

THE SILENCE OF GOD IN THE FACE OF EVIL

Advent 1: Restore us, O God

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Mark 13:24-37

Sometimes it borders on the *absurd*

to try to be disciple of Jesus in this world we live in.

Those of us who set our faces down a path in life

that looks like a path of Christ-like living,

end up looking foolish sometimes.

Like we're walking a path

no one else with any common sense is walking.

But then, Jesus *did* say it would feel that way.

"The road is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life."

"I am sending you out as sheep among wolves."

We who proclaim Christ . . . as Lord, as Savior,

as our model for life . . .

dare to tell this world the good news

that we can confront and unmask the power of evil in the world

with the power of self-sacrificing love,

that we can lay down our lives, and set aside our agenda,

and be happy and fulfilled in life,

that we can have practically nothing,

in terms of wealth and possessions,

and be at peace.

To walk into *this* world

with the ethical frame of reference

that Jesus taught and demonstrated,

is to make ourselves the clowns of the world.

Who *really* takes the Jesus path *seriously*

as a way to actually live in today's world?

It's *laughable*.

We live in a culture that glorifies violence,

as the answer to defeating evil,

and makes blockbuster movies proving it works.

We live in a culture that glorifies sexual prowess,

that encourages everyone—

men and women, even children and youth—

to dress and to act in ways

that put their raw sexuality on display,

and blesses almost *any* sexual expression and behavior,

as long as people are of age, and it's consensual.

We live in a culture that glorifies unlimited wealth accumulation,

by almost *any* means, including greed, artful deceit,

or manipulation of the weak,

as long as it's *legal*,

and openly rewards this kind of behavior,

on Wall Street, in the halls of Congress, on "reality TV."

We live in a culture whose first instinct toward the stranger or alien,

is suspicion and self-protection, and only *later*,

after the strangers prove themselves, a reluctant welcome.

We live in a culture that deals with its enemies around the world

by intimidating them, coercing them,

forcing them to bend to our will by *whatever* means necessary;

usually with massive firepower.

Our voices are lonely voices,

if we openly object to the values of the dominant culture.

We look like society's court jesters,

if we seek to walk the Jesus path in front of everyone.

We risk getting laughed off the public stage,

if we call for self-restraint . . . for modesty in dress or behavior . . .

if we suggest that sexual intimacy and long-term commitment

need to go together . . .

if we say NO to accumulating wealth and possessions,

and invest *rather* in building human community . . .

if we say a *loud* NO to the Christmas shopping frenzy,

and give our money away to alleviate hunger, reduce poverty,

and heal the earth . . .

if we suggest that our first instinct toward immigrants

should be a warm welcome . . .

if we have the imagination to call our country toward a better,
non-violent way to approach our enemies,
assuming they could become friends.

Voices like *that* get drowned out.

They get dismissed as out-of-step with the times.
Because *they are*.

It can feel pretty lonely when we're out of step with the vast majority.
When it seems like real justice, true righteousness, and deep peace,
are losing out in this world.
When it looks like evil is getting the upper hand,
and there is precious little we can do to stop it.
In fact, *all* our human efforts at stemming the tide of evil
look puny and ineffective,
and we wish God would just get with the program,
and *do something* about it.

We aren't the first ones to feel this way.

I just painted a picture that looks like
it was copied straight off the canvas of the Old Testament.

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

O that you would get fed up
with the way things are down here on earth,
that you would get so furious with the evil all around us,
that you would say, “I can't take it any more,”
that you would just rip open the heavens, tear the sky in two,
and come down here and shake things up . . .
make the very mountains shake.

That's what Isaiah wanted—a God that acted decisively.

A God that intervened in the world,
did something about the mess they were in.
A God that spoke with the sound of thunder.

.....

But all he got was silence.
A deafening silence in the face of unspeakable evil.

If God is who God claims to be . . . *why* . . . “WHY?” Isaiah wondered.
Why do God's own people suffer so?
Why is evil allowed to triumph?
Why does violence run rampant on the earth?

Isaiah's questions are no easier to answer today.

But in a strange way, I find it comforting to hear
in these ancient pages, loud cries of lament from God's people.
For *one*, we see we're not the first generation of God's people,
who have struggled with the persistence of evil.
But even *more*, I am comforted by the vibrancy of their faith,
that they could lay out their complaints against God
as honestly as they *did*.

They had every *reason* to assume God has utterly abandoned them.

Isaiah's people were in exile for more than a generation.
The people joining Isaiah in crying out against God
were in a strange land,
and had no recollection of the last time
God had done *anything* for them as a people.
They only heard their parents or grandparents talk about
the old days, when God spoke, and acted on their behalf.
They had every right to give up on God,
because God had given up on them.

But the fact that they stated their complaint in the form of a question
is, in *itself*, evidence of their faith.

They had every right to state, “God is nowhere!”
Instead they asked, “Where are you, God?”

Why is it we think we don't have a right to question God?

Questioning God is actually a sign of a healthy, living faith.
To question God is to presume
God is in a position to answer the question.
If we had no faith,
we wouldn't bother asking God *questions*, would we?

Even in that desperate psalm of lament we read earlier,
the psalmist called God the “Shepherd of Israel,”

“you who lead Joseph like a flock.”

This bitter complaint the psalmist had against God,
was made in the context of a vital relationship
between the people and their God,
between the sheep and their shepherd.

