

When God Seems Absent

St Augustine (354-420 AD), *Confessions*

“My soul is restless until it finds its rest in thee”

Does God Always Seem Present in Your Life?

A tree is there
but void of leaves,
and a rainbow
no one can seem
to touch or hold.

Haven't you known
some barrenness
in your living,
some distance from
others you know,
and even God?



Barrenness and Distance: The Patriarchal Witness

Consider Abram

- “As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. Then the Lord said to Abram, ‘Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years’” (Genesis 15:12, 13).
- “Then Sarai said to Abram, ‘May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me’” (Genesis 16:5)

Consider Abraham

- “After these things God tested Abraham.... He said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Mariah, and offer him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you’” (Genesis 22:1,2).
- “Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son” (Genesis 22:9,10)

Barrenness and Distance: The Prophetic Struggle

Consider Isaiah

- “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts” (6:5).
- “And God said, ‘Go.... Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes....’ Then I said, ‘How long, O Lord?’ And he said, ‘Until cities lie waste, without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate’” (6:9-11, rev).

Consider Jeremiah

- “You will be in the right, O Lord, when I lay charges against you; but let me put my case to you. Why does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?How long will the land mourn and the grass of every field wither?” (12:1,4).
- “If you have raced with foot-runners and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you fall down, how will you fare in the thickets of the Jordan?” (12:5).

Barrenness and Distance: Sampling the Psalms

- “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest? “ (22:1,2).
- “Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent in sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away” (31:9,10).
- “I said, ‘I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue; I will keep a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence.’ I was silent and still; I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse, my heart became hot within me. While I mused the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue: ‘Lord, let me know the end of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is.... Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; do not hold your peace at my tears. For I am your passing guest, like all my forbears. Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again before I depart and am no more’” (39:1-4, 12,13).

Barrenness and Distance: Was Jesus Himself Immune?

- “As he came near and saw the city [Jerusalem] he wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you, and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God” Luke 19:41-44).
- “Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray.’ He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated.... And going a little farther he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want”” (Matthew 26:36,37,39).
- “From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?’ that is ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Matthew 27:45,46).

Barrenness and Distance: The Apostolic Awareness

- “After a little while the bystanders came up to Peter, ‘Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.’ Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, ‘I do not know the man!’ At that moment the cock crowed. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: ‘Before the cock crows you will deny me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly” (Matthew 26:73-75).
- Paul writes in Romans: “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ... So with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin” (7:21-25)
- And the writer to the Hebrews says: “See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal. You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, even though he sought the blessing with tears” (12:16,17).

Barrenness and Distance: The Witness of Saints

- St Augustine speaks of the absence of God in his life, wanton as he was, and profligate in lifestyle. Stealing some neighbor's pears one night with some friends, not because he was hungry but simply because they were there to be stolen, he confessed: "Doing this pleased us all the more because it was forbidden.... I was being gratuitously wanton, having no inducement to evil but the evil itself. It was foul and I loved it. I loved my own undoing. I loved my error—not that for which I erred but the error itself. A deprived soul, falling away from security in thee to destruction in itself, seeking nothing but the shameful deed but shame itself" (*The Confessions, Chapter IV*).
- John Tauler (1300-1361) writes: There are some who say in their blindness: 'God does not touch or inspire me as he does other persons.' God touches and moves, warns and desires all people equally, and he wants one quite as much as another. The inequality lies in the way in which his touch, his warnings, and his gifts are received. Often it happens that when God comes to us with his touches and his gifts, he finds the soul occupied. Other guests are there, and he has to turn away." (www.goodnews.ie/wisdomlinemarch2007.shtml)
- In *The Dark Night* for which John of the Cross (1542-1591) is famous he writes: "The soul, because of its impurity, suffers immensely at the time ... divine light truly assails it. When this pure light strikes in order to expel all impurity, persons feel so unclean and wretched that it seems God is against them and they are against God.... As Job says: 'Why have you set me against you, and I am heavy and burdensome to myself?' " (Job 7:20).

Barrenness and Distance: Our Challenge Today

- Martin Marty speaks of a crisis of certainty in the modern mind. He hangs his whole biography of Luther on the word: “God present and God absent. God too near and God too far, the God of wrath and the God of love, God weak and God almighty, God real and God as illusion, God revealed and God hidden,.” For Luther, believers should not imagine that they will be spared “the flood of mortal ills prevailing.” *Anfechtungen*, a German word describing Luther’s chronic interior struggles with God is a word, Marty says, that “is hard to translate but easy to appreciate.” It was and is “a delicious despair” that often finds us between the God out there [like a rainbow] and a God not there [like the barren tree].
www.ajourneywithjesus.net/Essays/20071119JJ.shtml
- Helmut Thielicke, in *The Silence of God*, writes: “That Jesus died on the cross for me cannot be taken for granted. We European Christians have gradually become accustomed to the dangerous and unhealthy idea that the grace of God is thrown at us. Voltaire cynically said of the forgiveness of God: ‘*C’est son métier*’—‘It is his job.’ But this is not so.... The kingdom of God is not thrust upon us. The grace of God can also be silent.... It is in no sense the duty or obligation of Jesus to bear my sin and to take me through the black gate of death. If he does this, it cannot be taken for granted (pp. 18,19).

Barrenness and Distance: On Bridging the Gap

- Face it. Lament can play a significant role both in naming the barrenness and distance from God we feel and in helping to heal it—See *The Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook*, Nos. 910-913 (see handout).
- Embrace and do not retreat from daily life. Look for opportunities to bless and serve others. “Do not pray to be at peace in your belief. Pray that your anxieties be given peaceful outlets that you may be the means to a peace which you yourself do not feel” (Christian Wiman, *The Christian Century*, 2/24/09, p. 20)
- Meditate on Scripture, alone and with others (Psalm 1). Passages such as Psalm 73 offer a narrative into which all of us can enter, since the moods described are part and parcel of our humanity. Reading Job, chapters 38-42 can help to restore our sense of perspective on who God is in his being and power. And New Testament passages like Romans 5, 8, and 12, Ephesians 1 and 2, and Hebrews 11 offer both needed theological perspectives on God’s redemptive work and welcome historical narrative to remind us that we belong to a people God has chosen for his inheritance and our edification.
- Fill your life with music, especially the hymnody of the church:
 - “O God Our Help in Ages Past” (No. 422)
 - “Now, Anxious Heart, Awake from your Sadness “ (No. 472)
 - “I Was There to Hear Your Borne Cry” (No.86), Band 7, “Singing the Story” + ECCHymnal CD

Do Not Doubt! Take Heart! God Is at Work!

The rooted tree
will bloom again,
and the rainbow
stay the sign of
his forbearance.

God is working
in all of life,
and manifests
in each of us,
his sovereign love.



Let Us Pray – Psalm 131

O Lord, my heart is not
lifted up, my eyes are not
raised too high.

I do not occupy myself
with things too great and
too marvelous for me.

But I have calmed and
quieted my soul, like a
weaned child with his
mother; my soul within
me is like a weaned child.

O Israel, hope in the Lord
from this time forth and
forevermore.

Amen!

