

God and the Empty Spaces
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Psalm 22:1-5
Genesis 28:10-16
Matthew 4:1-11

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Where is God? That seems to be one of the questions asked through the ages, along with questions about the Who, What and Why of God. But, this "Where" question seems to have a particularly personal nature to it, because we ask it in relation to ourselves.

The story goes that a Sunday School teacher once asked a young boy this very question after they had finished the lesson for the day. "Justin", said the teacher, "what have we learned from this morning's Bible verses? Can you tell me where God is?" Justin was silent. The teacher asked, again, "Justin, I am going to ask you one more time. Where is God?"

Justin jumped up, grabbed his little brother by the hand, and ran home and hid in the closet. His brother whispered to him in the dark, "Why are we hiding in this closet?" "Shh!" Justin said. "God is missing, and it looks like they're blaming us!"

The question of the whereabouts of God is one which we all ask from time to time. There are points along life's journey where God does seem to be missing, or at the least, hidden from our view. And this sense of God's absence might raise other questions for us: "Am I a spiritual failure? Have I done something wrong? Will I ever feel God's presence again? Do other people experience this emptiness as I do now?"

These are hard questions, but perhaps the last one is easiest to answer. The history of our faith bears witness to the fact that experiencing the absence of God happens to everyone. It seems to be part of the human spiritual condition. "Where is God?" is not a new question. The ancient texts of scripture are filled with poetry, stories, and conversations which ask, and sometimes answer, this same question.

"Emptiness, emptiness, all is emptiness!" cries out the author of Ecclesiastes. "If only I knew how to reach God, or how to travel to where God dwells!" says Job. "If I go eastward, God is not there; or westward- still, I cannot see him. If I seek God in the north, she is not to be found, invisible still when I turn to the south...God has made my heart sink, God has filled me with fear. For darkness hides me from God, and gloom veils God's presence from me." These words are unsettling in their honesty and pain. They disturb us with their stark, raw emotion. God is beyond our reach, hidden by darkness. Indeed, it sometimes seems that God deliberately withdraws from human relationship. "On that day my anger shall blaze against them; I will forsake them. I will hide my face from them", God says to Moses in Deuteronomy.

The passage from Matthew about Jesus' experience in the wilderness is one that has long been a traditional reading for the season of Lent. Jesus' spiritual retreat into the desert for 40 days of prayer and fasting has often been seen as a model for the spiritual disciplines of Lent. The temptation narrative is a rich source for musings on materialism, power, spiritual priorities, and a host of other topics. But, I want to save those for a later time. What jumps out at me as I have read these verses recently is the sense of God's absence.

The first two verses of chapter four read, "Then the Spirit led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the Devil. After spending forty days and nights without food, Jesus was hungry." It is as if God nudges Jesus into the wilderness and then withdraws. Jesus is left alone in an empty landscape until his questions, hunger, and inner turmoil become personified and take form as One who is Not God, the Devil. It strikes

me that this story is as much about God's absence, as it is about the presence of the Devil and his conversation with Jesus. God never speaks, but seems to be waiting silently in the wings. Jesus may have passed the test, but my guess is that he felt all the human emotions we feel in times when God seems far away... bewilderment, doubt, even abandonment.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The words of the Psalmist are also on the lips of a dying Christ. They have been repeated through the centuries by thousands of good people in the midst of bad times. A child dies, a devastating illness occurs, a mind begins to disintegrate, a marriage ends, depression grows into full-blown despair, tragedy strikes a body blow, and we are left gasping. "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?"

This cry does not come from a failure of spiritual nerve. It is not born out of lack of faith but rather from an honest struggle with the God who sometimes is best known by the shape of absence. And, it is not those who are without religion who are troubled by the times when God's face is hidden, but those we see as spiritually wise, those we most admire and respect.

Martin Shaw, Canon at Saint Edmundsbury Cathedral in Suffolk, England writes that those he knows who are "close to God" are not necessarily always happy or peaceful. As he says:

"Books on spirituality line my walls! And many of them assume two things. One is that I want to get closer to God and the second that 'getting closer' will bring some sort of peace. Of course, some level of contentment and ease are important to personal health, but most of those I respect, who take prayer to a deeper place, struggle acutely with their lives. They are frequently angry or are prone to varying levels of depression, and sometimes both. Paradoxically, they are also people who seem to know how to enjoy themselves and are even occasionally outrageous in their behavior!"

Shaw goes on to write that as a pastor who offers spiritual direction and companionship to people who feel the absence of God, he cannot offer simple answers just to comfort or explain away what cannot be understood. Shaw says "spiritual direction is not about filling that absence but accompanying it with the tortured silence of the wise who live by questions and not by answers".

<http://www.franciscans.org.uk/2002jan-shaw.html>

Much modern religion seems determined to do exactly the opposite- fill up the emptiness with cheap answers and false solutions. I received an email some time ago from a friend who wanted to share a sign she saw in front of a Youngsville church, a sign which read, "No more emptiness". My friend wrote,

"I looked at that and thought, how sad for them! But how seductive that is...how much harder it is to question and doubt and to allow yourself to experience the anxiety of emptiness, where you don't have any answers. How much harder it is to look death in the face and say, yeah, this could really be the end of "me", whoever "me" is. What does it mean to be truly empty?"

