

“Where Is God?”
Exodus 17:1-7
September 25, 2011

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Saint Paul, Minnesota

The Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Prayer: Guide us, O God, by your word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will, discover peace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It was bad enough when Elizabeth got laid off from her job—a job that had taken her too long to find, a job she hadn’t been too enthusiastic about taking but a job nonetheless, and now a job that she had learned she was good at and actually enjoyed. So it was bad enough to get laid off from that job, but when the doctor called with the lab results informing her that her cancer had returned and spread, she was devastated. She is a person of faith but now as a single, middle age person, she finds her faith shaken to the core and she’s afraid and wonders, “Where is God in all of this?”

Earl had had a wonderful life, eighty seven years of it, sixty one of them spent with the one true love of his life who died two years ago rather unexpectedly. He’s now living in a care facility, a move forced upon him by his son, his only child who lives out of state and only rarely visits because of the demands of his job and family. Earl has never been much of an extrovert. He doesn’t know many people where he lives. He has ongoing physical issues of his own and he can’t get around like he used to, so his days are mostly spent in his one room, with a comfortable reclining chair and single bed in the corner, reminding him that he now sleeps alone.

He spends his days looking around that room and he wonders where it all went—the years, the things and the people that used to fill his house. What happened to it all? After a lifetime it all comes down to one room, a single bed and a shoebox of old photos—shadows of all his yesterdays. And he misses his wife with a loneliness that aches, and he longs to hear her voice call out his name one more time, and he wonders, “Where is God in all of this?”

The parents sit numb at the graveside as Taps are played and the American flag is slowly lifted from the casket and then folded neatly before them by the crisp young Marines—folded with snaps and somber precision as if it’s the one final act of dignity they can offer, which it is. Then one of the young Marines takes the neatly folded flag and walks around the casket, bends down to her level and hands it to her saying, “Ma’am, on behalf of a grateful nation, please accept our deepest sympathies for the loss of your son.” Then the Marine stands upright, takes a step back and slowly salutes those devastated parents clutching the flag while sitting before the casket of their twenty three year old son who didn’t make it out of Afghanistan.

He was on his second tour of duty, a young man so full of promise, so full of confidence they can still picture him on the day he enlisted because he wanted to serve his country like it was a calling. And now their son is a casualty of war—another name to be etched on a future wall somewhere when this is all over and we struggle to keep his memory alive. But a folded flag and words of commendation from a young Marine, someone else’s son, does little to plug the deep emptiness they feel—an emptiness inside of them, like a hole violently ripped open the instant they heard the knock on their door by those men in uniform. And in their grief and confusion,

their hurt and their anger, the world no longer makes sense. Things are not as they seem and yet the rest of the world keeps going, not seeming to care and they're left wondering, "Where is God in all of this?"

Tamika was first abused at age ten and then abused for the last time, at least physically, at age fifteen, when out of desperation as much as out of sheer survival, she ran away from home. The abusers were various boyfriends her mother collected over the years, bums essentially who would drift into and out of their lives, bringing with them their criminal records, their twisted friends and the chaos of their bad habits. The steady drug use in the house, the loss of heat and electricity because of unpaid bills and the evictions, three of them in five years, all became too much to handle for someone who was trying to go to school.

Tamika had tried to take refuge at high school where, for a few hours each day she could attempt blocking out the nightmare at home while learning about far away places and dreaming of a better life. Most days after school she'd go to the homeless youth drop in center, an ad hoc shelter to about sixty youth open from 1:00 to 8:00 p.m. six days a week, each with similar stories to tell and who prefer that place than to the hell holes that await them were they to go home. Then one day after a particularly frightening situation at home involving another drug crazed boyfriend of her mother's and a gun, she left for good vowing never to return. She lived on the streets. She'd done what a young person has to do in order to survive.

And she wondered why no one came looking for her. She wondered if her mother even cared about her. When the weather was warm she would sleep outside preferring that to the chaos at home. And occasionally she'd wander into a church nearby her home where the people were nice and where she could usually get a meal on Sunday afternoons. She'd sit through the worship service and listen to the preacher talk about God this and God that—about how God did this for this one and about how God did that for that one. And yet when she looked at her own life she wondered what God had ever done for her. And she wondered "Where is God in all of this?" And as just one of the 2,500 youth who are homeless in Minnesota today, she is not alone in wondering the same thing.

"Where is God?"

