

The Deafening Silence of God

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

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 October 11, 2009

A boy and his younger brother were constantly getting into trouble at school. The teachers had the parents' phone number on speed-dial. The parents tried everything they knew to get the boys to behave, but to no avail. Finally, in an act of desperation, they asked the pastor to talk some sense into the boys. The pastor agreed that he would speak to each boy separately in order to best discern which boy was the instigator.

The older son went into the pastor's office, while the younger waited in the hallway. The pastor sat the boy down in a chair, then he sat himself down directly in front of him. The pastor stared at the boy and in a deep voice he asked, "Where is God?"

Silence. The boy just sat in his chair and looked at his feet.

Again the pastor asked in his deep, most serious voice, "Where is God?"

Still, the boy had nothing to say. He just shrugged his shoulders and stuck his hands in his pockets and kept looking at the floor.

A third time the pastor bellowed the question, "Where is God?"

This time the boy jumped up from his chair and ran out of the pastor's office as fast as he could. His little brother ran after him. When the younger boy caught up with his brother, he asked, "What happened in there? Why did you run out so suddenly?"

The older brother took a deep breath, and he said, "God is missing, and they think we've taken him!"

We may laugh at the notion that God is missing, because we have always been told that God is always everywhere, that there is nowhere we can go where God is not. We can quote the 46th Psalm, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble..."¹ Or what is it that the 139th Psalm reminds us?

"Where can I go from your spirit?

Or 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."²

And so when we talk about God being missing, we can't be serious.

Or can we? Because if God is always present, then why did Job experience the exact opposite, namely the deafening silence and absence of God? If there is nowhere we can flee from God's presence, then why does Job cry out, "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to God's dwelling... If I go forward, God is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left God hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the

1 Psalm 46:1

2 Psalm 139:7-10

right, but I cannot see him..."³ If there is nowhere we can go where God is not, then why is it that Jesus cried out from the cross the words of the 22nd Psalm: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"⁴

Scripture presents us with the paradoxical reality that, though God is always present everywhere, still there are times when we experience the deafening silence of God. There are times when we fall so deep into the pit of grief and despair that we feel like God is nowhere to be found. And there are times when we want to shake our fists at God and demand an explanation for what has happened to us. The Christian tradition is generally uncomfortable with this notion of God's seeming absence, or with the idea that we can argue with God. But the Old Testament helps us see that such experiences are actually vital to the health of our faith and piety.

For us to say that God is never hidden from us would be disingenuous. For us to say that we should not argue with God about the unfairness and injustice with which good people are treated would be to deny a vital part of our engaging with God in all of life's experiences.

C.S. Lewis, the stalwart defender of the Christian faith, shares his own experience of the silence of God. He found love late in his life and married Helen Joy Gresham. But only four years into their marriage Joy died of cancer. The grief was suffocating for Lewis. Listen as Lewis describes how he experienced God in his darkest hours:

"Meanwhile," he says, "where is God? This is one of the most disquieting of symptoms [of grief]. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence..."⁵

Have you ever heard the silence of God? Have you ever felt like when you most needed God the door was slammed in your face and bolted, even double-bolted from the inside?

Poet Ann Weems lost her son in an automobile accident on his 21st birthday. She, too, in her search for God in the midst of her grief experiences the deafening silence of God:

"God, have you forgotten our covenant?
Have you forgotten your promise?
Can't you enter my world of tears?
Can't you make your home
in a heart that is broken?
O God, acknowledge that you hear my cry!
Send word that you are on the way!
Answer me so that
I can cling to some hope
of your presence,
for I have believed
that you would come."⁶

3 Job 23:3, 8-9

4 Psalm 22:1

5 C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996 (reprint of 1961 edition)), pp. 5-6.

6 Ann Weems, "Lament Psalm Eight," *Psalms of Lament*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), p. 16.

Don't you see—to deny our experience of the absence of God is to deny some of the deepest parts of our humanity. Job helps us understand that there will be times in our lives when we desperately need God, but we won't be able to find God.

As we make our way through Job's experience of suffering and heartache, we're not going to find a neat and tidy answer to all our questions about suffering and evil and God's role in it all. Job's friends Eliphaz and Bildad and Zophar try to give Job some simple answers to his profound questions about suffering. They have told Job that only the wicked get punished, therefore Job must have done something to deserve his suffering. They have told Job that maybe God is teaching him a lesson, and he just needs to accept what has come his way. They have told Job that, as bad as things are, God has held back and not given Job everything he could have given. Job doesn't accept the answers his friends give him. For Job, life isn't so neat and tidy as to answer with simplistic explanations.

But what we do find in Job is a genuine expression of faith that refuses to believe that the way things are is the way they are meant to be. His is a faith that refuses to believe that the silence of God is eternal; his is a faith that will not give up until he has had his audience with God.

And in his persistence Job gives us permission to do the same. Job gives us permission to fight against the silence of God and cry out against unjust suffering. Job gives us permission to demand that God address our most profound pain. Job gives us permission to be relentless in our seeking of answers.

You see, as long as we adopt the posture of Job, then we are still engaged with God, even when we don't see or hear God. Some would take God's silence as evidence that there is no God, and so they would argue against the existence of God. But Job is not making a case against the existence of God; he is making a case to argue with God. And in so doing, Job is still in relationship with God.

When I encounter people who are experiencing despair and the deafening silence of God, I urge them not to give up. I tell them that it's okay to shake their fists in anger. I tell them that it's okay to cry out that their suffering is unfair. At least when they're railing against God, they're still acknowledging that God is part of the picture.

In his persistence, Job gives us the permission to do the same. Even against the silence of God, we are given permission to refuse to believe that the way things are is the way they are meant to be. "Those who search for God with Job's eyes will refuse to accept that this is the world God intends. They will not agree that God has determined that human beings are simply 'born to trouble' (4:7). They will not believe that faith must be forever construed as silent submission to injustice that terrorizes the innocent and subverts the moral foundations of creation." Like Job, we must "stubbornly insist that the absent [and silent] God remains committed to a world that has the capacity to be, [as it was in the very beginning,] 'very good.'"⁷

If the experience of Job were all that Scripture shared with us, surely we would have little reason to hope, other than that we would refuse to let the darkness of God's silence keep us silent in the wake of suffering and pain. Persistence will only take us thus far.

But there is an answer to the silence and abandonment we experience. You see, in his hour of deepest suffering Jesus cried out the words of the 22nd Psalm: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And in so doing Jesus demonstrates to us that God has taken into his very being the deepest depths of human suffering. And because of the resurrection we are assured that the experience of abandonment and forsakenness is not the last word to us. Instead, we are promised that even our deepest despair is within the scope of the redemption that Jesus Christ has won for us.

My friends in Christ, let us never deny the reality of the silence of God. It is a silence that often comes to us in our darkest moments, and makes the darkness even darker. To deny the silence would be to deny what is one of our most profound experiences as human beings.

7 Samuel E. Balentine, "Between Text and Sermon, Job 23:1-9, 16-17", *Interpretation*, 1999, p. 292.

But neither do we dare let the silence of God silence our cries to God, for through Job we see that we have permission to persist until we find the answers we need. And we are promised through Jesus Christ that there is a word that breaks the silence, it is the very word of God, the word of hope, the word of love. It is the word that says, Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Even in the silence.

Amen.