

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 21, 2015
St. Paul's - Peoria, IL
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That which we dare invoke to bless;
Our dearest faith; our ghastliest doubt;
He, They, One, All; within, without;
The Power in darkness whom we guess;

This is how Alfred, Lord Tennyson begins a section of *In Memoriam* (124) in which he wrestles with the seeming silence of God during tragedy, a struggle that seems to be inherent in a life of faith throughout all time. Job, possibly one of the oldest books of Scripture, is about this particular struggle. This righteous man's possessions are destroyed. All ten of his children are killed. Then, his own body is afflicted head to toe. All of this is due to a cosmic struggle, which we read about but is unknown to him, so he is left grieving the loss of everyone except his wife while in great physical pain, and the God who he has faithfully worshipped his entire life seems to have abandoned him.

Job hurls questions at God, many of the same questions as we ask today, especially as we grieve another sudden and violent loss of our brothers and sisters. Why is this happening? But more, why is God silent, especially in the times we long for God most? How do we continue to have faith in a good, loving, and all-powerful God who does not seem to lift a finger to alleviate the terrible suffering in our world? It is easy to think that this struggle was lessened when God was living in flesh among people - but then in our Gospel, the disciples are physically in the presence of the incarnate God, but he sleeps soundly while the disciples are fighting for their lives.

These questions have not abated from then till now. A century and a half ago, Tennyson expressed this... still holding to 'our dearest faith' when it feels closer to 'our ghastliest doubt,' and God seems so far away that the only shred of belief we have left can only fathom a 'Power in darkness whom we guess.'

Tennyson continues,

I found Him not in world or sun,
Or eagle's wing, or insect's eye;
Nor thro' the questions men may try,
The petty cobwebs we have spun:

We try so hard to explain the presence of God, to grasp what we cannot comprehend. Job's friends offer every explanation possible to answer his outcry against God's treatment of him. We often simplify their arguments into an insistence that Job has sinned and received what he deserved, but in fact the different men have more nuanced arguments, each of which often has shreds of truth and were likely well-considered explanations of their time trying to understand many of the same questions we ask about life.

The trouble is that they offered *explanations* for suffering, trying to explain Job's darkness rather than entering it with him. We often do this too. I think we often offer explanations for darkness because we know how very close it is to surrounding us. Job's friends' explained why Job's suffering was upon him and not them - if Job's claims were true that it was unprovoked and undeserved, then any of their lives could be changed in a moment as well, shattering their safe, understood world.

But Job's safe, understood world has already been shattered, and their well-intentioned explanations serve to further isolate Job. I also have found that often the very explanations meant to comfort me can be the most isolating. Tragedy itself shakes my faith less than attempts to explain it. Explanations help create distance, help us doing the explaining feel safer, but they also separate us from those suffering, as they keep us from joining them in their pain and leave them even more alone in their grief.

Beautiful and brilliant ideas about faith certainly weave us together as a church discerning how to join God's work in the world, but they are reduced to the spinning of petty cobwebs when offered as a response to the longing in our souls for the presence of God, which is most often experienced by those willing to walk with us in our suffering.

If e'er when faith had fall'n asleep,
I heard a voice, "Believe no more,"
And heard an ever-breaking shore
That tumbled in the Godless deep,

Left alone in God's silence, we eventually hear the voice, sometimes a whisper, sometimes a shout. We often are afraid to share our stories for fear of sounding crazy. Yet those who I find to have the deepest spiritual life admit to struggling continually with the silence of God and loneliness. That this journey has been trod by many before me gives me some hope that this darkness, this silence of God is part of seeking God.

We try so hard to fill the silence - we each have our own temptations. We stay busy, we seek to lose ourselves in moments of pleasure, we long for spiritual experiences that provide a glimpse of transcendence. Many of the things we do are good in themselves, but often we use them to numb ourselves to the impending darkness.

Sometimes I fear that if I face the silence, it will become deafening and the void will take over all that I am. Yet even our fears may give us a hint into the paradoxical, inexplicable nature of this place: as silence can be deafening and void can fill, absence is precisely where we find presence.

A warmth within the breast would melt
The freezing reason's colder part,
And like a man in wrath the heart
Stood up and answer'd, "I have felt."

Just as there are no words to answer the darkness, there are no words to describe that moment when the dawn breaks. It is not the moment when all is better; it is the moment when one realizes that all is not lost, the moment of hope.

It seems that poetry has always been the best way to point to this moment. The greatest laments are psalms that begin with cries of one who is suffering followed by a transition to praise. We never hear about the circumstances that cause the transformation, perhaps because the cause of the change is not due to the alleviation of difficulty. That moment comes when we know God's presence, know we are not alone.

But even this experience does not contain God any more than our ideas do. We can only express the transformation in ourselves that marks the presence of God like pointing to a shadow to mark the presence of light.

No, like a child in doubt and fear:
 But that blind clamour made me wise;
 Then was I as a child that cries,
But crying, knows his father near;

In college, I was drowning in explanations of a faith with no mystery and surrounded by an effervescence of others' spiritual feelings out of which seemed to flow everything except love. I was ready to throw in the towel when I read this poem in a literature class. It was as if my heart sighed and I knew somehow that my deepest cries gave witness to the fact that the One for whom I cried was closer than I realized.

The cry of a child is born out of a simple, innate faith that someone will come to their aid, and we join with Job, the disciples and many throughout history and throughout our nation today when we cry out to God: "Do you not care that we are perishing?" And this cry of our heart alone is an act of faith that there is one to answer.

In Job, God actually speaks into the silence, but not by presenting a court case as requested. Read alone, this passage may seem like a rebuke to his cries, but in the end, God declares that Job's friends who have told him not to cry *have* sinned, but that Job was righteous. Let us never forget that this is a righteous cry, a cry that God will always hear.

God speaks out of a whirlwind, pointing to nature of the universe, the unfathomable glory of creation. The response of God is presence, offering Job a glimpse of mystery, the glory of God.

At first Job is speechless. When he finally responds, he says that he has seen God and is satisfied. Job encounters the presence of God, and somehow facing the mystery that cannot be understood replaces the desire to understand. Job knows that God is with him, that he is not alone, and that is the hope that he needs to carry on.

Today, may we continue to cry out to God and hear the cries around us.

May our prayer of questions open us to the beautiful view of God who is in the place we do not know, where we cannot see.

May we know how much this God longs to be with us, coming among us as Jesus, the light has come into the darkness who the darkness will never overcome.

May we join with those who are crying out, know that is where God is, and may we join together, knowing that God is among us, and we are never alone.

May the light of the mystery of God grasp us, and may we be able to say with Tennyson:

And what I am beheld again

What is, and no man understands;

And out of darkness came the hands

That reach thro' nature, moulding men.