



When God is absent and silent

2024 Good Friday Message



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In his Large Catechism Martin Luther talks about a God who is like “a kind father who cares for us so that no evil may befall us.” To believe that we are created and cared for by a benevolent God rings true to our experience when things are going well, and we do indeed feel loved and cared for. But when that is no longer the case, our understanding of who God is gets challenged. When suffering and evil take over our lives, we are likely to doubt our image of God, and start asking questions, like Where is my God? and Who is my God?

Traumatic experiences, caused for example by violence, or life-threatening illnesses, often trigger fundamental questions regarding our faith, including questions about God's love for us. In the Old Testament, particularly in the book of Psalms, prayers of lament are frequent, where individuals or communities express their feelings of agony, outrage, and desertion. Lamentations include cries for help and are at the same time testimony of faith. The persons or the groups look to God, where they believe help is to be found, while they complain about God's absence and silence. They seek help, at the same time they open up about the suffering they are experiencing.

Psalm 22 is a well-known prayer of lament, not least because it is cited by Jesus dying on the cross in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. In the beginning of the psalm, the person speaking accuses God of being far away, neither providing help nor responding to the desperate cry for intervention:

*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.*

(Psalm 22:1-2)

When experiencing afflictions of some sort and facing God's silence and absence instead of help and comfort, it is important that people feel free to express their pain and despair. It is through lamentations that the suffering person is able to open up for God's help, and at the same time admit the inability to be one's own redeemer.

During Holy Week we are invited to contemplate the passion story and what message it has in store for us today. The fact that Jesus felt abandoned by God on the cross testifies to his truly human experience of anguish and fear of being left alone in his most desperate moment. What we can take from this testimony is Jesus' true identification with us in our moments of despair. Therefore, we should not be afraid to speak out, and lament, when we feel abandoned by God. While admitting our helplessness and need for God's rescue, we are at the same time affirming our trust in God who cares for us, no matter what.

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