My hunch is that many of us ask that question and most often, we ask it when life has hit us hard and left us questioning or trying to make sense out of something that seems absolutely senseless. A sudden and unexpected death. A huge injustice. A tragedy beyond comprehension until we see it for ourselves on television.

The feeling that in our time of deepest need, God is somehow absent, reflects the most profound sense of aloneness and abandonment and betrayal we can feel. It is the fundamental question about human suffering—about the existence of evil in a world created by God and pronounced as good. It's the question of why bad things happen to good people. And why doesn't God stop bad things from happening, or even worse, "Is God even capable of preventing bad things from happening?"

And the options here, if those are your only options, are not good. Because when you stumble into your darkest hour and those are your questions, then God is either not powerful enough to stop the suffering that has visited you, or God is uncaring and indifferent to your situation. Or worse, as some believe, God is actually orchestrating suffering and pain, even natural disasters in order to punish sin or teach lessons.

Like most of life's great and profound questions, I have come to the conclusion that it is perhaps best not to demand an answer the moment fate asks the question. Because in those moments of deepest human hurt and suffering, those moments when an otherwise good life unravels and uncertainty takes hold and the world makes absolutely no sense, perhaps asking the question "Where is God?" isn't the right question to be asking.

In today's text from the book of Exodus, the people of Israel are on the move toward a promised land. But the promise still remains just that, a promise, with no end in sight. And as days turn into months and then years, and as life is lived in various stages of hungering and thirsting, and long periods of aimless wandering, it's easy to see why the people grumbled at Moses.

Why did you take us out here? Did you take us out here to die?

And the people of Israel are not alone. Remember Mary and Martha at the death of their brother Lazarus when Jesus shows up after it's too late. *Lord, where have you been? If only you had been here our brother would not have died.* Or remember the disciples on the boat in the storm—a storm that is raging around them while Jesus, the one they depend on, the one in whom they have placed their faith and trust, is sound asleep.

Is the Lord with us or not?

It's a familiar question and Moses had heard it before. He knows how restless they are even with the God who has faithfully sustained them in the past. Another time when the people got impatient because God was not meeting their expectations, they made their own god in the form of a golden calf. So unreliable was God, apparently, that they fashioned their own golden god exclaiming, "Here at last is the god who brought us out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 32:4).

And then again today,

We're dying of thirst out here. Do something! Is the Lord with us or not?

And Moses finally tells them that they are putting God to the test and they might not want to do that. Because it could just be that asking if the Lord is with us or not, or asking in your time of need where God is, may be the wrong question to be asking.

Perhaps a better question might be directed inward, namely by asking how you measure God's presence in your life in the first place? What are you looking for in good times as well as in bad times? Miraculous signs? Parting waters? Rainbows in the clouds? A burning bush? Manna from heaven? Voices in the night? Water gushing from a rock in the dry desert?

Those things happen from time to time, but they happen on occasions so rare that if you are seeking only those things as ways of demonstrating God's presence and as a means of sustaining your faith in a way that satisfies and comforts, you will always come up short, you will always be wanting.

Perhaps it's time to consider the possibility that God's deepest presence is to be found in precisely those moments when you are most alone—alone with yourself in your silent questioning?

Martin Buber once remarked that a divine eclipse does not mean that God is dead. “An eclipse of the sun,” he said, “is something that occurs between the sun and our eyes, not in the sun itself.” He suggests that what blocks the sun from our eyes is the radical subjectivism of our age, in which our knowledge of God is limited by our language.

Even our best words about God can only point to that which lies far beyond ourselves and our human understanding. And that if God seems distant or absent, perhaps it’s because we are the ones doing the hiding.

These wilderness stories are about a people living between a promise and its fulfillment. In other words, they are stories about people like you and me—good people of faith who believe in God, who trust that God’s love for them is everlasting, and yet who find themselves from time to time *not* so much expressing doubt, but asking,

Do I dare to believe that it’s true...

that God’s presence is real and God’s promises are everlasting?

Do I dare to believe it?

And to that question, all I can do is stand here and bear witness to the fact that down through the ages, people of faith, in good times and in bad, have found the strength to trust God’s promises of grace—to live into the promise that we are never alone, and that the One who became flesh and was born in a stable means that we never know how or where God is going to be revealed.

People of God, scripture confirms it, the faithful are living examples of it, and the great hymn proclaims it, “No doubt our inmost wants are clear, to One who holds us always dear.”

Believe it. Trust it. Live it. Sing it!

Amen.

Martin Buber, *The Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy*, p. 23.