid.

It's the truth, the pattern at the very center of our faith. The deep woundedness of Christ, becomes the very salvation of the world.

And it's true in each of our lives as well. **"If we are being afflicted,"** Paul says in vs. 6, **"it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experienced when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we also suffer."**

You see, the great redemption at the heart of your struggles or your pain *comes when you can bear that pain for the sake of others, for the life of the world...* and offer to the world the same grace and hope and wisdom that comes to you in the midst of it.

Grace comes to you not just for yourself,
...but *so that* you might share it with others.
Whatever grace you've known,
whatever comfort you've been given
whatever guidance and compassion that has flowed to you from above,
was given not just for you... but for the sake of the world.

I know that is a lot to hope for when you first find yourself in the dark woods.... when life seems out of control, and your future a blur.

So, if you're in that place today, let me simply say this: Trust the wisdom offered you here in 2 Corinthians.

This pain is not forever.
There is a light, and you will see it again.

This isn't all there is.

Trust.

You can't leap over your grief. You can't rush through it.

As Barbra Brown Taylor so wisely puts it, "**The only way out, is to go through it.**" That's exactly what Dante has to do... down, down he goes into Inferno... before he can begin to climb again through Purgatorio...

And though he can't see it here at the beginning...eventually, he will be taken into Paradiso.

And if you keep walking,
if you'll trust the guide given to you.
someday, you will be taken there too.

Amen.

Reflection:

"I am bearing the mystery of the suffering of humanity, its sad woundedness, but I am also bearing the very glory of God, and even sharing in the divine nature."

~ R. Rohr

Song of Reflection: Wayfaring Stranger