

Why Does God Hide?

by Patty Friesen, Palm Sunday (April 14/19)

“Verily, thou art a God who hidest Thyself.” Isaiah 45:15

Read: Isaiah 45:15-18 (King James Version), Luke 23:1-12 (Inclusive Version)

Sing: Immortal, Invisible God only Wise #70 HWB

In Downton Abbey, when Lady Violet’s rival finally gets a boyfriend, she ironically quips, “God works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform.” Lady Violet quoted this from the hymn in the Church of England hymnal written by William Cowper, who was anything but ironic, suffering from suicidal depression for most of his life. Cowper knew a thing or two about the mysterious and often impenetrable ways of God.

The prophet Isaiah wrote, “Verily, thou art a God who hidest thyself” in the King James Version. I like the King James Version for today’s biblical work, because when we say Verily, thou art a God who hidest *thyself*, we are addressing God in the second person as we would talk to a friend. In street English it would be, “For sure, you are a hiding kind of God.” Ironically, the Inclusive Bible’s version says, Truly you have a secret God is a distant reference to God as third person. Take note everyone that this is a King James Version preferred moment!

Throughout Christian history, the question has always been asked: Why do you hide, God? When terrible things happen, where are you? This question becomes more urgent and more agonizing when something happens to young people. A year ago, when the Humboldt Broncos bus crash happened there wasn’t a person in this country who didn’t ask, “Where was God?”

This is the question that Christian faith must ask. It's a very shallow faith if it does not ask it. Many people have been conditioned not to ask these kinds of questions - as though the questions are disrespectful, intrusive, or dangerous to faith. Some worry that asking such a question is like opening a door to not believing in God at all. But the people of the Bible do ask about the presence and absence of God, directly and bluntly. The questions are asked over and over again in the Psalms and the wonderful little book of the prophet Habakkuk asks it this way: "Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear? Why are you silent?" (Hab:1:2,13)

The silence and absence of God is a major theme of scripture and a common struggle in the Christian life. Habakkuk's questions are part of every believer's struggle for faith. I suspect that many seasoned churchgoers have had occasion to ask why God so often seems to be silent. Anyone who has not asked this question hasn't been fully tested yet.

The idea that God is inaccessible and lives in "light inaccessible, hid from our eyes" is an ancient one. When Moses came down from speaking with God on Mount Sinai, his face reflected God's light so brightly that he had to wear a veil over it (Ex. 34:29-35). When Moses asked God to show him God's glory or Shekinah, God placed him in a cleft in a rock and covered him with a hand to protect Moses from seeing God's glory directly (Ex.33:21-23). God dwells in inaccessible light - light that we can't directly look at. It's uncreated light that emanates from God's very being.

"Thou art a God who hidest thyself." The name for this idea in Latin is *Deus Absconditus*, the hidden God. But God is not just hidden on general principles. If God is hidden, it is because God is the one who does the hiding. God means to be hidden.

It is God's nature to be out of the reach of our senses. There is a distance between God and ourselves that cannot be bridged from our side. God isn't a product of human imagination, a human wish raised to the nth power or a projection of human hopes and fears. God is outside and beyond our ideas of God, so we can't see God from a human point of view at all. Put another way: God is invisible not only to our eyes; God is also invisible to our imaginations. But how then do we even know who God is? How do we even know if there is a god?

Isaiah praises this God of hiddenness. In fact, Isaiah chapters 40-55 are the longest, most sustained hymn of praise to God's power and purposes in the whole Bible. Yet the conditions in which those chapters were written were hopeless by any ordinary standards. The people of God had been dragged off to Babylon, where they were forced to ponder the fact that their God had apparently abandoned them. Isaiah writes that God is not dependent upon desperate circumstances and God is not simply located with the children of Israel, but with all of creation itself. The rest of Isaiah 45 mocks Babylon, "They carry about their wooden idols, and keep praying to a god that cannot save...There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and Saviour...Turn to me and be saved all the ends of the earth! For I am God and there is no other...To me every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess. (Is.45:20-23)

One of the main reasons we need to know the Old Testament intimately is that the God revealed in it as both hidden and accessible. It's the same with the hymn Immortal Invisible by Chalmers Smith – God is immortal and invisible, yet God is most gracious, most glorious, most accessible to us. These seem a contradiction: How do we know that God is gracious and worthy of praise if God is hidden and inaccessible?

The fact that God seems hidden is paradoxically a testimony to God's reality. If we didn't believe there was God, God wouldn't even exist in hiddenness. But hiddenness and self-disclosure are God's choice. God isn't hidden because we are too stupid to find God or too lazy or not spiritual enough. God hides and reveals as God wills. If that were not so, God would not be God. God would be nothing more than a projection of our own religious ideas and wishes.

God hides because God is God in the Old Testament and God self-discloses because God is love in the New Testament. This is a theological paradox. God self-discloses in Jesus and that God's self also suffered injury and death in Jesus shows us this identification with humanity and vulnerability. Jesus himself experienced the hiddenness of God when on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus experienced the absence of God and yet the presence of God saying at the end, "Into your hands, I commit my spirit." Jesus trusted the presence of God despite apparent absence. This is the powerful gospel lesson of this Holy Week.

We do not know why God appeared to be absent on Saskatchewan Hwy 35 a year ago. The Broncos chaplain shared profoundly at the memorial service that "Where was God that awful night? God was present to us, suffering with us in that bus and holding our hands in death and injury and in the help that came in first responders and emergency room staff at RUH. God continues to be present to grieving families and communities, mourning with us as in the suffering of Jesus himself."

Hymn writers Cowper and Chalmers Smith, scripture writers Isaiah and Luke, Jesus himself and we ourselves have experienced both the absence and presence,

both the hiddenness and revelation of God. It is captured in the declaration scratched on the walls of a basement where a Jewish person was hiding from the Nazis in Koln, Germany: I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. I believe in love even when feeling it not. I believe in God even when God is silent.

The silence of God descended upon the cross on Good Friday and on the morning of the third day, the sun rose upon the empty tomb. As another scripture writer reminds us: The secret things belong to the Lord our God: but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever” (Deuteronomy 29:29).

Why Does God Hide? by Fleming Rutledge (CC Sept 12/18)

Let us pray...Hidden God, in mystery and silence you are present in our lives, bringing new life out of death, hope out of despair. We thank you that you do not leave us alone but labor to make us whole. Help us to perceive your unseen hand in the unfolding of our lives, and to attend to the gentle guidance of your Spirit, that we may know the joy of your love and rest in your peace. Amen. #745 HWB