

The Hiddenness of God

Isaiah 64: 1-9

*A sermon given by the Reverend Casey W. FitzGerald on the first Sunday of Advent, November 30, 2008,
at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia*

Focus Text

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
²as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
⁴From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.
⁵You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
⁶We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
⁷There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
⁸Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity for ever.
Now consider, we are all your people.*

Mary could not speak. I cannot remember exactly why she could not speak...if it was because of the cancer itself, or because of the treatments she received during her many months living in the hospital. When I first was called to her room and introduced myself as the chaplain, she just looked at me as tears began to stream down her face...she did not need words to convey her feelings. It was one of those visits where I felt instantly connected with the patient. She soon became one of my favorites. I visited often over the next few weeks and came to find out that Mary had a 12 year old son at home who was struggling in school and now, much to her chagrin, was being cared for by her sister; she was in the middle of trying to move out of the unhealthy apartment complex in which she lived, and she had been diagnosed with a serious form of cancer which had brought her unexpectedly to that hospital room. I suppose that place had been both a source of hope and her prison those many long months.

Our visits continued for weeks until one day, I came in for my regular visit, and heard her voice for the first time. It was weak, but sounded so beautiful. She explained that we had been and must continue to be, what she called, “prayer warriors”: committed to both God’s cause and her own healing. Things were looking up, and sure enough one day I went to visit her on the unit and she was no longer there. Mary had been discharged. Hope abounded. “God is good,” I thought... a prayer warrior, indeed. The outcome had been a success by anyone’s standards. It was one of those times when I felt assured of both the efficacy of prayer and the importance of my work...when I would surely have echoed the notion in our text from Isaiah that God meets those who do right, those who remember God in their ways (v. 5). Mary had faithfully remembered God in prayer and, eventually, her prayers for healing were answered. Like the widow who knocked and knocked and knocked at the judge’s door, it seemed that God finally answered her persistence. There is always a sense of relief when we feel God has entered our lives in tangible, meaningful ways. So it was with Mary.

About two weeks later I came into the pastoral care office to relieve the overnight chaplain of her duties. We went over her visits as we had done so many times before and came to her last call early that morning. She had been paged to the ER only to watch doctors attempt unsuccessfully to revive a 12 year old boy from a deadly asthmatic attack. When she handed me the report, I recognized the last name. My heart sank. I rushed through the corridors of the hospital to the crowded ER and found Mary there, suddenly childless. Wordless once again, but not for the same reasons as before. Tears streamed down those cheeks. I have no doubt that she would have gladly exchanged her life for her child’s. And yet, there she was—her cancer in remission, her son in the morgue.

In her waiting room she was surrounded by loving family and friends who said prayers and thanked God for his blessings and plans. I dutifully put on my “armor” and joined the rest of her prayer warriors, but all the while I wondered if my “armor” was truly a mask—covering up my real feelings of God’s absence and betrayal.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...”

God—you have hidden yourself from us.

It is easy to believe in a good God who intercedes on our behalf when things are going well, when the world make sense. It is much more difficult when our sense of order and goodness is overthrown by loss and tragedy. We are haunted by prayers unanswered. During these times, when God seems unavailable, we are forced to ask about the very nature of God’s self.

Old Testament scholar Richard Nysse wrote an article titled, “The Dark Side of God...” In it, he writes, “I use [the phrase ‘the dark side of God’] because it snaps us to attention. The phrase is shocking in a religious culture that has reduced God to either a useful notion or a dispenser of enhancements to our lives.”ⁱ I do not believe the notion of the “dark side of God,” refers so much to some evil-causing part of God’s nature, but more accurately, the “dark side of God” reflects the fact that God is more complex than we would have God be. It is daring to even ask difficult questions of God, especially ones in which we wonder if God is with us at all. But I have always suspected that an unquestioning faith is a naïve faith. Isaiah himself shows us what it means to relate to God in all of God’s complexity. He acts as intercessor between God and the Israelites. He remembers, as we do now, the God of his ancestors and remembers that things just don’t seem to be the same. As author James Brennehan put it, “It’s been a long time since God sent pillars of cloud by day and fire by night. It’s been a long time since God rained manna from heaven or sent plagues upon Israel’s enemies. It seems to these Jewish refugees that God is no longer minding the store.”ⁱⁱ

Who is this God?

Like the Israelites who seem to search and search in vain for God, I’m sure many of us have wondered why God does not act as God did in our time-honored stories from the Old Testament. We are often frustrated in our search for signs that God is with us. And when we believe that we know how God *should be* acting, we may find ourselves in good company with the disaffected Israelites. Tired of waiting, the people have withdrawn from the hidden God, and no longer follow God’s path. They have waited long enough, it seems. And sometimes it feels that we have waited long enough, too.

Who is this God?

Deitrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a German concentration camp in 1944, dared to draw this conclusion: “God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him.... The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us.”ⁱⁱⁱ I believe Bonhoeffer is saying that God is with us—*especially in our abandonment*. He calls on Mark’s gospel, where Jesus on the cross cries out to God: “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). *And so, it is Jesus who truly knows what it means to feel that God has hidden God’s self. And because of that—because he suffered as a human, because he felt that ungodly godly abandonment, because he died on a cross—because of all this, we know that God has not ultimately abandoned us.* It is mind-boggling, I know...complex beyond our full understanding.

I know discussing the hiddenness of God might seem to be a bleak way to begin the Advent season...a season presumably to be filled with joy and excitement. But there is great truth that for many of us, Advent is a season in which a people confronted with darkness wait for a great light to shine again in every corner of the world. Such is the trust of our prophet, Isaiah, who speaks to God from a community in real pain, but speaks to God out of real trust. What I love about this text is that Isaiah is honest. Honest with himself, honest with the people, and, most importantly, honest with God. How incredible that we have a God with whom we may be ourselves...with whom we may voice our deepest fears, even of abandonment by God...all the while trusting that we are not ultimately abandoned. “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand,” writes Isaiah. “Now consider, we are all your people.” We learn from Isaiah that faith in God does not mean that we live in some kind of utopia, or that we understand the reason behind everything that takes place in the world. Faith in God does not mean that we can predict how God answers us every step of the way. Faith in God during Advent means acknowledging the real and present darkness we face: war, disease, poverty, hunger, and, of course, personal darkness, as with depression, grief, anger, etc. Acknowledging their presence and yet being able to cry out to the God of hope and promise...this is what Advent means to us. We look to the birth of the Christ child, even as we look to the communion table and remember his sacrifices, even as we look to the day when all will be redeemed.

Surrounding Mary’s son in the hospital, holding the trembling hands of a grieving mother, I wondered where God might be. Even as those around me prayed appropriately with thanksgiving for a good God, I prayed also out of devastation, anger, bewilderment, and abandonment...God, why have you hidden yourself from us? But even as we grieved, I knew...knew that just as God sent his Son to show us that he is with us, our Emmanuel, God has also promised to come again. Death will not have the final word...not for Mary’s son, not for me, not for you. War will cease, diseases will be no more, poverty will end, taking with it its companion hunger, and all darkness will come to an end. This is the great hope we find in Advent...and this is the good news that in Christ we are not forsaken. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Nysse, Richard, "The Dark Side of God: Considerations for Preaching and Teaching," *Word & World*, 1997.

ⁱⁱ Brenneman, James, "Living by the Word," *The Christian Century*, November 18, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Taken from article by Scott Bader-Saye in *Feasting on the Word* (edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor).