

THE ABSENCE OF GOD
Evil and Injustice
Jeremiah 12:1-4; Mathew 27:1-26
March 12, 2017

LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-absence-of-god-evil-and-injustice/>

Of all the pictures from Israel which I posted on Facebook, this one received the most response. We are in the Judean Wilderness (which captures the very essence of Lent—barrenness, loneliness, abandonment), overlooking the Dead Sea. We launched this series because we hear from you, “Yes, but…” We hear the need to honestly grapple with doubts and questions regarding evil, suffering and God’s absence.

As I toured the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, I kept asking, “Why did God allow this?” (Perhaps God is asking why WE allowed it!). Paul Msiza, the South African pastor who preached here on Ash Wednesday, spoke to the Churchnet Board movingly about apartheid in his native land. His own brother was a prisoner on Robben Island. He said it seemed the more the church prayed, the worse things got. They would awaken each morning and more bodies were in the street, people shot by the white government.

OK, so let’s admit it. There is a part of us which would really like to see evil people fry. We want to be there when God exacts justice and we wouldn’t really mind helping God with the project! Jane Ace once said, “It’s true time heals all wounds, but it’s also true that time wounds all heels.” Given enough time, God, wound them!

Let’s face it. The Christian life has answers, but it also has questions. It offers great comfort, but also enormous loneliness. It provides great purpose, but also huge uncertainties. And let’s be clear—these all coexist in the same people at the same time! A famous German pastor Helmut Thielicke published a book of sermons, entitled, *The Silence of God*, in which he wrote, “The silence of God is the greatest test of your faith” [p. 12].

I know you’ve suffered abuse, mistreatment, you’ve been disrespected and victimized by evil and injustice. I just have one question. Has anyone here ever had it worse than Jesus? What we also see in this story is how evil and injustice work. One, evil and injustice prevail when systems coalesce and oppress the innocent, and most of their efforts to oppress involve protecting money and power. Two, evil and injustice prevail when good people stand back and do nothing or even join in the abuse. In the film “Romero,” a priest asks a parishioner, “Why do you need to confess? You haven’t done anything wrong.” The person replied, “It’s what I’ve not done that I need to confess.”

Much of the space in Matthew’s story is taken up with theme of Jesus’ innocence. The word “blood” appears in vv. 4, 6, 8, 24-25 (innocent, price of, field of, righteous man’s and his blood is on us). And yet, from Jesus’ “sort of” answer in v. 11 to the cry of dereliction in v. 46, Jesus is silent. In Jesus, we see the loneliness of suffering, the loneliness of compassion, of giving yourself for others and not having it reciprocated.

And so, the mystery of Christ's suffering for us is matched by the mystery of Christ's suffering with us. At those times, we experience God's absence, yet God is with us in the suffering. Brennan Manning wrote, "The experience of absence does not mean the absence of experience" [*The Ragamuffin Gospel*, p. 83].

In his book *Soul Survivor*, Philip Yancey tells about a gathering of believers in which Cathy stood up, lip quivering and tears filling her eyes. She said, "I was molested as a child. Then in college I was drugged and raped. I kept asking, 'Why me? I tried to be good. I went to church...So I just gave up. I took to alcohol to cover the pain. One day I stopped by my old church...' In the empty building, without planning to at all, I began to pray. I started bawling like a baby." Of course, she reported, not everything got solved that day. The pain did not go away. But she learned that suffering and joy can live together. "God can use everything in our lives, even the pain that never goes away. I learned to claim my brokenness" [p. 318].

We all live with betrayal, disappointment, mistreatment, injustice, rejection. We don't get to choose or control these things. We only get to choose our response. And we are not alone. A Crucified Friend is with us.