

When you think you've lost God

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

The world is going through a hard time, with one disaster following another. It has been hard to watch or listen to the news, wondering what is going to happen next. No sooner had the news of the horror of the Christchurch shootings broken than the incident of three teenagers crushed to death at an Irish hotel last weekend started to filter through.

A huge chemical plant blast in eastern China has claimed the lives of 47 people and the number could well rise.

Cyclone Idai has devastated large swathes of Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe, with hundreds dying, and hundreds of thousands affected by the deluge of water that has flooded the land, and it is still raining.

I'd like to say that there is nothing left to say about Brexit. I'd like to... The damage done by the lies and the fear and the incompetence and the intransigence on every side goes on and on and on.

Where do you turn to for help? Where do you go when you feel the universe has transported itself into a dimension of negativity and despair?

For some the despair and the hurt will be nearer to home. I have spent time this week visiting people who have railed against the encroaching frailty that advancing years has brought to them. Things that were once straightforward to do have now become complicated, or impossible. A woman missing her husband and the passing months have not made it any more bearable. A daughter seeing a parent slip steadily into the hazy land of dimension, where though the clouds lift occasionally, the gathering gloom grows heavier each week. Bad things happen to good people.

Where is God? What is God doing about this? Isn't that what God is for?

Faith is turned dim, and the questions and the gloom keep pouring in and through; the terrible thought steals, or blasts, into our functional atheism: “We’ve lost God. Oh my God, we have lost God!”

Into this world, your world, my world, our world, God stands on the borders of our existence. Watching. Listening. Waiting.

We come to Church, having spent the last week working, struggling, compromising, seeking approval, earning our sustenance and salaries in a world of family, work, and leisure that competes for every waking moment. Here we are, perched alertly and anxiously on our pews, devoutly seeking a word from the Lord. But gnawing at our hearts and minds is that question, ‘we’ve lost God’.

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The Old Testament prophet Isaiah imagines God speaking to God’s people. “Are you thirsty – come to the waters and drink.” “In the south western United States, where the humidity is low, you may be thirsty and not even know it. Your perspiration evaporates so quickly that you do not realize you are becoming dehydrated. So whether you feel thirsty or not, you drink a little water as often as you can. In Grand Canyon National Park there are signs strategically placed along the trails that remind you to stop and drink water. “Stop! Drink water. You are thirsty, whether you realize it or not!”ⁱ

How can it be that we do not recognize our own thirst? What are we thirsty for? Into this world, your world, my world, our world, God stands on the borders of our existence. Watching. Listening. Waiting.

There are times when we are intensely aware of our needs and desires, including the things we thirst for, and other times when we do not feel the need or desire. This is the latter time. I believe we are living through one of those dry, thirsty times. We live in a world that is thirsty for God, but does not know what it is thirsty for. “Why aren’t people nicer? Why don’t more people make commitments? Why is loneliness rife in every age group? Why are communities

collapsing? Why is knife crime growing amongst young people? Why is there no meaning in my life? Why can't I find love? Why can't I rest?" Not true for everyone, not true all of the time, but there won't be a person here this morning who at some point or other has not felt some of these; and who have felt that they have lost God. Who have felt utterly let down, unappreciated and taken for granted, overwhelmed, lost, out of their depth, abandoned, no hope, no future. No one, not even God, could find them.

We thirst, we hunger, but we no longer feel able, or confident, or worthy, to call on God. Because we're not sure, we're really not sure that there is any point, or that we're good enough, or even if there is a God, that God would ever really care about someone like us.

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Have you ever gone to visit someone at home and as soon as you sit down in their living room your hostess offers you something to drink. Your answer may be based not on whether you are thirsty but on how long you want to stay. Even if you decline, your hostess may persist. "Are you sure? How about a cup of tea, or a soft drink?" "No thank you, I'm fine." "Not even a glass of water?"

That's what Isaiah is saying to us about God. He's saying to us, "Just stop it. Whether or not you are thirsty, whether or not you are hungry, you need what God has to offer. You think you've lost God? Will you just stop, and listen, and accept what God is trying to give you; and has been trying to give you for some time?" We might have lost God, but God has not lost us. God will never lose us. Perhaps in our laziness, or busy-ness, in this season of Lent, we simply need to stop for a moment, and let God find us.

The school pupil or student studying for exams and writing papers. The person in the work place working their 95 hour week. The parent rushing to meet this need, and that need for their children. The partner trying to please and please and please their loved one. The person of faith forgetting about God, or frantically searching and panicking. Just stop. Into this world, your

world, my world, our world, God stands on the borders of our existence. Watching. Listening. Waiting.

We know something is missing. We miss God. A poem by Dennis O'Driscoll captures this.

“His grace is no longer called for
before meals: farmed fish multiply
without His intercession.
Bread production rises through
Disease-resistant grains devised
Scientifically to mitigate His faults.
Yet, though we rebelled against Him
Like adolescents, uplifted to see
An oppressive father banished –
A bearded hermit – to the desert,
We confess to missing Him at times.
Miss Him during the civil wedding
When, at the blossomy altar
Of the registrar’s desk, we wait in vain
To be fed a line containing words
Like ‘everlasting’ and ‘divine’.
Miss Him when the TV scientist
Explains the cosmos through equations,
Leaving our planet revolving on its axis
Aimlessly, a wheel skidding in the snow.
Miss Him when the radio catches a snatch
Of plainchant from some echoey priory;
When the gospel choir raises its collective voice
To ask *Shall we gather at the River?*
Or the forces of the oratorio converge
On *I Know That My Redeemer Liveth*
And our contracted hearts lose a beat.
Miss Him when a choked voice at
The crematorium recites the poem
About fearing no more the heat of the sun.
Miss Him when we stand in judgement
On a lank Crucifixion in an art museum,
Its stripe-like ribs testifying to rank.
Miss Him when the gamma-rays
Recorded on the satellite graph
Seem arranged into a celestial score,
The music of the spheres,
The *Ave Verum Corpus* of the observatory lab.
Miss Him when we stumble on the breast lump
For the first time and an involuntary prayer
Escapes our lips; when a shadow crosses
Our bodies on an x-ray screen; when we receive

A transfusion of foaming blood
Sacrificed anonymously to save a life.
Miss Him when we call out His name
Spontaneously in awe or anger
As a woman in a birth ward bawls
Her long-dead mother's name.
Miss Him when the linen-covered
Dining table holds warm bread rolls,
Shiny glasses of wine.
Miss Him when a dove swoops
From the orange grove in a tourist village
Just as the monastery bell begins to take its toll.
Miss Him when our journey leads us
Under leaves of Gothic tracery, an arch
Of overlapping branches that meet
Like hands in Michaelangelo's creation.
Miss Him when, trudging past a church,
We catch a residual blast of incense,
A perfume on par with the fresh-baked loaf
Which Milosz compared to happiness.
Miss Him when our newly-decorated kitchen
Comes in Shaker-style and we order
A matching set of Mother Ann Lee chairs.
Miss Him when we listen to the prophecy
Of astronomers that the visible galaxies
Will recede as the universe expands.
Miss Him the way an uncoupled glider
Riding the evening thermals misses its tug.
Miss Him as the lovers shrugging
Shoulders outside the cheap hotel
Ponder what their next move should be.
Even feel nostalgic, the odd days,
For His Second Coming,
Like standing in the brick
Dome of a dovecote
After the birds have flown.”

Into this world, your world, my world, our world, God stands on the borders of our existence.

Watching. Listening. Waiting. God goes missing so that we might go looking for Him.

You may have lost God, for a time. But God has not lost you.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Daniel M Debevoise, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 2, p74