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Gifts from the Dark: Thunderstruck

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Bible Reference: Job 37:2-5 and 1Kings 19:11-15

As Reid's coming up to read our text this morning, I just want to give you a little information about – there's two texts here, one from Job and one from First Kings, and in the world of theology, we have this word called "theophany." It's a fancy word that simply means when God engages humanity, this name of something that we're trying to make sense of when we hear God's voice in our lives and don't necessarily know what to do with it. So, from the Job reading, you're going to hear somebody who is understanding God's voice in power and in bravado, and in the next reading in Kings, you're going to find somebody who doesn't actually hear God's voice in the noise but hears it somewhere else. Please listen to our reading.

(Reid Shaw reads Job 37:2-5 and 1Kings 19:11-15.)

The Celts acknowledged lightning as sacred. In fact they would establish sacred spaces wherever they saw lightning strike. That spot would become holy ground. The point of contact signified a connection with unfathomable power. These lightning kissed spots became places of worship and honor and reverence. In fact if a clansman or clanswoman got struck by lightning, the Celtic edict stated that he or she would be forever endowed with the power of the highest deity, essentially touched by God, whether dead or alive. Chinese wisdom designates the symbolic meaning of lightning with fertility. This has to do with lightning and its affiliation with what comes after the thunder and lightning, which is usually rain. The Tao, a sacred philosophical text, speaks of the lightning as this: The powerful lightning bolt clings to the cloud to turn it to rain. It opens the womb, and soon there will be the birth of new life.

We could talk about all the different places historically where thunder and lightning, or visions of power, are understood as explaining the voice of God. The purpose here was not to explain where thunder and lightning come from, but to try to make sense of where God's voice comes from, and more important how it comes to us through our own intuition. So, when the ancients speak of deity flashing lightning or clashing in claps of thunder, they meant that the voice of the divine often comes through these momentary flashes of intuition or awareness that trigger sensations and reverberate like rolling thunder.

If you think about it, even today we use expressions rooted in the physical in order to describe experiences with something other than what is normal. We say things like, "Oh, the light bulb went on." Or, "You know, I saw the light in that experience." Or, "That was a flash of brilliance." Or, "Something resonated deeply within me." Or, "My world was rocked." Or, "I had a brain storm." Or, "I was thunderstruck."

When God comes to us with guidance, with inspiration, with encouragement, with creativity or even with caution, we struggle to define what that internal experience is saying. So, in our attempt to capture this ineffable experience of divine inspiration and guidance, we resort to these different metaphors, referring to things that we see or feel or hear. I think that one reason thunder and lightning is an appropriate metaphor for the voice of God is because it's so brief. It's momentary.

I remember growing up – I grew up in the plains of Texas and Oklahoma, and you could see storms coming for miles. As I was a kid, I lived right on Tornado Alley, and people used to say, "Aren't you

afraid if tornados?” And I would say, “No, because you can see them coming for three days.” Right? They’re just coming slowly across the plains. You watch them coming, and there was this beautiful experience of when it was thundering, and the thunder storms and lightning storm would come, we would all go sit on the back porch, and you would see them rolling across, the winds carrying them, and it was completely dark, and it was these claps of thunder and lightning, and then the sky would light up with these shiny slivers of light. And all of a sudden, you could see more clearly. Right? The clouds would light up, and I remember as we would go on family vacations and drive across, we would be sitting in the back of the car in the middle of a storm and there was just like arcs, right? There was just like this beautiful stream of light that would light the night sky, and you would see things more clearly. Storm produced an eerie, strobe-like effect, illuminating the darkness, and for a sliver of a moment, you get a glimpse of what’s hidden from plain sight.

