

## Job and the Absence of God

Texts: **Job 23:1-9, 13-17; Psalm 22: 1-152: 5-12; Psalm 73**

In seminary I went to chapel every day. One day one of my friends, Jody, came in with one of his friends, a visitor from Chicago who was joining us for worship. His friend, whose name was Mike, sat between us. At some point in the middle of worship, I put my hand on Mike's shoulder for a moment and gave it a squeeze of welcome. I don't know why I did it. I just felt like I needed to do it. It was just for a moment, and I thought nothing of it. Later that day, my friend Jody came up to me and said, "Hey, Allan, I don't know how you saw that Mike was crying in chapel. I never even noticed it. But I just wanted you to know that he was so grateful that you put your hand on his shoulder. It meant everything to him. He'll never forget what you did in there. You caught him when he was falling into despair. Your hand was like a message from God to him that he was not alone." Mike was crying in chapel? This was news to me! I had no idea. But I remember feeling like I *had* to put my hand on his shoulder, which is something I would normally never do to someone I'd just met.

It's times like that when it feels like God is nearby, working to make things right. The Spirit works in my soul to reach out to another soul that needs help. God is so close. In my life there have been recurring moments when I feel like God has been oh so present in a situation, when God was right there. But soon enough, that feeling starts slipping through my fingers, and I lose the presence of God with me.

And then there are the times when God isn't just not present, but feels positively absent. I once did a funeral for a baby named Michael. Michael's mom was at the hospital with labor pains, but it wasn't quite time. She was asked whether she wanted to have the birth induced, or wait a day to see what happened. She decided to wait. Overnight, the cord got caught around Michael's neck and when they checked on his mother's progress the next morning, Michael was dead in her womb. He was delivered still-born just before noon. She just kept saying over and over, "I could have been induced and Michael would be here now. I could have been induced." Right there is the absence of God. We want to just scream, "Where are you, God?!" Where are you, in the midst of that pain, that tragedy? Where are you? Why isn't Michael here with his parents going home from the hospital today, instead of here in the casket, going into the ground today? It's almost too much to bear. Somehow they found the faith to carry on, to keep trusting that God had their little one safely in God's arms, that there was a bigger picture than just that moment. I agree with that, but I protest that God allows those moments.

This is the situation for Job, who's lost his children, his wife, his money and his health. The happiness he once had has been transformed into pain and suffering. It's too much to bear, and he cries out to God in our text today. Where are you God? Where are you? Job speaks for us all. He refuses to abandon his faith, but he also won't just accept his suffering passively. He cries out in protest. We want answers. We want God to respond, to justify why this suffering has been allowed to happen.

Every believer knows this place of despair in the face of tragedy. Every believer who goes through suffering like this cries out to God and too often hears silence. "If only I knew where to find God; if only I could go to God's dwelling place," Job says. "Then I could find out what God would answer me."

Yes, yes, where can we go to confront God? Where can we go to get a hearing for our questions? Where can we go to get an answer? That's what we want to know. Why am I suffering? Job speaks for us all again: "If I go to the east, God is not there. If I go to the west, I don't find God. When God is at work in the north, I do not see God; when God turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of God." Job confesses that God is at work, that God is doing something in the world. He just struggles to find God anywhere he looks.

What's worse is that Job is caught up in the arbitrariness of what's happened, and the feeling of being unable to escape: "God stands alone, and who can oppose God? God does whatever God pleases." This makes it worse. Job is convinced that God is ultimately in control of things, but sometimes things are just terrible. Is it really God's will? If not, we need answers, and we need them now. But they aren't coming. All there is, is silence, silence that is like a thick darkness that covers Job's face. Job cries out for all of us in the midst of our pain: "God, where are you?" He doesn't know. He can't find God. But it doesn't stop him from calling out about the seeming injustice of it all. God's silence won't silence Job.

