

PRAYER: IN THE DESERT

by Rev. Elaine Poproski

Over the past number of weeks, we've spent a lot of time contemplating prayer. We've considered what it means that God has things to say to us. We've talked about praying for ourselves and for other people, asking the hard questions around what it is that actually happens when we pray. We've spent time listening for God's voice in Scripture, practicing listening as we gather for worship on Sundays. And we've done all of this under the assumption that God really does want us to know him – he really does want us to experience friendship with him. And yet...

Sometimes when we pray.... there's nothing.

Sometimes when we read Scripture, listening really carefully for what God has to say.... nothing.

Sometimes we do everything right, and all we get in response is silence.

And sometimes the silence goes on so long that we may even begin to wonder if God is even there.

I know, we're not supposed to wonder that. We're supposed to know that God never leaves us or forsakes us. That truth, after all, is repeated over and over again all through the Bible.

In Deuteronomy 31:8 we read this: "It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you."

In Joshua 1:9 we read, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

In Hebrews 13:5 we read, "God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'"

These are just a few examples. It's all through the Bible – sometimes in black and white, spelled out for us, and sometimes assumed in the stories and parables and other kinds of writing. You might be familiar with the great words of Romans 8:38-39. They speak of the love of God, rather than specifically of God himself, but then, if God is love, perhaps it's one and the same. These are the words:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Don't we need that promise more today than ever?

Nothing can separate us from God.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

And God himself will never leave us and will never forsake us.

And yet, sometimes when we pray, it is as if our words travel no further than the ceiling. It's as if we're speaking to air. All we get is silence. God seems to have disappeared. Sometimes it's something we feel; it's like there's no Holy Spirit response to or even acknowledgement of our spirit – of our presence. Sometimes it's an internal thing.

And sometimes it's an external thing. Sometimes, we pray and we pray and we pray and nothing happens. Sometimes, that's o.k. Sometimes it's enough to carry our worries, the people for whom we're praying, the things about which we're praying – sometimes it's enough to carry those things to God and hold them there in faith, regardless of whether or not it seems that God has heard. But sometimes, that is not enough. Because sometimes, we wait and we wait and we wait and doubt begins to creep in; we begin to wonder if maybe we're at the wrong address; we begin to wonder if God maybe isn't there anymore. And what was an external thing, becomes an internal thing. It becomes a crisis of faith.

Have you ever experienced the absence of God? the silence of God?

I know the Bible tells us that God never leaves us and never forsakes us. God is never truly absent. God doesn't go on vacation or get distracted by other things. Whatever our experience might be, the fact is that God is always there, always listening, and always loving.

And yet, sometimes, our experience is the complete opposite of that fact. Sometimes our experience matters more than the facts. Sometimes, the feeling of profound aloneness that accompanies the experience of God's absence is so powerful, so profound, that we cry out with Jesus, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"ⁱ

I know that some of you here this morning have never experienced this absence of God. I know that some of you have never experienced the kind of wobbly faith or outright lost faith that God's silence or seeming absence can bring on. I hope you never do. But I also know that some of you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Some of you have been in that place of aloneness before. Some of you are there right now. If you've never really experienced the presence of God, then his absence might not be that big a deal. But if God's absence is new, if you're used to hearing from God, if you're used to having a sense or a confidence in God's presence with you, then the silence is likely devastating. You might be wondering what you did wrong. You might be wondering what sin has gone unconfessed. Other people might tell you to just have faith. Or they might hint that there's something wrong with you that God isn't showing up. But the truth of the matter is that sometimes God is just silent. Sometimes, it's as if God has just disappeared – gone away. And there's nothing you did to make it so.

This experience of God's absence is so common that it has a name – many names and descriptions, actually. Richard Foster calls this experience "the Sahara of the heart."ⁱⁱ George Buttrick, another biblical scholar, describes the experience as "beating on Heaven's door with bruised knuckles in the dark."ⁱⁱⁱ The 16th century mystic, St. John of the Cross dubbed this experience of God's absence, of which he was intimately familiar, the "dark night of the soul."^{iv} This kind of experience is not rare. It has nothing to do with how good or how faithful of a

Christian you are. It's not a punishment from God. To try to explain *why* is to try to explain the mind of God.

That being said, there does seem to be agreement among those who write about this topic, that there is a kind of purification of our faith that takes place through an extended experience of God's silence. It's like God is challenging us to choose whether our faith is in him, or in our experiences of him.

Right near the end of John 6, we learn that a whole bunch of Jesus' disciples (we sometimes forget there were way more than twelve disciples)... a whole bunch of them decided they didn't want to follow Jesus anymore. The things he was saying were just too hard. So they went home. Jesus turned to the disciples who were left and asked them, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter, speaking on behalf of the rest of the disciples, said this: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."^v

When God is silent, especially when he's silent for a long time, when he seems to have gone away – disappeared – it's as if he's asking us, just like Jesus asked his disciples, "Do you also wish to go away?" It's like God is asking us, "If you never again hear my voice, if you never again experience the presence of my Spirit, if all you ever hear from me is silence, will you leave or will you stay?"

The image I have in my head of this, is that of Abraham walking up the mountain with his young son, Isaac. You might remember the story: Abraham and Sarah were very old and had no children. But God had for decades been promising that they would be the mother and father to descendants as numerous as the grains of sand on a beach. Finally, God gave them their miracle. His name was Isaac. And then one day God asked Abraham to take Isaac up the mountain and sacrifice him.^{vi} It's a horrendous story. Most of us likely can't get past the bloody image of a child sacrifice. But what if we think about the story more as an allegory than as a literal event? To read the Bible, or at least parts of the Bible, allegorically has a long history in Christianity. Perhaps, through the lens of allegory, we hear God asking Abraham, not to kill a child, but to choose which was more important to him: God or God's promise. Perhaps when we listen as allegory, we hear the same question Jesus asked his disciples: "Do you also wish to go away?" "Will you stay with me, now that things are hard, or will you go?"

That is the question with which we are confronted when God is silent. Will we stay or will we go?

To experience God's absence – God's silence – especially when it goes on for a long time, is like being in the desert. In the Bible, the desert is the place in which people's faith is challenged. The desert is the place of God's silence, of God's absence. It is the place in which people are asked, "will you follow, even when it's hard, even when it seems impossible, even when you feel completely alone – abandoned – lost?"

The Hebrew people were in the desert after escaping slavery in Egypt. When they spied out the Promised Land to which they were headed, their fear at the sight of giants made God invisible to them. All they could see was their fear. They decided they would not follow God into that

Promised Land. As a result, they wandered the desert for 40 years, and though God was not silent or absent, the desert was a hard place, and it took everything Moses had to keep them from going back to Egypt.

The desert is the place to which Jesus retreated immediately following his baptism. It's the place where, when he was at his weakest, he encountered, not his heavenly Father, but the devil, who tempted him terribly to turn away from God and from his mission in the world. It was in the desert, stripped of everything, that Jesus made the choice to be the Messiah – to follow no matter what.

The desert is the place where God's people are purified. It's the place where God's people are tested. It's the place where God's people are challenged with the choice to stick with God, or to turn back and give up on following him.

Sometimes, we find ourselves in the Sahara of the heart – a desert in which our soul is parched and we wonder if we will ever again taste the living water that is God's Spirit in communion with us. Sometimes we find ourselves alone in the desert, wondering at God's silence.

What do we do when we're in the desert and we can't find our way out?

First, don't stop talking to God. Talk to the air, talk to the ceiling, but don't stop talking. This is one of the reasons the Spiritual Disciplines are so important. If we are in the habit of praying, then we will continue to pray, even when it seems like there's no one on the other end. If we have practiced the Spiritual Discipline of prayer, then we have practiced the forms and words and ways of prayer and so can employ them regardless of whether or not we feel God's presence in them.

Second, pray whatever you're thinking and feeling. Don't hold back. There's nothing you can say to God that he hasn't heard before. There's nothing you can say to God that will make him love you any less. The psalms are full of lament and complaint. The psalmists didn't try to hide their disappointment in God, their frustration, or their feelings of abandonment. They said it all. And so can we. If you're worried about your words, use theirs. Repeat them over and over again if you have to.

Psalms 109:1 "God whom I praise, do not be silent."

Psalms 88:13-14 "But I, O Lord, cry out to you;
 in the morning my prayer comes before you.
 O Lord, why do you cast me off?
 Why do you hide your face from me?"

Psalms 42:9 "I say to God, my rock,
 'Why have you forgotten me?'"

It's possible that you won't be able to pray in the desert. It's possible that even the psalmist's words won't do.

I remember a time in my life when I found myself completely unable to pray. A week before, I'd had the incredible privilege of learning that a young woman with whom I'd had a lot of conversations, had decided to become a Christian. She was someone the church had eagerly welcomed, even though when she first walked through our doors she was pretty hostile to all things Christian. I could see the change of her heart all over her face. And then, a week later, she was assaulted. And I was sure it would be more than her baby faith could manage. In actuality, her baby faith managed just fine. It was my grown-up faith that took a hit. I asked God how he could let this happen. I asked God how he could take such a risk with this brand-new Christian's faith. And all I heard was silence. I felt like I was losing my faith. I felt like maybe everything I believed to be true about God wasn't. It was a terrifying experience. What got me through was a friend who agreed to hold onto my faith for me until I could carry it again. I know that's a weird idea – to think about someone else holding your faith for you. How does that even work? Isn't faith, by definition, something we hold onto for ourselves? I don't know how it works. What I do know is that I needed my fellow Christian to hold onto my faith while I stumbled and crashed through the dark, as if newly and suddenly blind, so that I wouldn't lose my faith.

I tell you that story because one of the worst things about experiencing the absence and the silence of God is the profound aloneness that experience fills you with. It becomes really easy to isolate – to withdraw from other Christians. But this is when we need each other. This, perhaps more than any other time, is when we need our brothers and sisters in the faith. Because sometimes we can't keep talking to God. Sometimes we can't pray. And when that happens, we need others to pray for us.

Here's the last thing we need to do when we find ourselves in the desert: in short, just keep doing all the things you know to do. Richard Foster writes: "We pray, we listen, we worship, we carry out the duty of the present moment. What we learned to do in the light of God's love, we also do in the dark of God's absence. We ask and continue to ask even though there is no answer. We seek and continue to seek even though we do not find. We knock and continue to knock even though the door remains shut."^{vii}

We do the things we know to do. And we speak the things we know to be true, regardless of whether or not we feel them to be true in the moment.

Perhaps we repeat the words of Hebrews 13:5 over and over again. "God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'" Maybe we put those words on the bathroom mirror and recite them as we brush our teeth.

Perhaps we make a list of simple statements that we read through each day – statements like:

I am a child of God.

I am loved by God.

I am forgiven.

These are statements we can draw on, that we know to be true, even when we aren't experiencing their truth. What are some simple statements of truth we can hold onto when we find ourselves in the desert? Let's take a minute to build a list together. Imagine what it is to feel abandoned by God, to hear nothing but silence from God. What might you need to remember? Please unmute yourself to share or write it in the chat.

Allow space/time for people to share.

Each week I've been suggesting things to do through the week as we practice the Spiritual Discipline of Prayer in different ways. This week, I'd like to suggest two things. I'd like to suggest that you put together your list of truths – truths that you can turn to when you find yourself not believing them, when you find yourself in the desert place. I'd also like to encourage you to continue practicing the Spiritual Discipline of prayer. Find a time every day, if you haven't already done this, that you can set aside to pray. Maybe it's only 10 minutes. That's great. For 10 minutes every day, pray. Say whatever it is you need to say to God. Speak it out loud or write it in a journal. Whatever you need to do. And listen to whatever it is God might have to say to you. Maybe you listen through Scripture, like we did at the beginning of our service today. Maybe you just sit in silence for a bit. Maybe in your journal, you write like a conversation: I say this, God says this. The point is to practice the discipline of praying, building the habit, so that when the day comes that you find yourself in the desert, you have a solid foundation on which to stand.

When we're in crisis, we can't start anything new. So we develop this habit of prayer – this Spiritual Discipline of prayer – so that when that day comes, we're able to pray. If you're in that place right now, if you're in that desert place, if you are finding it too hard to pray these days, connect with somebody else so that they can be praying for you. Tell them what it is that you need – to hold your faith for you, to be the one who's praying on your behalf because you can't do it. We are in this life of faith, not alone – whatever it feels like in the desert – we're not alone. We're in this together.

ⁱ Matthew 27:46.

ⁱⁱ Richard Foster. *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. (New York: HarperLargePrint, 1992), 30.

ⁱⁱⁱ George Arthur Buttrick. *Prayer*. (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1942), 263.

^{iv} Foster, 32.

^v John 6:67-69.

^{vi} Genesis 22:1-14

^{vii} Foster, 42.