

“God is near”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Service of the Longest Night – December 21, 2021

John 1:1-5 and Psalm 34:1-7, 18-20

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

When you think of someone particularly close to God, someone who just radiates the presence of God, who comes to mind? Might be a grandparent, or a friend, or a pastor. A lot of us might think of someone like Mother Teresa. We see someone as good as Mother Teresa, and we think surely God is with her.

Indeed, that’s how it started. The year was 1946. Mother Teresa was 36 years old, a nun teaching at a school in Calcutta, India, when she was riding a train through the Himalayas, on her way to a spiritual retreat. It was there on that train that Mother Teresa heard the voice of Christ, calling her to live and minister among the poorest and sickest of Calcutta, the people no one wanted to see, know, or love, the ones called untouchable. While many of us might have been scared at such a thought or said, “No way!”, Mother Teresa felt elated. She was “filled with an overwhelming sense of God’s presence.”¹ She knew what God wanted, and she knew God would be with her.

But, just as she started her ministry, “she felt the door slam shut. God disappeared.”² That overwhelming presence vanished—“apparently for the remainder of her life.”

Unbeknownst to everyone but her spiritual confidants, Mother Teresa experienced a longest night of despair for nearly five decades. “I find no words,” she wrote, “to express the depths of the darkness... I am told that God lives in me... and yet between us there is a terrible separation... I call, I cling, I want—and there is no One to answer—no One on whom I can cling... I am alone.”

When these letters of agony were shared with the public, after her death, many felt shock; some felt betrayed, as if her pain somehow rendered her ministry fraudulent. I feel grief that a person of so much love felt so unloved herself. I also feel relief. Because if someone as good and faithful as Mother Teresa can experience the absence of God, then it’s OK if I do. It’s OK if you do. It’s OK if you feel lost. It’s not weird, or unfaithful, or wrong. In fact, it’s part of what it means to walk this road with Christ.

That’s not what many of us have been taught. We have been told that good things are signs of God’s presence: success, wealth, love, good health, beauty. #Blessed. Faith is a sign of God’s presence. Joy (just talked about joy on Sunday) is a sign of God’s presence. It’s why countless songs tell us that Christmas is the happiest time of the year. The implication is that, conversely, bad things are signs of the absence of God—sickness, death, addiction, poverty, trauma, doubt, loneliness. Many avoid our suffering as if it contained a curse. I wonder how many people

¹ <https://www.theimitationofchrist.com/abandoned-by-god/>

² Kerry Walters, “Mother Teresa: A Saint Who Conquered Darkness”

avoided the birth of Jesus because he was born in such an impoverished place. #Not Blessed. We know that years later, the soldiers and crowds will mock Jesus, assuming the cross to be proof that he is not the Son of God, for no Son of God could be crucified.

Even Jesus has his moment of doubt. He, like Mother Teresa, cries from the cross, “My God, my God, why have abandoned me?”

But here’s the revelation: it was God who cried out that day. That’s what we celebrate this Christmas: the incarnation of God in Jesus. That means—hold onto your seats—that means God, in Jesus, experienced the absence of God. In Jesus’ birth, life, and death, God felt what we feel—felt what Mother Teresa felt—and became present to the absence.

Henri Nouwen writes, “When Jesus spoke these words on the cross, total aloneness and full acceptance touched each other... Where God’s absence was most loudly expressed, God’s presence was most profoundly revealed. When God, through the humanity of Jesus, freely chose to share our own most painful experience of divine absence, God became most present to us.”³

That’s what we heard today in the Gospel of John: God is in the darkness. Yes, as a light. But it is only in the darkness that we will find that light.

The 34th Psalm tells us that “The angel of the Lord encamps around those” whose souls cry out. When we see someone hurting, we should see angels around them; we should see God. “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,” the psalmist sings. Not the successful, not the happy, not the confident, but “the crushed in spirit.”

To touch pain *is* to touch God.

By this, we do not mean what some churches have taught—that God causes our suffering or wants us to suffer. Rather, God is with us when we suffer. That’s the great paradox: it is precisely when we are most alone, most without hope, that God is most with us. Because God has been there too, in Jesus.

God is where the hurt is. God is drawn to it, comes alive in it, like a seed that opens in the fire. That is where we will find God. Not in a mansion, but in a manger. Not cozy in front of a fireplace on Christmas Eve, but in the belly of an unwed teenage mother. Not beneath a Christmas tree laden with presents, but at the border, a refugee. Not at the front of armies, but hunted by the powerful. Not safe and sound, but weeping in a garden. Not sculpted into a monument, but on a cross.

Perhaps that is why neither we nor Mother Teresa nor even Christ could find God in our deepest places of hurt—because God was *too* near to perceive. God wasn’t out there, some external force to comfort us, some friend to take us by the hand. God *was* us. God was our skin, our tears, our heartbeat, pressed so tightly to us, that we couldn’t perceive God. We thought God was gone, when in reality, God was in the one place we never thought to look: the mirror.

³ “Reaching Out”

Later, Mother Teresa came to understand that to love the suffering was to experience their pain, in the same way that to love us God had to experience our pain. It wasn't just absence she was experiencing; it was love—a divine kind of love, a love that stands not apart, but so close, so intimate, that we cannot tell where we end and God begins.

As Kerry Walters tells it, “Just a few months before her death, suffering from heart failure and pneumonia, she lay in a hospital bed, unable to speak because of the bronchial tube that had been inserted to help her breathe. She tried to communicate with her caretakers by writing on slips of paper, but was too weak to do so. Finally, mustering all her strength, she was able to scrawl, ‘I want Jesus.’ ”

And Jesus was there—he was in the hospital bed where she lay, a tube down his throat too, his heart also slowing.

Years earlier, Mother Teresa wrote, “If I ever become a saint—I will surely be one of ‘darkness.’ I will continually be absent from heaven—to light the light of those in darkness on earth.”

That is the truth of Christmas. God too is absent from heaven. She's too busy being born in a manger, lighting the light of those in darkness, here on earth. She's too busy, sitting here, in these pews, grieving your grief, hoping your hope, lighting the way. **Amen.**