

“The Absence of God”

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Text: Psalm 40

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Over the past few weeks we've explored the several faces of pain: in our bodies, in our relationships, in our losses. We've heard that God can help us in the midst of pain. We know that, and cling to that, and hope for that. But one of the great pains of faith is when we come to the time that we need that... and we don't find it. It is a pain in its own right: discovering God absent when we most need Him. This pain of faith is traditionally called “the dark night of the soul” – a phrase that comes from a poem by the 16th century Spanish monk John of the Cross. He suggested that having the painful experience of feeling God's absence in life is a universal and necessary stage in our own personal growth in faith. All of us start with a faith that we might call simple and naïve. When that faith is without challenge it is easy to affirm. But the challenge will come.... And in this challenge we are faced with three paths. We can depart from God. We can despair in faith. Or we can go deeper. John of the Cross wrote that the dark night of the soul is a tool in God's hand to prod us to go deeper in faith.

Indeed, the greatest thing any of us can do as Christians is to prepare our souls for that moment when it comes... and it does come. To me it is like my training as a scuba diver. A majority of what you learn in your training is three things: 1] stay calm in a crisis, 2] trust your buddy, 3] know what to do in a crisis. This understanding is not needed in most of your dives, but it's vital when something goes wrong! My instructor proved to me the wisdom of this in a dive near Halifax. In my first ocean dive, 10m underwater, he turned off my air without me knowing it. I'm here today because I responded as I was supposed to: I didn't panic, I trusted my buddy, and I followed the practice. It's the same in faith. When God seems to have been turned off in our life, we are not to panic, we are to keep trusting, and we are to keep practicing our faith. But, we tend not to practice our faith well in the easy times. We live consumed by our focus on what we are doing and so we lose our mindfulness of God. We do not practice ways to look for God or to appreciate God's presence. So in our time of need we can be caught out like a couch potato needing to run a sprint. The task can seem daunting, and our efforts can leave us well short of the goal.

This fundamental spiritual struggle is captured by the contrast between two people who lived 400 years ago. Michelangelo gave his entire life to what he could create. He said that every stone contains a sculpture, and that it was up to him the sculptor to set free the image within the stone. At the end of his life he regretted his focus. He wrote, “So now, from this mad passion which made me take art for an idol and king, I have learnt the burden of error that it bore... The world's frivolities have robbed me of the time that I was given for reflecting on God”. Contrast this with the attitude of the monk named Brother Lawrence. He used his time as the monastery's cook to develop a profound sense of knowing God's

presence moment by moment. He wrote, "Sometimes I imagine myself as a stone before a sculptor from which he will carve a beautiful statue. Presenting myself before God, I ask Him to form His perfect image in my soul and make me entirely like Himself". When we carve it all away, it comes down to this: in life are we going to be the sculptor or the sculpture? If it is our desire to be the sculpture, we make ourselves willing stone in God's hands. Traditionally this is called "practicing the presence of God", which is increasing our awareness of God's presence and growing more determined living of faith in life. This pays great dividends for us, for practicing the presence of God builds the spiritual reserve needed to deal with the dark night of the soul when it comes... and it does come.

Traditionally Presbyterians have a deep affinity for the Psalms. What makes them wonderful is their deep and frank expression of personal spirituality. Psalm 40 is an example that speaks to both practicing the presence of God and of the dark night of the soul. First, let us see some of the ways David practiced the presence of God. First, David kept in memory his spiritual story. The psalm opens with a recollection: "I waited patiently for the Lord; He inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit and set my feet upon the rock" (vs. 1-2). Many of the psalms do the same thing: they express remembrances of when God was present and helpful to the writers. Can you do the same? In telling our own life stories we can use many themes. We can tell our story through the theme of family, or of our careers, or of our involvements in our hobbies. Have you ever tried looking at your life story through the theme of your faith? Can you, like David here, recall times when you were in miry bog of the pit, and known God's help? David wrote here of God, "You have multiplied your wondrous deeds... were I to try to tell of them all, these deeds would be more than can be counted" (vs. 5). One of the greatest resources we can have for the dark nights of our soul is our own spiritual autobiography. In verse 3 David writes, those who see this will put their trust in God. A first step towards practicing the presence of God is to remember those discrete moments when you have known God's presence. Naming and cherishing those sets you on the right path.

Now, you may not have a great collection of stories, so another way we can grow in this is to hear how others have known God's presence. David here wrote "I have told the glad news of my deliverance to your people... I have spoken of your faithfulness" (vs. 9-10). If each of us here had only two stories of how God has been present to us, and if we were to share them, this morning we would have 200 stories of how God has been present to this congregation! Imagine! Now, admittedly, we as Presbyterians find it really hard to speak of our faith... even to each other. But in this we rob ourselves of a great gift – the gift of helping each other see God better. Sharing with each other our spiritual autobiographies can stretch our imagination and focus our sight on how God is made present to people. And if we have a better idea of what to look for, we up the chance of glimpsing God. And every glimpse adds to our sense of God's presence.

David also spoke here of dwelling upon God. He wrote, "I delight in your will... I hold you word in my heart" (vs. 8). "You have given me an open ear" (vs. 6). He was writing of a meditative practice that reflects on scripture but also one that simply sits in God's presence... an attitude that knows that we always live life under God's gaze. This is the actual doing of practicing the presence of God. It is living life

with a growing, moment by moment awareness that God is there, that God is gazing down on us, that our gracious God wishes to convey blessings on us. Imagine what this can do for you! I had a brother-in-law who was one of the best known bird watchers in Canada. In the time it took me to see two birds he would see thirty! His practice of his craft allowed him to glimpse things I would never see. The attitude, the outlook and the awareness we are called to have as Christians will help us do the same thing over time, that we too might say with David that God's wondrous deeds to us are more than can be counted. Practicing the presence of God is about training ourselves to look and to see.

Then the psalm changes in verse 11. In the last half of the psalm David tells us he is in his own dark night of the soul. "Evils have encompassed me without measure". What David asks of God tells us what he is missing. In the midst of this crisis, God appeared absent to David. And so David says, "Don't withhold your mercy... be faithful to me... deliver me, and don't delay!" David expresses his worry here that he may have caused God's absence. He wrote, "my sins overwhelm me to the point where I cannot see". In other words, what I have done in life clouds my vision of God. He cannot see God in his moment of need, and he confessed, "my heart fails me". Truly this would be a dark night of the soul. Normally he found it easy to sense God's presence. Now he couldn't.

However, it was those remembrances of God that are David's comfort.. that maintained his trust in God. Psalm 40 began by affirming that remembrance, "I waited patiently for the Lord; He inclined to me and heard my cry, and drew me up from the pit". Waiting patiently in the past had paid off. God did come through as hoped. It also paid off for David in building a persevering and trusting and patient faith. God does not always come to us in the urgency of our schedule. So the Psalms encourage us 22 times to wait upon the Lord. Hold fast to your spiritual autobiography, be attentive and expectant for God. And as John of the Cross tells us, God can use that dark night of the soul to help you dig deeper in your spirit to have a more trusting, steadfast faith. And then that dark night, one day, may become one of a growing number of climaxes in your faith story. A climax because God did come. That, my friends, will make you more grateful... will help you speak of God to others more freely... will help you know better what you are looking for when you look for God. David summed up well this dark night of the soul in the final verse: "As for me, I am now poor and needy, but the Lord does not delay for me. You are my help and deliverer. So do not delay, O my God".