

Adam, Where are You?

Genesis 3:8-10

On Dec. 11, 1979, Mother Teresa, went to Oslo Norway to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for her work with the poorest of poor in Calcutta India. In her acceptance speech she said, "It is not enough for us to say, 'I love God, but I do not love my neighbor, because on the cross, God had made himself the hungry one — the naked one — the homeless one.' Jesus' hunger, she said, is what 'you and I must find and alleviate.'" She also reminded everyone "that radiating joy is real because Christ is everywhere — Christ in our hearts, Christ in the poor we meet, Christ in the smile we give and in the smile that we receive." Those are the kinds of words you'd expect to hear from that great Christian saint: powerful, positive, and profound.

What we learned much later is that only a few months before, in a letter to her spiritual confidant, the Rev. Michael van der Peet, she wrote with weary familiarity of a different Christ, an absent one. "Jesus has a very special love for you," she assured Van der Peet. "but as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, — listen and do not hear — the tongue moves in prayer but does not speak ... I want you to pray for me — that I let Him have [a] free hand."¹ Her feelings echoed an earlier saint, John of the Cross, who expressed his spiritual condition as "a dark night of the soul".²

When van der Peet released these confidential letters of spiritual despair, many in the Catholic church were divided. Some were angry because they saw these as a private correspondence between a penitent and confessor. The seal of confession is sacrosanct, and they believe he broke it. Others were comforted to find out that they are not alone. If Mother Theresa can feel that way and still live a great life of faith, then maybe it's alright for me to feel that way as well. If her feelings about God can go up and down like mine, then maybe I can continue to be faithful as she did.

The message today is for anyone who has ever experienced the dark night of the soul. It is for everyone who has ever felt that God is a million miles away. If that has happened to you, the question is, "Did God move or did I?" Let us pray:

Lord, in a cold and bitter wind when the world around us is gray, our feelings of faith lose their warmth as well. We wonder where you are and why we don't feel as close to you as we once did. Revive flagging spirits we pray through your word and by your spirit so that we can once more "mount up with wings of eagles, so that we can run and not grow faint."³ Amen.

Last week we followed Adam and Eve into the garden only to find they were not alone. A serpent had slithered in and wrapped itself around the only tree God had

¹ <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1655415,00.html#ixzz0bwacSvCe>

² St. John of the Cross

³ Isaiah 40:31

forbidden. This was one smart snake for he knew better than to directly challenge the Word of God. The Lord walked with them daily so he knew he'd never convince them that God doesn't care or that God isn't there. Better, he thought, to raise questions and doubts. Better to add a word here or change a word there in order to lead them away from the Lord one inch at a time. He whispered into Eve's ear, "Did God really say?" The ruse worked and before they knew what they were doing they exchanged a relationship of trust and truth for a lie. In doing so, they sold their souls for something they already had in their souls and that was God's love.

Now, the Bible tells us that in that moment, "their eyes were opened and they knew they were naked."⁴ This has nothing to do with Eden being a clothing-optional garden. It's not as if after eating the forbidden fruit they suddenly felt a draft. This is not about clothing. This is the Bible's way of saying they became self-aware. For the first time, they looked in a mirror and didn't much like what they saw. So they sewed some leaves together to cover themselves, and then they hid behind some bushes so that God wouldn't see.

Talk to anyone in the field of psychology and they'll tell you that being honest with yourself, seeing yourself as you really are is the first step toward recovery, but it is hard to take and that's why most of us are quick to find excuses to explain our actions. Early on we learn to say, "It's not my fault, my brother made me do it." Or, "I did my homework but the dog ate it." Or, and this one every parent has heard, "Everyone is doing it, so it must be O.K."

The term those in the field use to describe this characteristic of human behavior is *denial*. It is an ostrich hiding its head in the sand, believing that means no one else can see.

Whenever we encounter something so traumatic that it shocks our system we have within us some kind of switch that turns off reality for a bit so that we don't have to immediately deal with whatever it is that causes us pain. This can happen when we face the loss of a loved one. It can happen when we face the loss of a marriage. It can happen when we face a loss of a job. It happens when innocence is lost as well. We can deny what we've done and who we are.

That's what this first couple did when their eyes were opened. They ran and hid and covered themselves up and thought God would never see. God would never find us. We won't have to be held accountable for our actions. We're not responsible. We can get away with it. No one will see. No one will know.

Many of us today look at things in the same way. We make excuses for our sins. It's not my fault, I was born with a bad temper. It's not my fault, I had bad parents. It's society that has made me the way that I am. Everyone else is doing it so how bad can it be?

