

## Where Is God Hiding

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on the 28th Sunday in Ordinary time, October 12, 1997: Scripture Lessons: Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

In his book for pastors, *The Living Reminder*, Henri Nouwen speaks of 'the ministry of absence.' Ministers do a disservice, he says, if they witness only to God's presence and don't prepare others to experience the times when God seems absent. The absence of God is a recurring theme in the Old Testament book of Job. It's a theme that appears often in the Psalms. <sup>It appears in the prophets</sup> ~~And~~ The prophet Isaiah prayed, "Truly, you are a God who hides yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior." The great mathematician, Pascal, wrote that "a religion which does not affirm that God is hidden is not true." So ministers need to prepare Christians for the dreaded experience of God's absence. For someone who trusts in God, losing God is the most terrible experience we'll ever have. It's like losing a lover. It's like losing a child. That's what it feels like when believers aren't able to find <sup>any sign of</sup> God in their lives. I want to talk to you this morning about the absence of God and to prepare you for it if it ever happens to you.

In one sense, God is absent from much of modern Western Culture. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a Nazi prison near the end of the second World War, said that modern society lives 'as if God didn't exist.' For many people, life is lived without reference to God. <sup>Sunday...</sup> There are many people for whom the word "God" has no specific meaning. T.S. Eliot referred to this when he wrote,

...it seems that something has happened that has never happened before: though we know not just when, or why, or how, or where.

Men have left GOD not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never happened before...

*In past ages people have exchanged one God for another but today...*

Our culture has forced God and religion to the periphery of human affairs or to mere psychological feelings. For the most part God is absent from the entertainment industry. Watching television you'd never get the impression that 40% of Americans attend a place of worship every week. There was a time when the greatest composers like Johann Sebastian Bach dedicated their music to the glory of God. There was a time not too long ago when serious art

was painted by Christians like Van Gogh who himself was haunted by a sense of God's absence. Leo Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky were serious Christians who brought insights from the Christian faith to the human dilemma through their novels. But with a few exceptions, God is absent from modern art, literature, and music. If God appears at all, he appears on the periphery.

God is also absent from the lives of many Christians. My guess is that few Presbyterians recognize the presence of God by reading the Bible every day or by praying before meals or at night before going to bed or in the morning when they get up. God is just absent from our lives. There was a time when Presbyterians taught and encouraged these spiritual disciplines. But somehow, today, those disciplines seem old fashioned and out of touch with a high tech society and few of us practice them. It's not that people don't believe in God. Nearly everybody believes in God. God is simply absent from our lives and many people don't even miss him. So one reason God seems absent is because our culture as well as we as individuals have pushed God to the periphery.

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~~But there's another sense in which God is absent from the lives of many Christians.~~

Some of us have experienced a sense of God's absence in times of personal tragedy. Many of us, in a time of personal loss or critical illness have found ourselves echoing the words of Job, "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling!... If I go forward, he's not there; or backward, I can't perceive him; on the left he hides, and I can't behold him; I turn to the right, but I can't see him." These are not the words of an unbeliever. These are the words and feelings of one who loves God and wants, more than anything else, to know that God is present with them and loves them.

Sometimes we feel that we must have done something to deserve the sense of God's absence. Eliphaz, one of Job's friends, accused Job of bringing on his experience of God's absence by his sins. "Is not your wickedness great?" Eliphaz says to Job. "You've exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing, and stripped the naked of their clothing. You've given no water to the weary to drink, and you've withheld bread from the hungry. Return to the Almighty and humble yourself." But none of these accusations were true! They were absolutely false!

Job didn't deserve spiritual abandonment. Job angrily responded to Eliphaz, "I'm innocent! And I want more than anything else to come before God and argue my case and prove <sup>my innocence</sup> ~~it~~ but I can't find <sup>God</sup> ~~him~~ anywhere." Job is the patron saint of all Christians who experience the dark night of the soul through no fault of their own.

