

I Wish the Preacher Would Talk About... *When God is Absent*

Psalm 13

August 18, 2024

These many years later, I can still remember the sinking feeling in my stomach and the burning in my cheeks. I was standing next to a friend, Nathan, a man in his late twenties, and we were at the funeral home. It was a Thursday evening. Vases of flowers and boxes of Kleenex occupied every surface in sight. We were there at that funeral home on that Thursday evening, standing side-by-side, because my friend's father had died. It was both tragic and unexpected. No chance to say goodbye. It seemed like every person in that small town had come. My friend was visibly distressed. He was struggling to maintain the energy necessary to greet that long line of visitors. He wanted to be anywhere except here. You could see it in his eyes.

A family friend approached and shook his hand. He politely thanked the man for coming, for supporting the family. And then, rather than move along, the man patted my friend on his back and said, "I know it's hard right now, son, but in time you'll see this was all a part of God's plan."

The grieving son looked quizzically at his would-be comforter, thanked him, and then turned and looked straight at me. What I saw now was not sadness but bewildered frustration, even anger. Even in this moment, I can feel the force of those words. *Part of God's plan. Someday you'll see.* Now to be clear, I have no doubt that the objective of the visiting friend was sincere. I have no doubt that he intended, he meant, to bring comfort. But I also know—because I saw it with my own eyes and not for the last time—that his choice of words brought only pain in that moment. The cliché did not hold the weight.

Was there something different the man should have said? How are we to make sense of the unthinkable?

Where is God when the innocent suffer and the grieving can find no comfort? What does our faith offer to us when God is silent? When God is absent?

I wonder if you have ever prayed the words of Psalm 13. I wonder if you have ever asked how long the pain will last, if you have ever questioned the suffering of the righteous. I wonder if you have ever felt forgotten. Abandoned. Forsaken. Have you ever cried out to God in anger? I have. I have reached the outer limits of my faith. I have lost patience with God's inexplicable absence when I needed the most. I have become angry at pain I do not understand and cruelty I cannot accept. I have wondered how long such conditions will be permitted to persist, and I have wondered whether God has simply abandoned us all.

If you have never asked those questions, then God bless you. But if you have been there, then perhaps the words of the Psalmist will find a home in your heart. This book of poetic prayers contains forty-two psalms of lament—nearly a third of the total collection. Each one offers an unfiltered and unedited picture of the relationship between God and God's people in moments of particular pain, doubt, and despair. These psalms move beyond pious platitudes to embrace the realities of human life. They transcend statements of faith to vulnerable confession. They open a deeper understanding of our relationship to God.

And so, they can comfort us in ways that vapid expressions of condescending concocted confidence cannot. They refuse to ignore the reality of suffering. They face it head on. They invite honesty. They bear witness to a God who can bear the complexities of our lives. A God who is *with* us. With us not only in the moments of triumph and

glory, celebration and rejoicing. A God who goes with us into the valley of the shadow of death. Into the deepest depths of our despair.

And at its most faithful, at *our* most faithful, this is how the community of faith functions as well. It is true that none of us can carry the weight of belief all by ourselves. It is true that we need others who share our pain, who walk alongside us, who prop us up when we are falling. Because the life of faith is no predictable path of steadily growing certainty. There are mountains and there are valleys. Our faith is unflinching at one moment and flickering the very next. This is what it means to be human. And so, we need each other.

When I was twelve years old, my mother picked me up from school early so that I could attend the funeral of Edmund Cooper. Mr. Edmund was an elderly member of our church. He had battled cancer for some time. Edmund and his wife, Miss Lena, were like grandparents to my siblings and me. We spent many afternoons at their home, playing dominoes on the floor or chasing each other in their expansive backyard. Miss Lena was a saint. She was the kind of person who just radiated the joy of faith in every setting. But not that afternoon. Not that day.

