

When God is Silent

Psalm 22:1-5

St. Mark's & St. James UCC ~ November 15, 2020

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David speaks these words to God.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night but I find no rest.

Perhaps there is no greater pain than that of abandonment. The heart breaks when the one whom you depended upon, whom you thought would always be there, who would always respond no matter the situation – has turned away and is no longer there.

Many, many, many years ago, from kindergarten through 5th grade, my best friend Brian and I hung out. We played games at recess. We read books together. Did homework together. He was my best friend. And he was by far, the smartest kid in all the school.

When we got to sixth grade we were moved from the small, country elementary school to the big middle school of Plymouth. One day Brian came up to me and said that he could no longer be my friend. He wanted to be friends with the smart kids. He wanted to hang out with those who could hang with him intellectually. From that day on we were no longer friends.

I can understand David's feeling of abandonment, and aloneness.

He's in the middle of great trial –

His son has turned against him.

His country is at war.

His enemies are rising.

The poor all around him are being trampled.

The needy are groaning for relief.

And nothing seemed to be going right.

David – the king of Israel – cries out to God,
Why have you turned your back on me?
Why don't you hear my cries of pain?
Don't you love me anymore?
Why are you silent?

Makes you want to cry doesn't it? David wanted to know why God seemed so far away – why God wasn't answering him.

We've probably all felt that way at times. That's not to say we've never had encounters with God where he breaks into our lives with power and answers our prayers and wins our trust and waters the garden of our faith, making it lush and green.

But then there are those times when chaos careens with apparent carelessness through our lives leaving us shattered. Or an unrelenting darkness descends. Or an arid wind that we don't understand blows across our spiritual landscape, leaving the surface of our soul cracked and parched. And we cry to God in our anguish and God just seems silent.

A few years ago, Tamika Holmes was settling into her new home in Phoenix when she got a call that she never thought she would receive.

Her 20-year-old daughter, Jahara Kennedy, was dead.

Kennedy was celebrating her sister's birthday at the Days Inn in Milwaukee when four men tried to rob them. Kennedy barricaded herself behind a closed door. One of the men shot through the door, and a bullet hit Kennedy in the head.

Do you think families who suffer the loss of a loved one because of a violent or hateful crime believe God to be absent in that moment?

Does the one who lost his job, lost his wife, his car, his dignity and everything else because of a drug addiction believe that God is absent?

Does the teenager, struggling to know who she is and what her purpose is, and why others laugh at her ~ does she ask David's question, "*My God, why have you turned your back on me? Don't you care about me?*"

Bart Ehrman, professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina once felt the silence of God.

He was unable to resolve the tension between a good God and all the suffering that goes on in the world. He wrote these words:

The God I once believed in was a God who was active in this world. He saved the Israelites from slavery; he sent Jesus for the salvation of the world; he intervened on behalf of his people when they were in desperate need; he was actively involved in my life. But I can't believe in that God anymore, because from what I now see around the world, he doesn't intervene.

Could Prof. Ehrman, in some way, be saying, "*God doesn't care anymore?*"

That God is good and all powerful and loves and cares for us,
seems to some a very churchly sentiment in our world today.

And maybe it's not all that surprising that some people don't want to go to church anymore.

They don't want to be a part of something that just doesn't make sense – they've asked themselves the same question, if God is good and loving and kind and merciful and gracious – how does God allow all this bad, evil stuff to happen in the world?

It's like the young man who joined his wife at the Christmas Eve service. The man found the service to be emotionally difficult – disturbing, especially when the congregational prayer took place. A lay person stood during the service and said in great prayerful solemnity, "*You came into the darkness and made a difference. Come into the darkness again.*"

This prayer brought him to tears, not tears of joy – but tears of frustration.
"*Why doesn't God enter into the darkness again? Why is the darkness so overwhelming?*"

To say that God is with you in your suffering is not enough! How do you say to mom and dad whose two year old girl is diagnosed with leukemia... *I know it's bad, but God is with you.*

Those words are often said with the best of intentions.

God is with you.

Blessed are those who mourn.

Blessed are those who suffer.

These are biblical passages upon which our faith is built. But here's the thing:
when grief strikes,
or we feel abandoned,
or when God is silent...

those words are rendered meaningless and unreal. The reality of grief, the reality of abandonment, or the reality of suffering tremendous pain and heartache is the absence of God.

So what do we do when we feel like David? We're overwhelmed by all that is going on around us and we lament God's absence in our life. What do we do?

Take a moment and look around at the people sitting here... go ahead....

Look to the person to your left and your right, behind and in front of you?
Who is sitting across the aisle?

This is your church family. You may or may not know one another personally.

But these are the people who pray for you when you're hurting.

These are the people whom you call when you want to share a heavy burden.

These are the people who come and run the vacuum cleaner for you and do a load of dishes, because you can't get up to do it yourself.

These are the people who attend the funeral service *with* you,
and bring food to your home,
and sit and cry with you.

These are the people who keep you in mind when a job opening is posted at their company, and they know you're looking.

This is the place you come to when you are feeling abandoned so you can surround yourself with people who care about you.

This is where you find people with similar passions – like singing, and knitting, and crafts, and teaching and going on missions' trips.

This is where you find other people who want to know Jesus.
This is the place where you feel like you belong.
This is the place where God's presence nourishes you.

Before I get everyone believing this is the *only* place, or that this place is mysteriously *better* than any other ... notice the order in which I began with this list.

It starts with the people – people coming together, loving and caring for one another even and especially in the midst of great crisis. The coming together might take place in your home, or over a cup of coffee, or on Zoom, or a phone call, or somewhere else outside the church walls.

And it moves to a place where more and more people can come together and feel like they belong to something bigger than themselves.

It moves to a place where people can pray together, break bread together, read scripture together, hear the Good News together, and together lift their thanks as well as their anger and fear to God.

Even though David felt abandoned by God he realized that it may not be God that was absent, perhaps he had absented himself from God. Because he goes on to say:

Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were rescued; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

Sometimes, the hard truth is that we are the ones who have absented *ourselves* from God and not the other way around.

See God is always with us. We have this promise from way back in time when Isaiah tells us, Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God is with us’.)

A promise made by God to all of humanity – from Noah, to Abraham, to Isaac and Jacob, to Moses and David, and through Jesus. God is with us. Through thick and thin; light and dark; happiness and sadness God is with us.

You don’t have to take my word for it. Both Old and New Testament tell us this very thing.

And then there is the little girl who was diagnosed with Leukemia. Her name was Anna and she went through treatment for seven years and at times she was disease free!

But in the end the leukemia came back. And those gathered around her in her last moments share this story:

Before she died, Anna mustered the final energy to sit up in her hospital bed and say, “the angels – they’re so beautiful. Do you hear their singing? I’ve never heard such beautiful singing!” Then she laid her head down on her pillow and died.

God’s not silent. God’s not absent. Sometimes our answer isn’t here. It’s back home with God. Whether here or there; God is with us.