Philip Yancey, a Christian writer, is a modern day Job. "For one whole year," he writes, "my prayers seemed to go nowhere; I never had the sense that God was listening. No minister had prepared me for this ordeal. In desperation I bought a 'Book of Hours' used in high-church liturgy, and for that year I simply read the prayers and Bible passages, offering them to God as my prayers since I had no words of my own. I now look back on that time of absence as an important growth period, for in some ways I had pursued God more earnestly than ever." Periods of God's absence can spur us on to seek God more passionately and become more deeply aware of our need of the God who has come to us in Christ.

When the wife of C.S. Lewis died, he, like Job, couldn't find God. "Go to God when all is well and he's always there. But go to him in time of despair and he's not home. The shades are drawn and the lights have all been turned off inside. You can knock on the door as long as you want but there's no answer. Is God in there? Is he just hiding? Was he ever in there? God is a very present help in time of plenty but a very absent help in time of need." These are not the words of a cynical atheist. They're the words of a man of God and one of the most effective Christian apologists of the twentieth century.

Nicholas Wolterstorff is another modern day Job. Wolterstorff is a professor of philosophy at Yale University. He's an internationally recognized scholar and a deeply devout Christian in the Reformed tradition. In his little book, *Lament For A Son*, he writes, "The telephone rang at 3:30 on that Sunday afternoon, a bright sunny day. We had just sent a younger brother off to the plane to be with Eric for the summer."

"Mr. Wolterstorff?"

"Yes."

"Is this Eric's father?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Wolterstorff, I must give you some bad news."

"Yes."

"Eric has been climbing in the mountains and has had an accident."

"Yes."

"Mr. Wolterstorff, I must tell you, Eric is dead. Mr. Wolterstorff, are you there? You must come at once! Mr. Wolterstorff, Eric is dead."

"For three seconds", he writes, "I felt the peace of resignation: arms extended, limp son in hand, peacefully offering him to someone - Someone. Then the pain - cold burning pain." Wolterstorff prayed the prayer of Job. "I'm at an impasse, and you, O God, have brought me here. From my earliest days, I heard of you. From my earliest days, I believed in you. I shared in the life of your people: in their prayers, in their work, in their songs, in their listening for your speech and in their watching for your presence. For me your yoke was easy. On me your presence smiled. But now noon has darkened. As fast as she could say, 'He's dead,' the light dimmed. And where are you in this darkness? I learned to spy you in the light. Here in this darkness I can't find you. If I had never looked for you, or looked but never found, I would not feel this pain of your absence. Will my eyes adjust to this darkness? Will I find you in the dark - not in the streaks of light which remain, but in the darkness? Has anyone ever found you there?"

I apologize for the fact that all my references have been to men, yet women, too, feel God's absence acutely. In my pastoral experience women seem to be more prone to ~~the~~ experience of God's absence, or at least they're more likely to share that experience with me. But whether you're a man or a woman, the Christian response to the absence of God is faith. I know that sounds trite. It may even sound superficial. You might even say, 'Well, that's exactly what I'd expect a minister to say.' But the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament tells us that faith is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." When we can't see God, our faith keeps us seeking, looking, searching. After World War 2 words were found written in chalk in the basement of a bombed out building in Berlin. I don't know if the

words were written by a Christian or a Jew. I don't know if they were written by a man or a woman, an adult or a child. I don't know if the one who wrote the words survived the war or died. But they were written by a modern day Job. The person scribbled on the basement wall, "I believe in the sun even when it does not shine. I believe in love, even when I do not feel it. I believe in God, even when he is silent."

Job could not see God but he went on trusting. He went on believing. He couldn't feel God. He couldn't find God. But, in faith, he affirmed that God "knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold." There will be times when we won't be able to find any sign of God in our lives. We won't be able to feel God's presence. We won't be able to see God - and yet, because we trust in the crucified and risen Christ, the One who cried out from the cross, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me" - we affirm that God <sup>sees</sup> ~~feels~~ us. <sup>or where we are.</sup> God knows us. God knows where we are when we don't know where God is. God finds us in Christ when we're unable to find him. "He knows the way that we take. When he has tested us, we shall come out like gold."

Let us pray: O You who have come and found us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, you know the way that we take; <sup>direct us in hidden ways</sup> when you have tested us, may we come out like gold and see you as you are. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.