

Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.

14 October 2018

Hebrew Scripture: Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Christian Scripture: Hebrews 4:12-16

“When God Seems Absent”



The Bible is not necessarily consistent. And we should thank God for that. Why? Well, the Bible is a collection of stories about our ancestors' faith journeys. Since God was in relationship with each one of them, it makes perfect sense that that Bible chronicles many *different* relationships, which are based on many *different* experiences, which therefore produced many *different*, well, perspectives or vantages.



As an example, let's examine the book of Proverbs. Tradition states that King Solomon wrote Proverbs. We all know King Solomon had it pretty good. So, it stands to reason that Solomon would write

from a perspective wherein the blessings of God are based primarily on *his* good behavior. Or, conversely, others' ill-fortune is based on *their* bad behaviour. Proverbs conveys an 'If, then' perspective. 'If you do *this*, *then* that will happen to you'. This perspective in the Hebrew scripture carries over into Jesus' time.

But, a complication arose when someone was *born* blind and hence could not him or herself have done anything wrong (John 9). So, the 'If, then' theology speculated that the parents of the blind man must have done something wrong. Hence, the priests and scribes posed the question to Jesus, "Who sinned? This man or his parents?"

Now, I am not against a partial 'If, then' understanding of the world. I certainly believe that there are consequences for people's actions, both good and bad. Yet, there are two problems, as I see it, with the 'If, then' theology.

First, it can easily presuppose that God sometimes *causes* suffering as a form of punishment. And this conclusion is deeply problematic for me. I was once amused by a bumper-sticker that conveyed this idea that God causes suffering:



God gives us only
what we can
handle. Apparently
God thinks I'm a
bad-ass.

Yet, the God that I know and worship does not cause suffering. God does not give us suffering so as to teach us lessons, although we can and should learn lessons from our suffering. God does not punish us with suffering, although there are often consequences for our actions that often cause us to suffer. Neither do I believe 'we pay' for our sins through suffering. No. Instead, my God loves, my God supports, my God affirms!

Second, and more importantly for us this morning, I have difficulty with the 'If, then' theology because often good people hurt and suffer through no fault of their own. We learn this from Job. Sometimes, life just plain sucks. For some weeks I have ached for Lisa and Matthew, Joy and Dart, Dawn and Tony and I have grieved the pain suffered by Michael. Michael is the first child I met in this congregation. Michael is fighting a titanic battle, a battle which no three or four year old child should have to fight. I will contest anyone who for a moment would suggest that Michael's sufferings are somehow deserved or caused and 'given' by God.



In our scripture reading this morning, Job challenged the ‘If, then’ perspective. Job said to his less than sympathetic friends, ‘Your “If, then” theology is rubbish in my case. I have done nothing wrong. Yet I suffer, and I suffer terribly’.

We all can relate to Job. Despite that I am privileged, I still suffer. I remember when my father died. I suffered. I remember when I laid in pain in hospital after being attacked by a police dog. I remember having to have my hip reconstructed with seven pins and two plates. I remember (because it was not too long ago) when my wife told me she no longer wished to be married to me. I have felt alone. I have felt abandoned by God. I have felt that nowhere can God be found. I have, even as an ordained minister, accused God of going AWOL (Absent Without Leave).

I have suffered, but not as much as most. Not as much as most of you. You have suffered greatly. I know it. You have at times felt that God’s presence is absent, like Job did. Many of you struggle with addition, be it yours or a loved one’s. Many of you are lonely. Many of

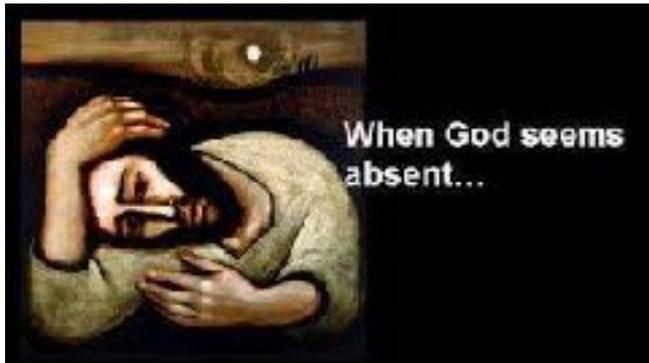
you despair over the process of aging. I read your e-mails this week. Some of you struggle with mental illness, either yours or your children's. Some of you are tired. Some of you have told me you are disillusioned with your church, perhaps rightfully so. Some of you suffer from chronic pain.



Listen to Job. Have you not heard your own voice in his laments? Are you currently in the midst of a condition or circumstance wherein you can hear yourself lamenting?

‘My complaint is bitter (23:2). I groan with pain (2). If I could only find God (3). But, I can't. I have looked everywhere: left and right, up and down (8-9). I have prayed everything and I still hear nothing. I am terrified (16). I am in darkness. Yet, even in abandonment, I will not stop crying-out to God for help (17).’

