



“Where is God?”

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Hayward, California**

**Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost
October 11, 2009
Job 23:1-9, 16-17**

It is often said that the Book of Job raises more questions than it answers. Like many Bible stories, especially the Gospel parables of Jesus, each of us must puzzle through the ancient language to find a theme or moral that resonates with one's own problems or concerns.

In last Sunday's sermon, Pastor Arlene looked at one of the really big questions we find in the Book of Job: How do we cope when bad things happen? Today, in Job Part II, we look at another big question raised by Job: Where is God?

To situate you again in the story, let me remind you that poor Job is sitting in a dust heap, his body covered with festering sores, surrounded by three friends who are quite insistently and unsympathetically telling Job that his misfortune is a divine punishment for sin and that to be restored he must repent of this sin and ask God's forgiveness.

Job, however, is equally convinced of his innocence and fidelity to God. He feels unjustly accused and abandoned by God. In today's text, he deeply laments the fact that he cannot find God, though he looks in every direction of the compass. After railing against God (and his friends) for pages and pages, Job finally reaches a breaking point in Chapter 23 and proclaims with bitterness: Oh, that I knew where God was! I would go to God's house and present my case in person! But everywhere I look God is nowhere to be found!

What Job wants, like a dissatisfied customer fed up with the lame excuses offered by salespeople in a large department store, is to see the store manager. But God is nowhere to be found. God is not available to hear Job's complaint. In the beginning of Chapter 24, Job laments: “Why are times not kept by the Almighty and why do those who know him never see his days?” Like the store manager who is never available to receive complaints, God seems absent to Job, leaving him to ask: “What's the deal? Is this guy ever in? Where is God?”

We have all had Job's experience. The sense that God is nowhere to be found comes in many forms and with many names. It comes for many reasons, at times of

misfortune, and most especially during both personal and community tragedy, and, sadly, sometimes it comes for no reason at all. While to feel abandoned by God is always a spiritual crisis for the individual or the community, to feel abandoned by God after feeling close to God is a double blow, first to one's happiness and then to one's faith.

Biblical scholar and minister Renita Weems likens the sense of God's absence in her life as silence, saying, "No one is ever prepared to endure the long silence that follows intimacy. No one is prepared to face it when it comes after lovemaking. No one is prepared to face it when it follows a period of intimacy with God. It is the hardest thing to talk about, and it is the hardest part of the spiritual journey to prepare for."¹

In 2007, we learned that even the saintliest among us experience the absence or silence of God in our life. In the process of collecting documents to support the canonization of Mother Teresa, the Catholic nun who spent a lifetime devoted to helping the desperately ill in the slums of Calcutta, a trove of her letters to confessors and confidants revealed that Mother Teresa felt God's absence keenly and painfully for the last fifty years of her life. In over 40 letters, she variously described her sense of God's absence as silence, dryness, darkness, loneliness, and torture. She compared her experience of God's abandonment to hell and at one point said it had lead her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God. She was acutely aware of the discrepancy between her inner state and her public demeanor, particularly her remarks upon receiving the Nobel prize where she spoke glowingly of Christ's radiating presence in the world. "The smile," she wrote, is "a mask" or "a cloak that covers everything."²

Who would have thought one of the most faithful people in the world wondered:
Where is God?

When we struggle with our own sense of absence, knowing others, from Job to Mother Teresa, have also struggled with this type of loss is a good place to start. I believe it is inherent in the human condition and the spiritual journey of life that there will be times when God seems absent. It is also good to remember that though you feel it, though you name it, and though you seek to cure it, you did not cause it. It's a good time to rest, think broadly, and to ask oneself gentle questions.

One of my favorite gentle questions is look at the question of "where is God" quite literally. Is God a supernatural being who is "out there" but who sometimes intervenes in human affairs? Or is God an all-encompassing spirit who is not "out there" but who is "within us", thus not the direct cause of events but the presence in all events, both good and bad?

¹ Weems, Renita. *Listening for God: A Minister's Journey Through Silence and Doubt*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999, p. 25.