⁴ Genesis 3:7

When the man and the woman covered themselves up with excuses, when they ran from their responsibilities, and when they tried to hide behind all their “reasons why”; the Bible says that “in the cool of the day the Lord walked through the garden and called out, “Adam, Adam, where are you?”

I’ve long felt this was one of the most poignant pleas in all of scripture. God is portrayed as a two-legged deity searching behind every bush and looking behind every tree. God is described as a parent frantically looking for a child who has wandered away in the mall.

That’s the way it reads, but it’s not as if God didn’t know exactly where they were and what they did. The purpose of this question was not to find out where they were. God called out “Adam, where are you” so that Adam would know that the Lord was still there and still cared and was looking for him.

This is one of the unique features of Christianity. In most other understandings of the divine, God is immutable, unmovable, and holy. Faith in most other religious expressions describes our journey to find God. We’re the ones who are supposed to look under every bush and behind every tree to find God that is always one step away. God is on top of the mountain and our job is to somehow get there. Every religion has its own ideas about how we do that, but most seem to agree it’s our job to make the effort. We move toward God. God does not move toward us.

Jesus had a different view. In his parable of the ninety and nine, he describes a shepherd who had lost one little lamb out of a flock of a hundred. In his story, the shepherd leaves the flock and searches for the one who has wandered away. This seemed to Jesus self-evident – the standard practice of this business. But, I wonder if there were some shepherds in his congregation who thought this was utterly foolish. Why risk the welfare of the whole flock to find one silly sheep that wandered away lest all the rest fall prey to wolves?

But Jesus was concerned about that lost little lamb caught in the thorns, trapped in a dead-end canyon, or just not sure about how to make it safely home. In Jesus’ view, the good shepherd goes and hunts for the sheep.

Where did he get that idea? Well maybe he had read the twenty-third psalm. He may even have memorized it as many of you have. It begins with that soaring statement of faith, “the Lord is my Shepherd”, but how does it end? “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Now, Jesus knew Hebrew better than you or I, so he would have understood that the word our Bibles translate as “follow” does not describe a puppy dog trailing after its master. Rather, this word “radaph” is a hunter searching, tracking, following its prey and never giving up. The goodness and mercy of God does not trail after you like tin cans tied to a wedding bumper. The goodness and mercy of God is described by poet, Francis Thompson, as the “hound of heaven” hot on your trail.

Jesus came to seek and save the lost just as his heavenly father had rushed through the garden calling out, “Adam where are you?” The question was an invitation to repent to make things right to follow once more. The question was a second chance, but Adam missed it. When he and Eve finally stood up from behind the bushes, God asked why they were hiding and Adam said, “Because we were naked.” God, keeping the door of redemption open asked, “Who told you that you were naked?”

This was his opportunity to confess and repent and to make things right once more, but Adam couldn’t do it. Instead he pointed at Eve and said, “she made me do it” and then she pointed at the serpent and said, “he made me do it”. From that day to this people have been quick to point fingers and lay blame on everyone but themselves. Then they wonder where God went. They wonder why God seems so far away.

If, like Mother Theresa and countless other saints, you’ve felt far from God, if you’ve experienced that dark night of the soul when you’ve laid awake at night and wondered if God is there and if God cares; if you feel step-by-step and inch-by-inch you’ve wandered so far away you wonder how you’ll ever get back – then listen for the still small voice of God who whispers, “where are you?”. Stand up from behind the appearances you’ve worked so hard to present to others. Raise your hand once more and say, “Lord, here am I.”

In a moment we’ll sing a favorite hymn written by a man who did just that. John Newton, as many of you know, was a British seafaring captain who traded in slaves in the late eighteenth century. His trade made him a hard man with a thick skin and narrow vision. He gave no thought to the people chained and lined up like logs in the hold of his ship. On one particularly stormy voyage when he feared all was lost he saw himself as he really was and opened himself up to God for the first time, and he prayed, “Lord deliver me, a sinner.” Somehow over the sound of the thunder or perhaps through it, in the midst of waves crashing over the bows. In the midst of that storm and in the middle of that prayer he would later say he felt the presence of God. He knew God was there and God did care. Later he described that experience in the verse which says,

“Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved;

how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.

The Lord has promised good to me, his word my hope secures;

he will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.

Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come;

‘tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

Let us pray:

O God of amazing grace, how sweet is the sound of your voice calling out to us and bidding us come and follow. Some of us remember when we were lost and how you found us, when we did not understand but now can see. Others have been hiding for far too long, and it's time to stand up and say, "Here I am Lord, take my life and let me live my life in faith and hope and love. Through Jesus Christ the Lord of Life I pray. Amen.