And Isaiah’s lament ended with,

“Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter.”
“Now consider, we are all your people.”

These are cries of a people who knew to whom they belonged.
Somehow, even in their deepest darkness,
that knew they were connected with God,
as intimately as clay is connected to the hands of a potter.

That is a profound response to the silence of God in the face of evil.
And it’s not the *easier* response.
Much *easier*, when God is silent or absent,
would be to adjust our image of God.
To make God an abstraction,
some intangible force
that we don’t have to reckon with directly.
God’s silence is less painful,
if we don’t *expect* God to speak *anyway*.

But if *that’s* how we cope with God’s silence,
we need to reread the stories of the Old Testament.
The God of the Hebrew scriptures is portrayed as *intensely* personal.
Yes, God is majestic and sovereign and sits above creation.
But the wonderful mystery of the God of the Hebrews—
the God who has a name, *Yahweh*—
is that this God also lives among his people.

This is the God who walked and talked
with Adam and Eve in the Garden.
This is the God who, taking the form of several travelers,
sat under a tree with Abraham,
eating curds and veal.
This is the God who wrestled with Jacob all night,

flesh against flesh.

This is the God who walked in front of the people of Israel,
leading them out of slavery in Egypt,
sending them sweet water and quail and manna in the desert.

The God of the Hebrews was a personal God.

Not as in “my personal, *private* God, fashioned just for me.”

That God is a purely American invention.

But a personal God, in the sense of forming a people to relate to.
Personal in the sense of being accessible to the people.
Personal in the sense of having personality,
having characteristics,
being able to connect with other personal, sentient, beings.

And the New Testament takes this idea of a personal God to the ultimate.
This is what we celebrate in Advent and Christmas.
That God longed so deeply to connect with us,
that God took on humanity itself,
and came to live with us and walk with us
in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Maybe we’re too sophisticated to *need* a personal God.
Maybe, when it feels like God is absent,
we don’t turn to the personal, visceral, God of the scriptures,
we don’t seek the God who walks and talks with God’s people,
we don’t cry out in desperation.
We make God into something that doesn’t *have* to relate to us.
We make God into an idea, a philosophical abstraction.

It’s easier that way.
A lot easier than having to say God has abandoned us,
and then deal with all the implications of *that*.

If God is an abstraction,
it makes no sense to cry out in desperation when there is silence.
There *is* no breakdown in a relationship to get passionate *about*,
the way the prophets did, and
the way the psalm writers did.

You know, when it comes to matters of faith,
I'd rather have a faith I could get angry and passionate
and hopeful and doubtful and ecstatic *about!*
I'd rather have the faith of the psalmist who could cry out
in utter frustration,
“How long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?”
or a prophet who could argue and agonize,
“Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

Maybe this is where the community of faith can come in.
There are those among us experiencing personal crises of faith,
in various degrees, and in various ways.
And there are those of us who look at the state of the world,
and despair that God is paying any attention whatsoever.

Usually, the church has been expert at offering platitudes.
To those struggling personally with God, we say,
“All things work together for good.”
“God is right here beside you, even if you can’t see it.”
“Don’t worry. Don’t doubt. Just believe!”
To those in despair about unmitigated evil in the world, we say,
“Take heart, this is just a sign of the end times.”
“God is in control.”
“Jesus is coming soon.”

I wonder if we wouldn’t be *more* helpful,
if we modeled a way to address God in the midst of crisis?
If we showed God enough respect to lay out our complaints,
our cries of desperation?
Cries for help that *mean something* because they are honest,
and because they are based on the assumption
that God is real, is personal, is active in the world
and in a position to hear our complaints.

Not saying the platitudes might not be true.
In *fact*, we just read a Gospel text this morning,
that affirms that Christ is coming again,
that evil will *not* hold sway forever,

and that we need to live in a constant state of attentiveness,
of keeping awake and alert.

But the purpose of scriptures like *that*,
is *not* to give us some cheap emotional reassurance,
it is *not* to take our minds *off*
the present evils and injustices in the world.
Precisely the *opposite*.

It’s to help us focus and be attentive and look for signs
that the God we know in scripture
is even *now* at work in the *midst* of the evil,
and this God will be revealed
when and where we least expect it.

All the more reason to hold on to an image of God
we can be passionate about—whether out of joy or agony.

The first step is being willing to cry out when God is silent.
The next step is being willing to wait.
Because things might not change tomorrow.

That’s what Advent is all about.
It’s a season of remembering that we wait for God.
The people of Israel certainly waited longer than they bargained for.
And so might we.

Our questions and complaints may go unanswered for a while.
But we are stubborn in our hope.
God is somewhere. And God will come and redeem us.
That is the good news of this season.

Now, we’re going to have two concrete and beautiful expressions
of our trust in a God who is both high and holy and transcendent,
and a God who is real, present, and active among us.

Will the choir come up now for the anthem?
The choir will be singing a gorgeous piece of music
called “Sanctus.”

The translation of the Latin text is,
Holy, Holy, Holy,
Lord God of Hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of thy glory.
Hosanna in the highest.

After which we are invited to partake in the Lord's Supper,
one of the most tangible expressions of our faith,
that God has come to be among us, and is still among us,
in the bread and cup, and in our daily lives.

—*Phil Kniss, November 27, 2011*