² Van Biema, David. *Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith*. Time Magazine, August 23, 2007, Web, October 8, 2009 (<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1655415,00.html>)

In a *History of God*, theologian Karen Armstrong shows that these two concepts of God have co-existed in all of the Abrahamic religions, including Christianity, since their ancient beginnings. When Job was written in the 6th or 5th Century BCE, the people prayed to a God who was “out there” but their concept of the universe was much smaller than our own and “out there” was more intimate and not nearly as far away as when “universe” means galaxy upon galaxy, as it does today. In the early 1st Century CE, the Apostle Paul wrote of a God “in whom we live and move and have our being” and the universe was, at least in part, not separate from God, but in God. Since the Enlightenment, however, with its emphasis on science and natural systems, God has mostly become a supernatural but separate force, the divine outsider who got the ball rolling with the Big Bang and to whom many address prayers for intervention. As our knowledge of the universe grows, our external God seems farther and farther away, more absent, and to some, perhaps not there at all.

Marcus Borg, a professor and champion for a new paradigm of Christian faith, makes a compelling case for rethinking how much emphasis we give in our life to the supernatural God who is “out there” over the all-encompassing God who is within and around us. The problem with a God, he says, who lives far away and who intervenes in our world from on high is how we account for the times when God does not intervene. We have seen tragedies so great in this century, such as the Holocaust and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, that Borg believes it does not make sense to believe in a God who would chose not to intervene. Furthermore, he argues, if God intervenes for us, why not for others who are equally worthy, equally needy, equally faithful?

In this God’s place, Borg embraces the *panentheistic* God, the all-within-God, and rejects the language of divine intervention. The all-within-God is both *immanent* (meaning among us) and *transcendent* (meaning beyond us and beyond our human understanding). The all-within-God does not intervene because God is already here, a permeating presence with and among us, who lives and suffers with us, who is the “more” in life that carries and inspires us, and grants us the grace and strength to move through great tragedy and suffering.

Where is God for you? Does it change when you are troubled or suffering? Does it change when and how you pray? When others ask, what do you tell them?

In times of trouble, I have found great comfort in two ideas about where God resides. Interestingly, in both ideas, God is neither far away nor a spirit within me. God is nearby, almost but not quite by my side.

The first idea occurred and comforted me when my first marriage failed in my early thirties. I felt so tossed and thrown about by my emotions that I felt like I was in the surf, being pounded by wave after wave. Someone pointed out to me that if you swim out of the surf and into deeper water, there are no crashing waves, only the gentle rise and fall of water as the swells go up and down. God, I thought, though I

scarcely believed in God at the time, was not in the surf but in the deep. To reach God—and personal peace—I needed to move out of the time and space where I was being buffeted about by problems and into the deeper water.

The second idea comforts me when I see the painful conflicts that rage on and on between people. The arguments, feuds, the road rage, the name-calling seems senseless and glorified by a culture hooked on drama and outrage. It comforts me to imagine people as children playing war in the backyard of life while God, the ever-patient parent, calls us to put down our toys and return home.

Neither of my ideas are adequate metaphors for how one should handle either personal crises or the pervasive problem of conflict, but isn't it interesting that in both, God is neither out there or within, but is nearby and waiting, willing, and wanting us to move toward God and to the peace that belief and faith can offer.

Your ideas about "where God is" will be different from mine. I believe what comforts you may not comfort others nor conform to the historic or emerging beliefs of this or any church. What unites us is the question and our commitment to answering it, alone and together, through prayer, through practice, and through community. When I stand in the sanctuary and ask for your joys and concerns, when I prepare our prayers of intercession and thanksgiving, I do not know where God is or what God will do or will not do, but I know with personal certainty that God is on our side.

At the end of the story of Job, it turns out that God was never that far away. God heard everything Job and his friends said and speaks to them out of a whirlwind, not as a store manager who has finally shown up for his work handling customer complaints, but as the President of the United States, just returned from the G8 Summit, ready to re-immense himself into national health care reform while leading a war in two countries. God says, Job, do you have any idea where I've been? How great I am? Do you have a clue what I've been doing? Do you understand my power and mystery in the least? And God turns to Job's friends and reprimands them for trying to convince Job that his misfortune was his fault. And Job's life—his wealth, his children, and his unflagging belief in God—is restored.

So you see, no matter how it looked, no matter how God's absence felt, it turned out that God was on Job's side all along. My friends, God is powerful and mysterious. God's presence in our life lifts us to new heights and our sense of God's absence can take us to new lows. Let us go forth together committed to finding God, believing, knowing, and celebrating that no matter where God is, God is always on our side. Amen.