Yesterday, our church hosted the Brattleboro Literary Festival and many authors read poetry that communicated their agony, their sadness, their painful experiences. And so does Job. He communicates to us the universal condition of human suffering.



Adele Calhoun calls these experiences the ‘the presence of the absence of God’. She writes:

in these times, we sense God as a God who hides himself; it may be that we cannot ‘feel’ God or it seems God is distant from us. But being aware of that feeling of absence is also a way of knowing God. Martin Luther talked about how our mysterious God, in some ways, is hidden from us—how sometimes we feel a dark side of God's love. And so it is crucial to know that even when a person is in a place of profound spiritual desolation, that too is a real place in the spiritual journey with God. God's hiddenness—what Christian mystics called ‘the cloud of unknowing’—is as real as it would be if you saw God's handwriting on the wall.¹

So, what do we do when God’s presence seems absent in the midst of our suffering? I certainly don’t have the answers. I have only a perspective. Perhaps, my perspective can be helpful.

I can honestly tell you, I have almost only found the presence of God in the midst of my suffering *in relationship with others*. For me, and I pray for you as well, I encounter the living God through the

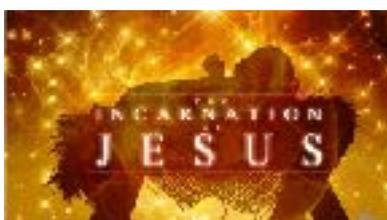
¹ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, with Kelli Trujillo, “How can we know when God is present in the moments of our lives?”, *Christian Bible Studies*, February 21, 2012. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/bible-answers/spirituallife/how-can-we-know-when-god-is-present.html>, accessed 14 October 2018.

words, presence and actions of those with whom I was in relationship. Have you not as well? I am confirming your experience too?

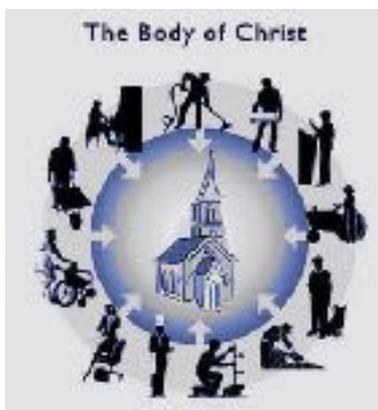
In the midst of my suffering, God has not audibly spoken to me. At least, not yet. In the midst of my suffering, God has not visually shown Godself to me as God did to Moses and Ezekiel. I have not had an ecstatic experience as did the apostle Paul, who was knocked off his ass, on to his ass, and rendered mute for days. No. I have heard God and seen God through others with whom I was in relationship.

It is in and through those around us that we can glimpse the presence of God in the midst of our suffering. If they are people of substance, people of faith, people who are invested not just in themselves but in others, they can and will speak the wisdom and show the presence of God.

And we at Centre Congregational Church have this presence with us in such abundance because of our shared understanding of the meaning of Jesus Christ's ministry. Because of our shared faith, we have the ability and the opportunity to lavishly communicate to one another the wisdom and presence of God.



We have this special ability to communicate to one another the love of God in the midst of suffering because we understand and we encounter an incarnated God (a God that has been made flesh in Jesus Christ). Our scripture from Hebrews speaks to us beautifully. The writer reminds us that God, through Jesus, is able “to sympathize with our weaknesses” (Hebrews 4:15) and therefore “we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

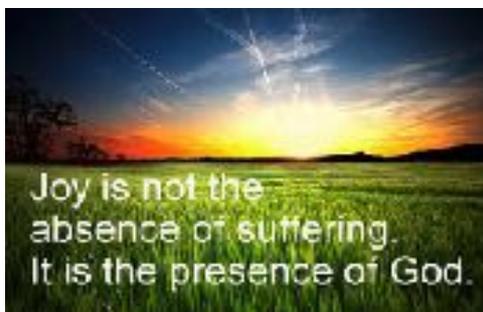


What does ‘sympathize with our weaknesses’ mean? It means that because God is incarnate, God is with us and can be seen, felt and heard through flesh. Through Jesus. And through the Body of Christ, which is not a building, but rather a congregation, that is, you! It means that because God is incarnate, God can be seen, and felt, and touched, and heard by others through you.

So, what are you waiting for? There are so many in our church that are suffering and in pain - are you being the face of God to them? If you are suffering, are you surrounding yourself and talking with us

here who are suffering, are you allowing yourself to be vulnerable and to hear God speaking words of wisdom through the mouths of your fellow members? Well, get to it!

And let us not be naïve to believe that our presence to others or others' presence to us automatically dissolves our suffering. No, we continue to suffer.



This is because “Joy is not the absence of the suffering. It is the presence of God.” We can experience joy in the midst of suffering through one another, just as we do through Jesus.

This was the word of God, and it was spoken to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.