



When God is Absent

SCRIPTURE:
Job 23:1-9, 16-17

February 14, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

There once was a man named Job. He was upright and blameless before God. He loved God and honored God. He had a wonderful family, many friends, good health, a beautiful home and property and livestock. He was rich and prosperous. God was pleased with how Job honored God. When God mentioned this, a member of God's court, called the accuser, more like a prosecuting attorney, said that, of course, Job loved God because Job had a great life. But if Job lost all these things—his family, home, his wealth—he would curse God. So God allowed bad things to happen to Job. God did not cause them but God allowed them. And that's where we are in chapter 23. Job has lost everything. Listen to this.

Then Job answered: Today also my complaint is bitter, God's hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find God, that I might come even to God's dwelling! I would lay out my case before God and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what God would answer me and understand what God would say to me. Would God contend with me in the greatness of God's power? No; but God would give heed to me. There an upright person could reason with God, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge. If I go forward, God is not there, or backward I cannot perceive God; on the left God hides and I cannot behold God; I turn to the right but I cannot see God.

God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face! Job 23:1-9, 16-17

In the midst of his pain and suffering, Job says: If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick dark-

ness would cover my face! For Job, God is absent. Some of us have experienced this. Some of us are struggling through it now. And I am not just talking about the Super Bowl game last Sunday. Over 500 years ago, St. John of the Cross wrote about this experience. He called it "the dark night of the soul." It is characterized by a profound struggle with God. For some, it is brought on by a devastating illness. For others, betrayal in a relationship, or a losing battle with an addiction or just a dryness of one's faith. God is absent.

For me, it happened when I was in seminary. Interesting, isn't it? I went to McCormick Seminary in Chicago. The seminary rests on 55th Street. 55th is a major thoroughfare four lanes across and notoriously, cars did not slow down for pedestrians. We used to tell each other that in the Apostles' Creed where we recite that Jesus came to judge the quick and the dead—well, he was talking about 55th Street because if you were not quick, you were dead.

It was the middle of winter, which also had something to do with it. I got to class one morning and a friend asked me, "Did you hear about the accident early this morning?" "No," I replied. "What happened?" "It's really sad," she said. "This kid was running to catch the bus and he ran out into the street and got hit and died."

I guess because we were studying about God's will and providence that news stayed with me. The next day, The Chicago Tribune had an article about him in the metro section. His name was Robert and he grew up in the Robert Taylor Homes Housing Project on the south side of Chicago a few miles away from McCormick Seminary. The Robert Taylor Homes was notorious for violence. Several gangs fought daily for control over their territory. It had

earned the dubious honor as the most dangerous housing project in Chicago. Even police officers were reluctant to go there after dark.

When he got into a college-prep high school across town, Robert had moved out to avoid the gangs. He was a junior in high school. For two years, he had been sleeping on the floor of his grandmother's one-bedroom apartment near 55th Street. He was an honors student. He had to take two buses and the train to get to school every day. He had a part-time job to help his mom and grandma. He had to start out at 5:30 every morning. The morning he died, he had inadvertently slept late because he had been up doing his homework until midnight after coming home from his job. His grandmother woke him up and insisted he eat something, which made him later. So he was running out of the apartment building with his backpack when he saw the city bus across the street. He ran out and didn't see the car coming in the opposite direction.

I carried Robert's story with me the whole day. Later that evening, I walked down 55th Street and found a collection of flowers and cards and stuffed animals and pictures right there against his apartment building. I stood there and tried to pray. While I was there, an older woman came and stood next to me. She whispered, "This is so sad. He was such a good boy." I told her I'm sure he was.

As I walked back, I passed my seminary and stopped in our chapel. It was late and no one was around. I remember just sitting there and it wasn't just that I was sad, I was angry, too. I remember praying and saying to God out loud, "What are you doing? Don't you understand? We are trying so hard to believe in you but come on. He was just a kid. He was making all the right choices. He wanted to be the first in his family to go to college. He wanted to be a teacher and a coach. A teacher. Couldn't you have done something? Couldn't you have gotten him up earlier or made the bus a little late? Don't you understand? We are trying so hard to live here. What is wrong with you? He was trying so hard to live." And I remember this. I just sat there. And I didn't hear anything.

I moved through the next days in a fog and God felt so absent and I remember wondering why I was in seminary at all. My friend found out when his service was going to be and she told me we needed to go. I told her that I didn't want to go but she insisted. The church was packed. And I listened to the preacher and so many of his friends and family and teachers talk about how beautiful he was and how smart and how kind he was and then his grandmother got up and in the best of the Black church tradition, she gave her testimony. She testified about how much she loved her grandson. How proud she was of him. How she felt bad for making him late because she wanted him to eat before he left her apartment. How she has kept his bed there on her living-room floor. And then she talked about how God is holding her up in her grief. She talked about how close Jesus is to her right now. And watching her and listening to her, I began to hear God's voice again.

St. John of the Cross, who struggled with the dark night of the soul over his lifetime, wrote that he believed even the struggle honored God because even in God's absence, he still was seeking God. Job gets it wrong when he blames God for his suffering. Hear me clearly: I do not believe God causes suffering or pain or sadness or death. I do not believe God takes loved ones away from us. But I believe God allows it. Why? That is part of the mystery, but I believe God allows pain and suffering and dark nights of the soul partly out of respect for us. God does not want us to love God so that only good things will happen to us. That would make God coercive and manipulative. If people who loved God never got cancer, then everyone would love God out of fear. And love based on fear is not love. No.

I think God allows suffering and sadness and death equally on the just and the unjust, on the good and the bad, on the righteous and unrighteous out of respect for us and our free will. Job gets it wrong in blaming God, but here is where Job gets it right. Even in his suffering, Job wants to take his laments directly to God. Even when Job feels like God is absent, Job stays in relationship with God. And that is the good news of Job. Because even when the pain

cuts you deep and the night keeps you from sleeping and when the world seems so cruel, God is still there.

After Robert's grandmother shared her testimony, she had the courage and the faith to lead the church in singing and her voice and the voices of the choir, they lifted us all. When I first heard this song six years ago, it did that for me. I could hear God singing to us. It's called "Remedy" by Adele. Becky and Nathan Bliss are going to share it with us.

I get it. When tragedy strikes, God can feel absent. Job gets it wrong when he blames God for all that has happened. It's very human to do that but it's wrong. I do not believe God causes disease or

death or addiction or pandemics or depression or broken relationships but I do believe God allows bad things to happen because God is not a coercive God. And I believe that even in the dark night of the soul, God will be our remedy. You know, it is not lost on me that what began to lead me out of my own faith struggle was the strong faith of Robert's grandmother. That is the redemptive power of God. That in our struggle, God is present with us through the faith of others. You do that for me over and over. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This sermon was delivered by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka, at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, Kansas, 66208. The sermon can be read, heard, or watched on the church's website: www.villagepres.org/online.
