

Feeling like God has abandoned us is very hard. Everyone, I think, feels this way sometimes. So let's pity the disciples before we criticize them. They had more or less gotten used to Jesus's public ministry in Galilee, itinerant preaching, large crowds, home visits, occasional confrontations, when he decided it was time to drop everything and uproot them to go to Jerusalem. Then they had to deal in short order with his passion and death, his presence among them in his resurrected body, and then his departure again with his ascension, which we celebrated last Thursday.

The disciples might have felt that the rug had been pulled out from under them too many times, that Jesus was finding one confounding way after another to leave them. So we should cut them some slack when they ask their last question of Jesus, and it turns out to be, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" In other words, "Now you're going to kick out the Romans and make Israel a sovereign nation again, right?" After everything, they were still thinking in limited, political terms. Perhaps Jesus groaned and facepalmed, and St. Luke was too discreet to record it.

I want to say that the reason Jesus ascended into heaven was because he could handle being crucified, but questions like that were just too much. However, Jesus went on to tell them exactly why he was ascending: the Holy Spirit would come, not to tell them of future political developments, but to empower them to proclaim the good news of his life beyond the city, and beyond the country, to the whole world.

I'm reminded of something that stuck with me from the Godly Play teacher training a few of us are taking. In the manual, God's presence in the Old Testament is described as "elusive." At first blush, that might seem ridiculous, since even casual churchgoers can probably reel off several stories where God is not just communicating with people, but directly and dramatically intervening in our world. The Flood, the Exodus, the Ten Commandments, to name a very few. But in those three stories, God only intervened after God had seemed to have abandoned the people.

The flood story begins in a moment where God had seemed so far away, so irrelevant, that only one family on Earth still cared about God and his ways. The exodus came only after God's people had been enslaved by a people who worshiped false gods who were easy to visualize. God had been visibly guiding his people through the desert, but even while God was giving Moses the Commandments, the rest of the people were so sure that God was out of the picture that they made a golden calf and began to worship it. So really, the problem isn't that God is hard to find; the problem is that we often don't try that hard to look for God. We don't try that hard to live the way God wants us to live, or to align our priorities with God's. The disciples were literally staring God in the face and still worried about the wrong things.

Today marks a weird time when our liturgical calendar makes us stop and pay attention to a feeling of divine absence. We celebrate the arrival of the Holy Spirit next Sunday, the Day of Pentecost. Pentecost does not happen immediately after the

Ascension, but ten days after. We could ignore this time, or look back to the Ascension, or forward to Pentecost, but instead, I would ask that look around. I ask that we take advantage of this opportunity to contemplate the awesome majesty of God's omnipresence, hinted at in the way Jesus is described in the letter to the Ephesians, "him who fills all in all."

Indeed, the material universe God created is no less God's world than heaven is, and God permeates both of them, filling them completely. In our fast-changing world, I find great comfort in reclaiming this profound understanding of the omnipresence of God. While we are right to celebrate the ways that humanity has been able to perceive God, cherishing our *inability* to perceive God is an affirmation of the unique way God is present in all space and time. We can learn to love the mystery of how God is present, love that God's immanence is hiddenness. My theology professor, the Rev. Dr. Kathrine Sonderegger, explains it beautifully. She writes,

"It is a striking fact that God cannot be seen in the cosmos. God is not an Object encountered in the world of creatures, nor in the vast silence of the limitless space of the universe. God is not located in the cosmos as are bodies, nor are there extensions where God is more 'concentrated,' so to say. Despite much loose talk about 'thin places on the earth,' or 'God-saturated space,' there is not 'more God' in some places rather than others, 'more God' in vast stretches of the universe than in tiny places of the earth. Whatever we must say later about the dwelling places of Almighty God, about His manifestation as Word and Gift to His creatures, we may not depart from this fundamental truth of the Lord's Oneness: He is everywhere present through His cosmos, not locally, but rather harmoniously, equally, generously, and lavishly in all places, at once, as the Invisible One."\*

Let me interrupt Dr. Sonderegger to note that a permanently visible God is a limited and vulnerable God, as the Passion of Jesus dramatically illustrates. God chose not to dwell permanently in Creation as the Incarnate One, but the local, visible way of being which God gloriously left behind in the Ascension of Jesus is the way of being in which modern atheism attempts to confine the God it refutes. Modern atheists invent and denigrate a variety of straw-man gods like "an old man in the sky" who punishes bad behavior, or the "god of the gaps," whose purpose is to explain phenomena which humans do not understand — never mind that Christians don't believe in those pathetic caricatures either. Ironically, Dr. Sonderegger goes on,

"As the scriptural struggle is waged against idolatry in every form, so the struggle in the modern age, ... is waged against the visibility of God. This is the theological significance of atheism in the contemporary world. ... Atheism testifies to the truth of the One God, his invisible Deity and Power, because God will not be left without His witnesses—even here, even in indifference and defiance. Modern atheism, even against its will, glorifies God in this way."\*

Dr. Sonderegger's insights are not only useful for driving atheists crazy, as much

fun as that can be. They are especially valuable for us to remember when God feels elusive. She reminds us that even our doubts and our senses of loss and alienation glorify God. They also proclaim God's unique way of existing in God's created world.

Now, I still believe that God can be present in special ways, that the Eucharist is worthy of all the reverence we can offer, that the reverence God commanded in the Temple was likewise justified, that Jesus himself was justified at the inauguration of his ministry in quoting Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," these are ways, and not amounts, of presence. I am profoundly comforted and challenged to know that when God feels distant, or hidden, this is only a feeling and not a true loss. How wonderful to remember, "you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you."

We are profoundly comforted indeed by our faith that whether we perceive God as near or far, we are protected, as Jesus prayed, "under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt [us] in due time." God is both closer to us and more worthy of worship than our minds can grasp, but in faith we can indeed hold closely to the one who holds our souls in life. An encounter with God the Holy Spirit, then, requires not travel to a "thin place," but faithful prayer. The Spirit will "restore, support, strengthen, and establish" us; we only need to ask. As we transition from Easter through Ascensiontide to Pentecost, I invite you to experiment with praying to the Holy Spirit, which is also praying *with* the Holy Spirit. If you don't know where to start, start by offering thanks and praise that God would choose to abide in creation in such an intimate and majestic way, and offer yourself to God, asking God to lead you somewhere new, in the assurance that God will be there.

\*Sonderregger, Katherine. Systematic Theology: The Doctrine of God: 1 (pp. 52-53). Fortress Press. Kindle Edition.