

The Woods are Lovely, Dark, and Deep

2 Samuel 18:1-18

The first poem I really related to in a personal way was Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." He penned the poem in 1922 after staying up all night writing "New Hampshire" and imagines a lone rider on a horse pausing in his travels to watch the snow fall in the woods. It ends with the rider reminding himself that, in spite of the loveliness of the view, he has promises to keep.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

When I heard "The woods are lovely, dark, and deep. But I have promises to keep, And miles to go before I sleep, And miles to go before I sleep." I knew exactly what Robert Frost was saying because I knew the power and the pull of the woods. I also knew that I couldn't go to the woods to play until I had done homework and chores.

To my friends and me, the woods behind our house on Nestro Road were like a magnet to which we were drawn daily. We spent countless hours there, up the hill behind our house in the woods and trees and dense forest. We built tree houses and forts, hunted for things buried in the dirt, and swung on thick vines that clung to the branches of tall, sturdy oak trees.

We played cowboys and indians and Tarzan. We marveled at God's creation and soaked up the beauty created by the world's greatest artist. We had fun in the woods.

But there was a dark side to the woods that could be hostile and unforgiving. Thickets of briars. Acres of poison ivy. Ticks. Chiggers. And worse, snakes! We fell out of trees and once tumbled into a swarm of bees paying a painful price.

Once, and only once, we got so deep into the woods so late at night that we almost got lost there, never to be seen again. Who can forget what happened in the wilderness woods to those sportsmen in "Deliverance?"

Now that I'm grown, I'm more aware of the dangers of the woods, and I don't just mean ticks and chiggers and poison ivy or falling from a tree. In this day when children are kidnapped from their very yards and homes, I am somewhat paranoid about letting my grandchildren go into the woods without me being very close behind.

You know, we acknowledge the dangers, toils and snares of the woods in our everyday culture. If you're a golfer, the last place you want your ball to land is in the woods. When a doctor says "She's improving, but she's not out the woods yet," we know exactly what the doctor means.

Children's stories that have plots that involves going into the woods rarely portray the woods as happy or safe: Snow White. Little Red Riding Hood. Hansel and Gretel.

Scripture speaks of the dangers of the woods. In the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery we read that:

As a wooded area separate from towns and cultivated fields, the forest is the abode of wild animals, especially nocturnal predators. We thus find references to every wild animal of the forest (Psalm 50:10), wild animals in the forest (Isaiah 56:9), and a forest in which wild animals devour people (Hosea 5:14, 13:7-8).¹

Forest imagery in Scripture shows at every turn the symbolism that characterizes the Bible. Many of the literal references noted above in the carry religious and moral meanings beyond the literal.

The forest being buffeted in a windstorm is the direct result of divine activity. The forest often becomes a picture of God's judgment as in Isaiah 10:17 or Hosea 2:12.

But the most vivid Biblical example of the dangers of answering the call of the woods is today's lesson from 2 Samuel that tells the story of the death of King David's son Absalom in the woods of Ephraim.

And more than the literal death of a man, this lesson is a moral story of the death and pain that is inevitable when any of us stroll, saunter, or scurry into the woods of sin.

Absalom had the world by the tail. Absalom had it all. He was of royal blood. He was a hunk of a man. He had hair to die for (and as we shall see, he did). He was smart, charming, and charismatic. He was a man capable of great compassion, as witnessed by the deep comfort and care he gave his sister Tamar after their brother Amnon had raped her.

Everyone in Israel, including David, was drawn to Absalom. The problem was that Absalom was drawn to the dark parts of the woods where pride, power, and greed lurked in the shadows. The woods created by the Master were lovely, dark, and deep indeed, but instead of remembering that he had promises to God to keep, specifically to keep out of them, he dove in head first, long beautiful hair and all.

¹ InterVarsity Press, Leicester England, 2001. pg 1045.

In a story eerily reminiscent of the heavenly revolt and fall of Lucifer (Isaiah 14:12-15), Absalom thinks he should be Number One. And he wants what he wants when he wants it. He decides he doesn't want to wait to be king when his father dies, he wants to be king NOW. So he leads a rebellion against David, and when King David and his army flee, Absalom moves in for the kill.

Just one problem, though. He allowed the battle to take place in the woods of Ephraim. Big mistake, Absalom. You should have stayed out of the woods.

Not only did Absalom's army get slaughtered that day, but the woods killed off more of Absalom's army than David's forces. Verse 8 tells us that "the wood devoured more people that day than the sword devoured" (KJV). Some speculate that the rough terrain, dense growth, wild animals, pits, swamps and morasses did them in. But however it happened, it was the will of God.

Chapter 17, verse 14 tells states that God had already decided to bring disaster on Absalom. And God used the woods of Ephraim to demonstrate what always happens when we wander into the dark shadows of the woods slinking around with sin.

As Absalom fled for his life, his gorgeous long head of hair got tangled in the low hanging thick branches of a large tree, and his mule kept on going. And Joab, David's right hand man to whom David had entreated that Absalom not be harmed, plunged three short spears into Absalom's heart. Why would Joab, ordered not to let harm come to Absalom, do this dastardly thing? Maybe because Absalom set fire to Joab's field in Chapter 14, verses 30-32.

Then ten soldiers surround Absalom, finish him off, and toss his body into a pit heaped high with stones. No royal burial for this prince. His grave was a contemptuous one, reserved for criminals, enemies (Josh 7:26: 8:29) and rebellious sons (Deut 21:20-21). The lesson of staying in sin's woods is death.

But its more than that. It's the untold heartbreak of the loved ones of those who ignored the "Keep Out" sign. The overwhelming anguish of David as he hysterically mourns his son's death is one of the most soul wrenching scenes in the Bible.

His wail "O my son, Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you O Absalom, my son, my son!" has been sobbed by parents of wayward offspring since the Fall. The only difference is that the names have changed and the circumstances of where loved ones have strayed are peppered with tags like cocaine, marijuana, liquor, AIDS, and too many more.

Our heavenly parent, God himself, feels like David felt when we trespass into the shadows of sin in the dark parts of the woods. And like David, he wants no harm to come to his children. Because when we suffer the ravages of what lurks in the woods, God felt like David, and wished he could have died in our place.

And so, He did.

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's son, God took away the eternally fatal consequences of our foray into the woods. If our life was a two act play, our dabbling in sin would be Act I where the curtain falls on an unhappy ending, but where Act II, with God dying on a cross in our place, ends happily.

But the pain lingers still. Even though we have the antidote, sin leaves a bitter aftertaste that lingers for a long time . . . in our mouths and in the mouths of the ones we love. The nightmares don't evaporate when we awake from sin's sleep.

So the next time you feel the magnetic pull of sin's lovely, dark and deep woods, ask the Holy Spirit to strengthen and fortify you with whatever you need to resist the pull. And remind yourself that you have promises to God to keep and miles of following Jesus before you sleep.

Amen and amen

"The Woods are Lovely, Dark, and Deep"
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I. Robert Frost's Poem: "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

- A. The woods are lovely, dark, and deep. But I have _____ to keep...
- B. There is a _____ to the woods that can be hostile and _____.
- C. Scripture speaks of the dangers of the woods:
Isaiah 10:17
Hosea 2:12

II. Absalom

- A. Absalom was drawn to the dark parts of the woods where P_____, P_____, and G_____ lurk.
- B. Absalom, instead of remembering that he had promises to keep, dove _____ into the woods.

III. David

- A. The overwhelming anguish of David
- B. God Himself feels like _____ when we trespass into the shadows of sin
- C. If life were a 2 Act play, Act I would have an _____ ending; Act II would have God _____ on the cross