Sometimes insight and intuition that we receive from God is dramatic like lightning, like thunder, like Job describes as God’s thunderous voice, and it’s really clear in that moment exactly what God is telling us, and we don’t question any longer. I’ve had those experiences in my faith, once when I was first going into ministry, and I was a young guy, and I was trying to pick where I was going to serve next, and I was really struggling with that somehow there is this right path in life, and as clear as day I felt like God said to me, “Rustin, there is not just one path. The question is are you following me no matter which way you go?” And like a clap of thunder, that voice changed how I lived my faith from that point on. It changed everything. I now don’t worry about whether I’m on the right path or the wrong path. I know that as long as I have God with me that I am fine, and, so, I don’t worry about that.

But sometimes, the word thunderstruck might not be the best description of how we experience God’s guidance. In today’s text from Kings, we read about the prophet Elijah, who has been challenged, threatened and chased, and he’s depressed, overwhelmed and deeply fearful. Now just before this passage which was so beautifully read, we see Elijah on the top of a mountain. I don’t know if you remember this story or not, but Elijah is challenging the prophets of Baal to an exercise of whose God is going to show up, and, so, he challenges them, and they each place their burnt offering, or what is going to be their burnt offering on their altar, and Elijah built his altar of stone, and he places a bull on top of the altar, and he digs a giant trench around that altar, and then he pours buckets and buckets and buckets of water until the entire place is saturated with water, even to the point of it being a moat around the whole altar. And Elijah cries out to God and says, “God, would you please show your power so that people will know who you are,” and like a bolt of lightning God sends fire to the altar and consumes everything, including the stone so that all that is left is ash.

What follows is the prophets of Baal who then cry out to their god for hours upon hours, and Elijah ridicules them, and they begin to cut themselves in order to get their god’s attention, and then nothing happens, and then finally they end up killing themselves. After this moment, Jezebel, one of the powerful forces of the time, says that she’s going to put Elijah and all the prophets of God to death for this. So, after God had shown up in such a dramatic and profound way, you would think that Elijah would have no fear, but the truth is that sometimes our most fearful moments are right after the moments God showed up in our lives.

And, so, Elijah, in fear and in anxiety about what could happen in his life if everything is taken from him, and he goes and hides inside of a cave, and that’s where we come to the text in 1Kings 19 that was read. Elijah, arrested by fear of Jezebel’s threat, sinking deeper and deeper into depression and despair, so much so that the scripture tells us he’s ready to take his own life, Elijah makes two identical speeches that tell us how deeply paralyzed that he was. The scripture says he went to the cave and there he

spent the night, and the word of the Lord came upon Elijah. He says, "Why are you here, Elijah?" He replied, "I am moved by zeal for the Lord, the God of hosts. The Israelites have forsaken your covenant. They've torn down your altars and put your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they're out to take my life, too." And God said, "Come out. Stand on the mountain before the Lord."

And, lo, the Lord passed, and there was a great and mighty wind, but the Lord was not in the wind. There was a great and mighty earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. There was a great and mighty fire, but God wasn't in the fire, and then there was silence, and God was in the silence. Sometimes God comes to us like a clap of lightning, and sometimes God comes to us in the deepest and stillest silence when we think that nobody is there. And Elijah, still wrapped in fear, repeats literally the same thing to God. It says that Elijah heard it, and he wrapped his mantle, his prayer shawl around his face. Now, if you've ever been to a synagogue, you'll notice that there are these prayer shawls that everybody wears, and at the bottom there are these knots. They are called the tzitzit, and on the tzitzit, each of those knots represents one of the promises of God from the Hebrew Bible. Each knot represents a promise. So, you can imagine Elijah coming out with his mantle and covering his head and in the midst of covering his head surrounding him are all of God's promises. In the midst of his darkness, in the midst of feeling like he is in the deepest of despair, God's promises are surrounding him, and sometimes he still couldn't see it.

