

THE ABSENCE OF GOD: Suffering and Unanswered Prayer

Job 1:13-22; 1 Peter 4:12-19

What about the silence of God in times of great trials?

March 5, 2017 at First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Missouri

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-absence-of-god-suffering-and-unanswered-prayer/>

I hate the dark. I know we are not supposed to hate but I strongly dislike the dark. I'm not its biggest fan. I don't remember a time that I've ever really liked the dark unless I'm trying to enjoy the stars in the sky or it is in the form of chocolate.

"Come inside now, it's getting dark." Something our mothers and fathers would call out from the back door, much to our disappointment. We were never ready to come in but darkness was moving in like a thick, ominous fog that caused the hair on our arms to stand up as danger seem to lurk on the edges waiting its turn. The only shelter after the sun was absent was found inside, under the comforting illumination of artificial light coming from the 60-watt bulbs in the lamps and the glow of the television. Until it was bedtime and then the light, like the sun, left me as my parents prepared our home for the night. Thank Jesus for nightlights.

In the dark, we imagine the worst. In the dark, the monsters seem real. In the dark, we feel vulnerable and exposed to what we cannot see. In the dark, we feel alone.

The longer I have lived, the more I have come to appreciate darkness. I'm still not a fan but I have learned that when the lights have gone off in my life (literally or figuratively) I have not died. "Instead, I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light." And this has led me to believe that I need darkness as much as I need light."¹

During times of darkness, people often seek out the church for help but many times churches are preoccupied with producing artificial light so that the darkness is kept at bay. Most of us can discern the difference between natural light and artificial light. We are not fooled. What if we could sit, together, in the darkness for a while? What if we resist filling this space with a fluorescent glare of easy answers and clichés? That is our intent with this new series, the Absence of God. To sit with the hard questions, to befriend the dark, to find meaning in the silence and trust God to be enough.

Lent is the perfect season to do this in. We began the season this week on Ash Wednesday with a powerful message by Rev. Paul Msiza on persevering in the darkness. You can listen to his message on our website. Lent is the liturgical season where we are asked to enter the wilderness from which God, apparently, has fled: where things don't always work out, where movies and stories lack happy endings, where suffering seems to win and where the silence of unanswered prayers is deafening.

As Ken Sehested said, "There are no Hallmark cards for Ash Wednesday."

Our attention during Lent turns to those whose hopes have been hammered, to those whose hope has been ripped from their hearts, to those who face dawn with fear and dusk with resignation. People like Job.

The first chapter of Job describes him as “a man honest inside and out, a man of his word, who was totally devoted to God and hated evil with a passion.” It tells us he was a dad who got up each and every morning to offer a sacrifice on behalf of his sons and daughters just in case they had sinned the night before in their partying. This man above reproach, this husband totally devoted to God, this daddy who loved his children sacrificially ... this man has the worst day ever. He endures wave after wave of heart-crushing news. The scripture says three times, “while he was still speaking....” Like the first round of news from the messenger about the oxen and donkeys and servants being killed by the Sabeans wasn’t enough that while the messenger was still speaking.....another one comes.... This time the fire of God consumed sheep and servants. While this messenger was still talking, another one the Chaldeans raided your camels and took them and killed your servants..... And why that messenger was still speaking and the room was filled with wailing and disbelief, another one came with the final blow, the word that a great wind blew in and stole the lives of all seven of your children, Job. These children that you prayed for each morning. These sons and daughters for whom you offered the best sacrifices each dawn are now gone.

The unrelenting waves of suffering pounded Job repeatedly. Drowning in a sea of pain, Job could barely catch his breath.

Sometimes suffering seems to know no end. We have a saying about things coming in threes but many of you here and most certainly countless people around the world would testify that suffering apparently is horrible at math. That suffering has long passed three and is still going strong.

The question “If God is so good, why is there evil or suffering in the world?” is the number one question or doubt expressed by believers and non-believers alike. If God is so good, why is there so much suffering in the world? If God were all-powerful, couldn’t he eliminate suffering? If God were loving and merciful, wouldn’t he eliminate suffering? So, is God unable or unwilling? This question, this doubt has plagued humanity for thousands of years and clearly it still exists today. If this was a question with an easy answer it would not be the most frequently asked question or expressed doubts for generations.

And it would be one thing if God did not alleviate the suffering of those who don’t believe or who have pledged their devotion to evil but even the most righteous among us, people like Job, experience great suffering.