I don't know about you, but I find this to be hard stuff. But I'm glad that Job is right there with me, calling out with a complaint against God. I'm glad that the Scripture authorizes me to speak up and argue with God. Why is it like this, Lord? It's not fair! It's not right. Why them? Why me? Why any of us? And why does it so often seem like it's the poor innocents who are always getting it, and not the exploiters and the grifters? Why do they always seem to have it easy? It's enough to make you almost lose your faith.

The Scripture knows about that, too! I tell you, there's nothing we feel that someone didn't already feel in the Bible. People of faith have been calling out to God in complaint and frustration, for a long time! God even inspires our complaints, and puts them in holy Scripture. Asaph, who wrote Psalm 73, knows what I'm talking about. He wrote, "As for me, my feet had almost slipped, for I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills. Surely I've kept my heart pure in vain." Oh, they get it, these Bible writers, they get it! This isn't the way things should be! Asaph tries to take a longer view of things: After entering the Temple, God seems to speak to him: the wicked are the ones on slippery ground, because all of their worldly goods mean nothing in the world that is coming. The ones who hold onto God has all they will need; the ones who hold on to worldly things will have nothing left in the world that is coming.

Asaph seems to be saying what Martin Luther King, Jr. once said: "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." Maybe. Maybe. But I sure wish it would bend a little faster and a little more obviously. I still have lots of questions for God. There's hope, but hope is like two birds in the bush: I'd rather have one in the hand! I'd rather have answers now.

So would Job. In chapter 3, he goes so far as to curse the day of his birth: "may the day of my birth perish—may it turn into darkness; may God above not care about it;... oh why did I not perish at birth and die as I came from the womb?" That's despair. We recognize it. We acknowledge it. And I wish I had an answer for him, or for you, or for myself. Why can God sometimes be so present, and at other times be so far away, so absent, and often when we need the presence of God the most, like when cancer or Covid comes, or worse yet, death to ourselves or someone we love? Where is God?

God's going to respond to Job a little later in the book, and we'll talk about that next week, but for now let us enter deeper into the mystery by reminding ourselves of Jesus' own words from the cross: "My

God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He was quoting Psalm 22, but those words express the abandonment, the loss, the sense of being alone without his heavenly Parent, that we mean when we talk about the absence of God. Part of the anguish for Jesus the Son as he hung on the cross was the silence of God the Parent in that moment of suffering. There are no special privileges for Jesus, as God in Christ enters fully into human existence, including the part where God can be silent when we most need to hear God's voice.

Whatever else is true, God-in-human-flesh was not spared that part of being human, and in that way, the absence of God the Parent becomes a shared experience between humanity and God the Son, enfleshed in Jesus our Savior.

Psalm 22 begins in anguish, but it ends in triumph: God has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted ones; God has not hidden God's face from them forever, but has listened to their cry for help. ... They will proclaim God's righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: God has done it!"

The Psalmist concludes that the experience of being abandoned by God, the experience of the deep absence of God, is a true experience, but isn't the full truth of the matter.

We can experience being totally alone when there are, in fact, people looking for us. We can experience feeling worthless, when there are, in fact, people who value us more than we can imagine. We can experience being totally unloved, when there are, in fact, people who love us.

And we can experience the complete absence of God, when, in fact, God is present with us but unrecognized.

Sometimes God breaks the silence in ways we don't expect. As I was typing these last words of the sermon, and trying to end with hope, iTunes randomly chose a song I haven't heard for years, called *The Promise*, by the group 4Him.

*"You may be waiting for the fire when I'm calling through the rain. You may be listening for the thunder While I'm whispering your name. You may be searching for a sign to let you know that it's okay. Hold on, 'Cause I'm on my way. Hold on, cause I'm on my way."*

I found those words comforting, reminding me that the silence of God might be because we are listening in the wrong places.

And they reminded me that God speaks in the most unexpected ways, sometimes in the words of a song that comes on at just the right moment, and sometimes with a hand on someone's shoulder in the Princeton Seminary Chapel to let a young man falling into despair know that he was not alone, that someone cared, and that in spite of the silence, God was there for him.

Amen