

Mid-week Lenten Service

March 15, 2023

Genesis 4:6-11

Matthew 26:47-56

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Has God abandoned man? Before this question can be answered, one has to consider it as a real possibility. The people of Israel wondered if God had turned His face from them. Lamenting the state of Israel after years of harassment by the Midianites and Amalekites, Gideon asked, "If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all the wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian."¹ Gideon is not alone in experiencing the loneliness that a perceived absence of God generates. Abel might have felt it as his brother, Cain, was striking him dead. In Noah's generation, those left to drown in the waters of wrath might have felt as if God had abandoned man. Job seems to have preferred abandonment to God's heavy hand being upon him.² Slaves in America could have wondered where God was in the midst of their suffering and oppression. During the Holocaust, many Jews wrestled with the idea of God in the face of overwhelming bloodshed. The Tutsis of Rwanda, over the course of about 100 days, saw 600,000 of their people murdered, and at least half as many women were raped. I don't blame people for wondering if God has abandoned man, or if He even exists at all.

There are times when evil seems to prevail. There were times in the past when death and disease were so prevalent that life was lived in death's shadow. Famine, plague, war, genocide; the collective suffering of our species has been extraordinary, yet the earth never ceases to drink the blood of man, and the grave never has its fill. Even our own souls can become so disordered at times that we can feel as though God has abandoned us. Psychological issues are ever more prevalent in the nihilistic boredom our affluence produces. Substance abuse and intoxicating escapism have locked countless people in a prison of their own making. Sadly, many more are left to deal with the consequences of loved ones spiraling into a drug-induced abyss. Our instincts put us in conflict with God's will, put us at odds with what is good, beautiful, and true. We are drawn to the opposite. We can see so much of the opposite – the evil, the ugly, and the false – permeating ourselves and others. A realist can sink into cynicism. The question, "Where is God?" can become a mocking statement of disbelief rather than a lament rooted in faith.

What is not up for debate is the question of whether man has abandoned God. We have turned our backs on the image of God we were originally created in. Much human evil can be attributed to the inability of man to see the divine in the other. Rather than seeking out mutually beneficial friendships with neighbors and strangers, we have turned others into objects to be used for our own benefit. With alarming frequency, industry turns men into mere commodities. Personal data is treated as a resource to be mined as if people can and should be used as a means to someone else's end. Sexual exploitation in the form of pornography or forced prostitution are

¹ Judges 6:13

² Job 23:2

the day-to-day reality of life in the modern world. Man has abandoned the invisible God by abandoning the image of God in our fellow man. Unless we are more than merely human, we will certainly be less than human. Unless we recognize the divine likeness in others, we Christians will never reflect the godliness we are to live up to in Christ.

Against all evidence that would support God in abandoning man, He remains faithful to us. Consider that it was not Job who was being tested in that remarkable book, but it is the story of God being tested. The Accuser was not interested in testing Job's faith in God so much as he was testing God's faith in Job. If God believed that Job was only reliable when things were good, God would not have given Satan unfettered access to Job. It is a shocking concession, but only if God does not fully trust that Job can face it. God demonstrates faith in man by allowing Job to go through unimaginable suffering. Material prosperity evaporated into poverty, the closest human relations abandoned him, and the esteem with which he used to be regaled turned into scorn and contempt. If a man could endure such a storm of adversity, continuing to trust in God, then God might be justified in creating mankind, and could be justified in redeeming him. Job remained faithful, even when everyone believed that God had not only abandoned him, but had forsaken him. Job's persevering voice still echoes in our ears, "I know that my Redeemer lives." While Job's fidelity is noteworthy, what is more noteworthy is the trust God had in Job. The confidence the Father put in Job has its source in the confidence the Father has in the Son.

Job endured much; how much more would Jesus have to endure? God must have been troubled by leaving Job to experience such a trial; what about seeing His Own Son endure greater suffering? Jesus is the Infinite incarnate. As such, He lived a more human life than we ever could. His soul, being perfectly ordered, experienced a divine joy in life that was more complete than we can experience. A rabbi once said, "I wish I could love the greatest saint as the Lord loves the greatest rascal."³ Deeper loves, deeper friendships, and deeper suffering in betrayal, Jesus experienced it all.

There is great risk in friendship. It is true that friendships can produce the most profound enjoyment of life, but they can also produce the most distressing pain. Jesus is the One who came as the friend to man who would lay down His life for all. Judas, opportunistic as could be, seeks friendship for his own ends alone. Peter may not have been self-serving in the way that Judas was, but he could be called a friend of convenience, there for the fight, but not when suffering was called for. Judas betrayed Jesus for a treasure of silver; Peter denied Jesus for... well, nothing at all. Judas' betrayal would lead to the shedding of Christ's blood. Peter's denial would mean that Jesus would die alone, alongside criminals. No one else, not even Job, had the capacity to suffer as Jesus did, as the infinite One opened that capacity like an unquenchable grave for human evil. In the garden, on the night of His arrest, Jesus prayed that a cup would pass from Him, yet he submitted to the will of the Father. The cup that could not pass from Christ was the suffering He alone could bear.

Even greater than the suffering of human wickedness was the depth of despair Jesus felt as He took our place on the cross. As Christ called out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" the Father had to turn away in a moment of agony. God did abandon man in the

³ Joshua Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1955), 424.

person of His Son, and the Father left the Son to take on all of humanity's betrayal of God. All that was evil, all that was ugly, and all the lies of man were seen in the bloodied flesh of Christ. The Father looked upon that dreadful scene and forsook all mankind as He forsook the Son of Man.

The blood of Christ poured onto the wood of the cross from His torn flesh. The cross became the altar of the ultimate sin offering for humanity. It was an event darkened by betrayal; darkened by Judas' betrayal, but also darkened by our own betrayal of the divine image in man. Yet, "where the power of darkness wants to overcome the light of God, there God triumphs and judges the darkness."⁴ It is this blood, shed in betrayal, that pleads on behalf of man for God's mercy and for our forgiveness.

So, the answer to the original question is yes, God has abandoned man, but He did so in the person of Christ. God abandons what man had become for the sake of a new creation, man made in the image of His Son. The abandonment is only temporary, and it is concentrated in a moment of time. God abandons man for a time, however brief, only to make the restoration of man that much more beautiful. How ugly is the way in which we spoil? Much greater is the beauty with which God restores.

In speaking to Israel through Isaiah, God says, "For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger, I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you."⁵ God withdraws from His Son only to bring Him back with deep compassion. God turns away from the sinful image of man only to restore us in the image of Christ. Restored by our baptism into Christ, God sees the restored divine image of His Son in us. The beauty of this restoration is that we can also see the divine image in our fellow man; "Behind every brother, we see God again."⁶ So, God has not abandoned man, but has united Himself to man in the most intimate of ways by becoming man in Christ. Remaining faithful to His promises to us, God shows us His everlasting kindness in His abundant mercy. That infinite mercy, found in the blood of Christ, pleads for us unto everlasting life.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 17.

⁵ Isaiah 54:7-8

⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Collected Sermons*, 28.