I will never forget watching from the back of the sanctuary as the organ played and Miss Lena walked down the aisle all by herself. Her gaze was not lifted up or turned side to side. She is looking down at the floor, and she is sobbing. I had never seen her cry. It made me anxious and fearful. I wanted to bolt, to escape that heavy place. Throughout the service, I could see her. She was inconsolable. Her weeping was unceasing. She simply never stopped crying. Her shoulders were shaking with grief. I hated every moment of that service, and afterwards, I ran to my father's office. I closed the door to hide.

Later, when I finally gathered my courage to walk into the fellowship hall, I saw something I will never forget. As our church family gathered for the traditional

cookies and punch, Miss Lena was sitting on a metal folding chair in the corner. She was no longer alone. She was no longer weeping. No, she was surrounded. She was surrounded by all her church grandchildren, some of them well into their forties. She was laughing and smiling. She was kissing cheeks, just like she always did. Now listen, the grief was real. It had not magically, suddenly, miraculously disappeared, and no one pretended it had. But in those moments, Miss Lena was lifted by a community of faith whose presence mattered far more than their statements. It was beautiful. And sacred.

In a powerful eulogy for his dear friend, the writer George Saunders spoke these words: "The disaster of his loss will fade. It will be replaced by the realization of what a miracle it was that he ever existed in the first place. But for now, there is just grief. Grief is, in a sense, the bill that comes due for love."

The cost of love is grief. The answer of faith to suffering is not sentimental platitude meant to mask the awkwardness or drown the tears. Faith's answer is simply presence. Use words sparingly if at all.

William Sloane Coffin was one of the great preachers of the last century, and he was also a father who lost his son, Alex, in a tragic accident. The very next week, Coffin gave Alex's eulogy. And here is what he says: "When a person dies, there are many things that can be said, but there is at least one thing that should never be said. The night after Alex died, I was sitting in the living room of one of my sister's houses outside of Boston, when the front door opened and in came a nice-looking, middle-aged woman, carrying about eighteen quiches. When she saw me, she shook her head, then headed for the kitchen, saying sadly over her shoulder, 'I just don't understand the will of God.' Instantly I was up in hot pursuit, swarming all over her. 'I'll say you don't, lady!' I said." Coffin continued, "For some reason, nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn't go around this world with his finger on triggers, with his fists around

knives, with his hands on steering wheels...The one thing that should never be said when someone dies tragically is 'It is the will of God.' Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that my son die, that when the waves closed over his sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."

That's it. The God of the Psalms, the God of the prophets, the God of Jesus Christ, the God whom we worship today, is simply incapable of keeping distant from our suffering. The God whom we worship is one of vulnerability and sacrificial love. The God we worship fully embraces our human lives. God, whose heart breaks for the brokenness of humanity and all creation. For us, this was most clearly demonstrated on a hill called Golgotha, where Jesus Christ revealed to us a God who will suffer the depths of human pain for the sake of human relationship. The cross for us is a sign of hope because it reveals a God who takes on human flesh and shares in human suffering.

Presence. Presence. This is what God offers, and it is the gift we can offer one another as well. Use words sparingly if at all. No platitudes to block the pain. Simply sit in the darkness long enough to receive what it has to offer. The promise of God is the promise of presence.

No one is forever lost because God will find us all.
No one is truly alone, because God walks with each.
Every single soul of unimaginable worth because each belongs to God.

And so, even from the valleys, we cry to God. We cling to the conviction that God permits nothing to separate us from divine love, that God goes to the depths with us, that God stays right there with us in our pain.

And so, our hope will never rest on human ability. Our faith will never be grounded in knowing the right answers or speaking the right words. Our hope is in God's grace. Our faith is rooted in God's promise of presence. We can trust God's sturdy love enough to stay in the discomfort of unexplained suffering. And we can trust the truth sung by the Psalmist. Joy will find us again. Joy will find you again.

Hold fast. Hang on. You belong to God. Amen.