Every day we hear news of suffering. We wake up to breaking news headlines on our phone that are all about pain. Unimaginable pain. We come here to church and we hear about a loving God. We sing songs about a good God, a powerful God who cares about us, who has great plans for us and it doesn’t seem to match up. Like when our parents would punish us and say, “This

hurts me more than it hurts you.” No, no it doesn’t. I felt like that spanking I got when I was younger for calling my sister a name hurt me way more than it hurt them. Now that I’m older and wiser, I can tell you that they were being honest - mostly. I’ve had to discipline my niece and nephew and they weren’t the only one that ended up in tears. It hurts.

It is important for me to stop here and share with you a concern I have. My fear is that I may say something or you may hear something that makes your personal journey with pain seem trite. That is the last thing I want you to hear this morning. I know some of the stories in this room and I cannot begin to understand the suffering you have experienced. And there are many stories untold. Significant pain that is still hidden in the dark. I am hoping this morning that you will hear my heart and that together we will trust God with our suffering.

Nothing I say today will give you an emotionally satisfying answer to the problem of pain and suffering. There is no answer that makes pain okay because the image of God in each of us will never allow us to be happy or satisfied with the existence of pain. The phrase “stuff happens” is probably the most accurate. Stuff happens. Things break. People hurt. Good has not triumphed over evil – yet. The natural world experiences chaos and disorder. It rains on the just and unjust alike. We are imperfect people in an imperfect world on an imperfect planet. Thus, suffering has happened and will continue to happen.

I don’t often watch the Disney channel but sometimes when I’m with my niece and nephew the channel is on. A couple of summers ago we were on vacation and chilling before heading out to the pool. The new Disney channel movie “Descendants” came on and my niece was into it. I stayed to watch as well – in solidarity, of course. But then I got into the movie and I’m going to confess to you today – I’ve seen it four or five times and only two of those were with my niece. In the movie, the kids are descendants of all the famous and infamous Disney characters – Beauty and the Beast’s son, Ben, is the main good guy and Malificent’s daughter, Mal, is the main bad girl. To try and give you a synopsis of the whole movie is impossible but at one point, Mal makes a love potion to give to Ben so he will fall in love with her and she can steal the Fairy Godmother’s magic wand. (Still with me?) Of course, as Disney would have it, Mal falls in love with Ben and decides she doesn’t want him to be tricked into loving her; she wants him to choose to love her. A big difference.

God created a loving world. And a world in which love is capable of meaningful expression and experience would also imply a world in which there is a choice. If someone tells you they love you, those words mean something because they are freely given. If you learned that someone had told you they loved you and that they had been forced to do it or were under a magic spell, their words would not mean very much. If you want to create a loving world, you must also create a world in which choice can be exercised. And in such a world, there is also the possibility of choosing a course of action that is not loving, an action that inflicts pain or sets suffering in motion.

Love always involves a choice. So, God gave us free will or a choice. But unfortunately, we abuse our free will and it leads to evil and suffering in our world. God did not create suffering.

Suffering is a result of choices. Our choices. Humanity's choices. And suffering is a part of the natural world. Job's enemies alternate between earthly (foreign armies) and heavenly (the lightning and the wind).

We can't have a God who gave up controlling so we could choose to love God rather than be coerced and at the same time have a God who intervenes all the time to prevent evil or bad from happening. We can't have it both ways.

But this still doesn't answer the question of why God appears to intervene sometimes and at other times remains silent. Why sometimes it feels like my prayers hit a ceiling and others reach the heavens. I agree with author Philip Yancey who wrote, "I do not doubt that God answers prayer. Rather, I struggle with the inconsistency of those apparent answers."ⁱⁱ

Whenever I think of unanswered prayers, I've always thought of the same scenario – two moms in a hospital room praying for a child. Both moms love their baby. Both moms would do anything for their child to live. There are no differences in the moms, the babies or the sincerity of the prayers. Yet one child is healed and one child dies. And in the waiting room, the friends and family of one shout praises to God for saving their baby while the others sit in grief and shock wondering what they did wrong. Why did God not answer their prayer when God appeared to answer the other?

This is a time when clichés don't work. This is a time when we tend to flip on the artificial light with responses like "God must have needed your child" or "God won't give you more than you can handle".

The death of a baby? That is more than you can handle.

The slow theft of your loved one's physical or mental health? That is more than you can handle.

The constant bombing of your city, the destruction of all you've known and loved, the slaughter of friends and family? That is certainly more than you can handle **IF** you had to handle it alone. **IF** you had to handle it without God.