So, he says, again, "God, I am moved by zeal for the Lord. The Israelites have forsaken your covenant, torn down your altars and put your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they're about to take my life." And one of the realities of fear and depression is that when we get into those places, we enter into a microcosm where all we can see is that. Elijah doesn't realize that there are other prophets who are doing and speaking the word of God alongside him, that he isn't alone, that God is with him, but so are the other faithful, and sometimes in the midst of our darkness, and in the Dark Wood of our lives, we can't see even the promises of God that have been fulfilled in our reality. We're burdened, and we're trapped.

See, the point of the story is not that Elijah makes a physical trip to Mt. Sinai. The meaning goes deeper. Elijah is in crises. He wants to terminate both the call of his life in prophetic ministry, but he also wants to terminate his life. He's become hopeless in the place of fear. In an act of sheer grace, God intervenes. He provides the prophet with life giving food and water and suggests that he step out of the cave, to step out of his darkness, and to meet God in a new space, and to return to the bedrock of his faith.

Listen for God's still, small voice. Sometimes in the midst of our darkness, the best thing we can do is to step as far out of our darkness as we possibly can. As someone who's suffered from depression in my own life, sometimes the best thing I can do in the morning, and it's a real work, is to just get out of bed, to get out of bed, to listen to what God is doing and is at work doing in the world and around me in my life – to remember the things that God has done previously, where God has brought me and moved me into a new place. We know from the life of Mother Teresa, in fact one of the most loving and compassionate humans ever to exist, that for the last 20 years of her ministry, she didn't hear the voice of God. What kept her doing what she was doing was the last message she heard from God, and she trusted.

Sometimes being thunderstruck by the awesomeness of God's guidance is characterized by silence better than lightning and booming thunder. We have to remember to listen to silence, and that may be the way to find the new energy we need for a new day, the new vision we need for a new day, the new

sense of purpose we need for a new day. I'll give you a personal example. I'm standing in front of you today. This was not in my ten-year plan. Anybody else have ten-year plans? It was not in my ten-year plan. I was in a great church in LA where it's sunny all the time, with complete freedom and engagement, and my spiritual director began to say to me, "Rustin, something is happening in your prayer life you need to pay attention to. I feel like you might be leaning out from where you are to see what God is doing in this space. Pay attention to the quiet moments, the silent moments." And all the while she's saying this, she doesn't know that John Ross is Facebooking me every five minutes asking me would I consider coming to Wayzata Community Church, and I'd say, "No." And he Facebooks me again. I say, "No." And he's like, "You're going to preach here this summer anyway. Why don't you have a conversation with our leadership team?"

And she says, "Rustin, lean in."

And, so, I lean in, and then I come here, and in the midst of all this, Heather is seeing lightning flashes all around, and she's all in. I wasn't all in. Sometimes you have to listen to the people around you because you can't see the new vision because of the old vision, that we get trapped in our old vision of what life was, like Elijah, that in the midst of his reality, he couldn't see around the prophesy that God had given him before to what the new prophesy was that God might have for his life now. And so, as we're sitting in a boat on Lake Minnetonka, which I hope to be doing with many of you this summer, John says, "What do you think?" And before I can say a word, Heather says, "I think it's great!" And John says, "Well, there went your negotiation-ship."

Sometimes in the midst of life, we can't get around ourselves to hear the voice of God in silence. The challenge for us to hear the voice of God in silence. The challenge for us in the Lenten season is that we might be thunderstruck in whatever way possible so that in the midst of our Dark Wood, in the midst of the darkness of our lives, that we might remember and hear anew God's voice calling out to us with his love, and here's the beautiful part: Scripture tells us that God is love, and perfect love casts out fear. So, if you're living in a world of fear, the only way to get through is to let go and to engage the love.

Let us pray. God, may we be awakened to these thundering silent moments that are your presence in our lives. May we hear your voice. May we hear your call to new life, to new day, to new moments. May we be awakened in the midst of our darkness and depression and fear to the fullness of your love, and may that love work within us to break down the fears that we have upon our present and our future and our past so that we can hear your voice more clearly. We pray this in your name. Amen.