What **does** it mean? I have spoken to you before about the Welsh clergyman and poet, R.S. Thomas, one of those wise souls who lived with the questions and spoke honestly about his own dark nights of the soul when God seemed far away. His poem, "The Absence" was quoted by pastors in several sermons after 9/11. He writes:

*It is this great absence
That is like a presence, that compels
Me to address it without hope
Of a reply. It is a room I enter*

I think we all need to know that...that someone will be with us, no matter what. Even a schemer like Jacob has not been abandoned. God has committed to accompany him. This promise is repeated throughout the psalms. It is made to the nation of Israel even when they pine away in exile in a strange land. God's face is not hidden forever. It is the promise made visible in Jesus who is called Emmanuel, "God With Us". It is the last word of the risen Christ to the world, "Lo, I am with you always."

After Jacob wakes from his dream, he exclaims "Surely God is in this place and I knew it not!" Jacob was shocked with the certainty that he could not escape God's presence, even when his own senses did not tell him that God was there. Jacob realized that, like the psalmist, he could say:

Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

God is present, and sometimes there are moments in our lives when we feel this presence deeply. Perhaps, it is only the tiniest stirring or the briefest glimpse of something that quickly slips away again. Whatever they are, these moments are precious indeed.

But there are other times when we cannot seem to find God at all, and the face of God is hidden. God's promised presence is not apparent. We feel like the disciples left behind when the risen Christ ascends into heaven, left alone, staring into the clouds, feeling lost and afraid. We don't understand why there are these times in our spiritual lives when God seems so frustratingly absent. But we do know that it happens to all of us.

So the question becomes how does one live in the times when God seems far away? Theologian Walter Brueggeman writes that the lives of our biblical ancestors might offer some possible answers. For them, in times of absence, God's promise of presence was **remembered**, and God's presence was also **anticipated**. It would come again, somehow, some way.

For us, this might offer a way of making sense of our own lives in times when God seems hidden. What may not now be felt, is nevertheless there as promised. Even in the very bleakest of places or the darkest of times, we might encounter God unexpectedly, and this surprise will wring from us the same cry as that of Jacob, "Surely God was in this place, and I knew it not!"

Indeed, God's hiddenness is frequently more our own doing than God's. As the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart writes, "God is at home. It is we who have gone out for a walk."

Eckhart and other Christian mystics write about how times of emptiness and absence can also be pathways back home and back to God. Sometimes we just have to let the darkness be darkness for awhile. In the emptiness we can learn to let go... let go of false theologies, let go of things and people that are too precious to us, let go of our fear of failure, let go of some of our fear of death. Our emptiness can sometimes heal us. It can give us an ability to love and live in a way that is authentic and whole. This is part of the message of Lent.

Letting go, falling... this is hard to do. We like soaring better...the high places, the mountaintop experiences. But there is also beauty in the fall. Consider a diver on a high board, a dancer on a stage. When I was the interim pastor at Binkley Baptist Church a couple of years ago, I met a remarkable older woman, Elise Goldman, formerly a dancer who had studied with Martha Graham in New York in the early 1940's. I was intrigued when Elise told me that one of her other dance teachers, Doris Humphrey, developed an entire technique based on the concept of the fall. After leaping into the air, a dancer would

strive to bring creative beauty to the way her body dropped to the floor. Falling was actually more important, more beautiful, than rising.

So how do we continue to put one foot in front of the other during those times when God seems hidden? Perhaps we can try to find some meaning in absence- we can close our eyes and believe that even falling and letting go can be significant. We can also remember ... remember the times, however brief or infrequent, when we encountered God in an unexpected place in our own lives and "knew it not."

There will always be times when we feel spiritually dry, when we are wandering in wilderness... that place between places. But, we can know that absence is not the final word. As the saying goes, God is not finished with us yet. There is more to come.

I had a friend and colleague, Sister Evelyn Mattern, who died a few years ago from lung cancer. Evelyn was a poet, among many other things, and one of her essays, "Thresholds" ends with words that were spoken at her funeral.

I read them to you now, as one more attempt to say what words really cannot say. I think they paint a picture, like a Zen proverb, where two opposites are equally true. God is both absent and present, and fullness of life also rests on emptiness. Evelyn says it this way:

*My midnight window frames ebony
Until the stars puncture the sky
And the moon, half full or more, lightens
The aisles between the winter trees.*

*Falling to sleep in the dark, I hear
Only stirrings from the dog's dream,
The hum of the refrigerator,
And green wood crackling in the stove.*

*Meanwhile the snow flings its flimsy veil
Across the land.....
...The dark beyond our sleeping
Is full beyond our knowing
And not the emptiness we think.*

(Evelyn Mattern & Helen David Brancato, *Ordinary Places, Sacred Spaces*, Bayeaux Arts, 2005.