I don't have easy answers for that mom in the hospital room. God, by all appearances, is silent. All I can do is sit with her in the darkness. But we do not sit alone. In the depths of darkness, we find God waiting for us, steadfast in love and tender in mercy.

There is a mystery surrounding prayer that we must respect even when we do not understand. Prayer does not work according to a fixed formula – get your life in order, say the right words, and the desired result will come. If that were true, Job would have avoided much suffering.

Throughout Scripture, there are many laments and unanswered prayers. Prayers of honest anguish and frustration. Prayers of as Walter Brueggeman describes "high-energy protest" against the silence of God. Prayers that in modern terms are "O, God, I cry out to you and all I get is your voicemail. I text you and you never text back." It is remarkable that Israel's anger towards God did not drive Israel away from God, but rather more passionately into prayer

addressed to God. When Israel is utterly confounded by God's actions or seeming lack thereof, they go to him and say so!ⁱⁱⁱ

Not even Jesus was exempt from unanswered prayer. In Gethsemane Jesus prayed with both the faith of protest and the faith of submission.

When we are suffering or when we see suffering around us, we are tempted to stop trusting God. We look at God through the lens of suffering rather than looking at suffering through the lens of God. What I mean is that we are so overwhelmed by the pain that we stop trusting what we know to be true about the character of God and all we can focus on is the circumstances and we let the circumstances change what we know to be true about who God is.

No one would have blamed Job for cursing God yet Job 1:22 reminds us that in all of this – all the pain, all the suffering, all the grieving, Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing. Job did not let his suffering change what he knew to be true about the character of God.

Even the Psalms, so profuse with groans and laments, circles back repeatedly to the theme of God's faithfulness and goodness.

The Apostle Peter reminds us in our New Testament reading today to not jump to the conclusion that God isn't on the job when life gets difficult. If we suffer because of our obedience to God, then we should be encouraged and count ourselves fortunate that we share in Christ sufferings. Peter is also quick to say that if we're suffering because we broke a law or are a busy body stirring up trouble or mischief, then that is a different matter. But if we are suffering because of our devotion to Christ, don't give it a second thought but rather take it in stride trusting God who knows what he's doing and will keep on doing it.

In the end, unanswered prayer brings us into the mystery that silenced Paul: the profound difference between our perspective and God's.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the Lord.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Isaiah 55:8-9

“We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!”
I Corinthians 13:12

No person, no matter how wise or how spiritual, can interpret the ways of God, explain one miracle and not another, why an apparent intervention here and not there. Along with the

apostle Paul, we can only wait, and trust.^{iv} Trust God's goodness. Trust God's tender mercies. Trust God's steadfast love.

The season of Lent reminds us that our Savior is all too familiar with suffering. That Jesus himself appeared to feel abandoned or forsaken by God while he hung on the cross. We do not journey in darkness alone or without hope. We can pray to the One who has walked this path before us, to the One who sympathizes with us because he knows what we are experiencing and feeling. He understands that even though our intellect knows God is good, we can still feel like God has left us.

I want to share this poem written by Terry York in 2005.

"Why have you forsaken me?"
 Jesus cried from Calvary;
 Psalm of faith and suffering,
 Moaned for lack of songs to sing.

When I face my Calvary,
 Do not hide your face from me.
 Share the pain within my bones.
 Hear, as prayer, my silent moans.

Private pain, a Job-like friend,
 Never leaves me, knows no end.
 God of love, is this your plan?
 Would you not this demon ban?

Yet, through dimly, still I see
 One who shares the pain with me.
 Then, though dark, this hope I claim:
 Jesus calls me by my name.
 Terry York, 2005^v

When I was in my early twenties, there came a night where I could no longer live with being afraid of the dark. It had robbed me of so much and no number of nightlights or artificial lights brought comfort. I remember sitting up in bed and opening my Bible and I came across Psalm 4:8, "*I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.*" I wrote it on a scrap of paper that I still have. And for twenty years I've kept that promise because of the peace it brings me. The promise was not that I would never experience darkness. The promise was that God would be with me in the dark, in the night, even in the silence.

Here is a name it and claim it truth that we can count on:

Sometimes we suffer. Sometimes God is silent. But always God is good.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 5.

ⁱⁱ Philip Yancey, *Prayer*, 220.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Prayer*

^{iv} *Prayer*, 247.

^v Terry W. York, "Why Have You Forsaken Me?" in *Christian Reflection, Suffering, Volume 14*. The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, Waco, Texas, 2005.