

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

Selah

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.

The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Selah

Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.

'Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.'

The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Selah

1 Kings 19: 9-13

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

God said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; **and after the fire a sound of sheer silence**. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

SERMON

Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu - Ah-nee-ez Go-geh Boy-ah-gee-you Was born in the summer of 1920 in Albania. At the age of 12 she first knew that she was called to serve the poor, and at 18 left home to enter the convent.

She arrived, by steamer boat, in Calcutta, India, January 6, 1929, and spent the following 19 years teaching girls at convent schools. She described herself as the happiest nun, very much in love with Almighty God.

This nun, so full of love for God, serving in ways that brought joy and purpose, reminds me some of Elijah - the early Elijah, who was so full of the Spirit of the Lord as he challenged the false gods of Baal, showing the people the power of the Almighty.

But again, in our reading today, we have a very different E here, alone in a cave. We'll come back to Ah-nee-ez later...

E is in a cave, on Mt Horeb, also known as Mt Sinai, the place where Moses met God, where, in the cleft of the rock, Moses stood, as Yahweh passed by.

It's here that E hears the word of the Lord asking - 'what are you doing here, Elijah?'

E's response? He complains - spins the facts, holding onto a false perspective that he, alone, is left, he alone has been faithfully carrying out God's will.

God allows E to speak his lament.

God doesn't argue, doesn't refute the spin E has put on the details.

God simply tells E to 'go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.'

But E doesn't go out. Not yet. He stays in the cave. He stays in the relative safety of the cave as the Wind tears rocks from the mountain, throwing them down... the earthquake causing the ground to

shake and a fire rushing by. Elsewhere in the OT God speaks from the fire on the mountain. God's voice is heard in the earthquake, the maelstrom. It's where E might have expected to meet God.

But God is nowhere to be found.

Scripture goes on: and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

When Elijah heard it, the sheer silence, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

The tumult has passed. The great storm is over.

E hears a sound of sheer silence. Hears a sound of sheer silence.

What does sheer silence sound like?

It's only then that E moves from the interior of the cave to stand at the edge.

Then, there, he hears the voice of God again.

God is not found in the wind, the earthquake or the fire.

God is not named to be in the sounds of silence, either.

Where is God in this moment of incredible upheaval?

God told E to 'go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.'

Where? Where is God?

Not in the usual places.

We like to read into the text that God was in the silence.

Ah, there God is. Phew.

All we need to do is be silent and God will appear.

Be still and know that I am God - we heard in Psalm 46:10. A valuable verse that helps quiet the stormy inner life. A verse that has saved me in dark moments.

Be still and know that I am God.

But here, in our story with E-

Where is God?

Wind, earthquake, fire and sheer silence - none are named as holding God's presence.

How do we respond when God appears to be silent? Nowhere to be found?

Back to Ah-nee-ez...

On September 10 1946 while on a train to Darjeeling for an annual 10 day retreat, **Ah-nee-ez Go-geh Boy-ah-gee-you, now known as Sister Teresa**, received what she referred to as her 'call within a call' - to serve the poorest of the poor.

While it took years, 3 years, of persistent letter writing to be granted permission to leave her teaching position and move into the slums of Calcutta, it was during this time that Sister Teresa began to experience what she describes as the untold darkness. The questioning if God was with her.

What a paradox - Sister Teresa continued to have an unwavering belief that God called her to this work, guiding every step along the way, but - or should I say, AND, her soul was plagued with doubt - a doubt which stayed with her for the rest of her life.

In a letter to Fr. Picachy, her spiritual director, dated July 1959¹, she included a prayer; an intimate letter to God, voicing her deepest doubts. I want you to hear some of her thoughts:

¹ Edited by Kolodiejchuk, Brian. 2007. *Mother Teresa: Come be my light, the private writings of the "saint of Calcutta"* Doubleday, NY. PP 186-188.

Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me?

The darkness is so dark - and I am alone. Unwanted, forsaken.

Where is my faith?

Even deep down, right in, there is nothing but emptiness and darkness.

So many unanswered questions live within me - I am afraid to uncover them.

If there be God, please forgive me.

I am told God loves me - and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.

In spite of all - this darkness and emptiness is not as painful as the longing for God.

Sister Teresa, now called Mother Teresa, is in a cave of spiritual darkness, unable to find God in the usual spaces and places of her life.

She ends this letter to God with these thoughts:

If this brings You glory, if You get a drop of joy from this - if souls are brought to You - if my suffering satiates Your Thirst - here I am Lord, with joy I accept all to the end of life - and I will smile at Your Hidden Face - always.

In a later letter to another confidant, she writes:

For the first time in this 11 years, I have come to love the darkness, for I believe now that it is a part, a very, very small part, of Jesus' darkness and pain on earth.

Later she writes

Let Him do with me whatever He wants, as He wants, for as long as He wants. If my darkness is light to some soul - I am perfectly happy - to be God's flower of the field.

She came to see her darkness as a sharing in Christ's redemptive suffering. She stepped in and out of the interior cave of doubt and darkness, and served God through her work of caring for the poor.

E, too, stepped out of the dark place, coming to the edge of the cave,

And God met him there.

He stepped out of the recesses of the cave and into the light. Was it curiosity, was it a longing to connect? Something caused him to move from the darkness to the opening, and there, again he met God.

MT lived in paradox - moving in and out of the dark night of the soul, and yet continuing, faithfully, in the work to which she felt called. God remained silent for her - at least she did not encounter God in the ways she expected.

I wonder about Elijah too.

And how about you?

Do you ever find yourself in these caves of doubt, wondering where God is?

How do we, how do you, respond when God appears to be silent?

How might you seek out God, in the unexpected places of your life?

I have no answers, but I find hope in the paradox of Elijah and Mother Teresa - these faithful who both lived in darkness AND served God.

How do you, my friends, seek out God, in the unexpected places of your life?