

**Sermon Preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity
Rittenhouse Square
March 11, 2007 (The Third Sunday in Lent)
by the Reverend Meg Buerkel
'Was God Asleep? The Absence and Presence of God'**

“Tell them I AM sent you.”

This was God’s response to Moses – when Moses asked what God’s name was. Moses wasn’t asking God, “What should I call you?” Moses was asking God, “Who are you? What are you like? What have you done?”¹ And God said, “I am who I am.” The medieval Rabbi Isaac² tells us God’s name could mean, “I am the One who was, I am the One right now, and I am the One who will be in the time to come.” God’s name tells us of God’s eternal nature.

And it’s paired with an action verb – send. From the other side of the wilderness, God sends Moses into the world, God sends Moses to the palace of Pharaoh to give him the message “Let my people go.” God sends Moses into the unknown to do the unthinkable.

But God promises Moses, “I will be with you.” I will be with you when you do the very thing you think impossible. I will be with you in your most dangerous moment. I will be with you when powerless you speaks to the powerful pharaoh. I will be with you.

God’s nature and name indicate that God is forever present... “and the baby shall be called Emmanuel, God with us.” God with us.

Why is it, then, that we experience the absence of God?

In the 29th chapter of *Waiting for Snow in Havana* Carlos Eire asks, “Was God asleep?” This query comes in the midst of a chapter remembering the ‘always forward never back’ of Fidel’s Revolution in Cuba. The bombs fall near Carlos’ home, his uncle disappears, and images on the black and white television set vividly show the “crushing defeat of the exile invaders” – the good guys lost.

“Was God asleep? Or infinitely angry?” Eire asks.

Where was God? This God so good, this God who was supposed to be on the side of Truth, Justice, Hope. This God, forever present. Where was God? Was God asleep?

We may not have had bombs falling all around us or watched our hopes dashed on a television set, but we have probably asked this question – or one similar – sometime in our life.

“Was God asleep? Or infinitely angry?” These are the questions also posed to Jesus in the Gospel lesson... Those Galileans must have suffered for a reason; those people must have been crushed under the fallen tower for a reason, and the reason must have been that they were sinful, and God was punishing them. And if that’s not the reason, then God is simply negligent. Sleeping on the job again. Where are you, God?

Where are you when bad things happen to good people? Or when others just keep getting knocked down again and again and again? Where are you? Are you absent? Missing? Asleep? Dead?

Yet, when we look a bit earlier in our Exodus passage we see that God commissions Moses because God heard the cries of the Hebrew slaves in their suffering. God was there. And God promises to deliver them from Egypt.

God was not asleep during their ordeal.

And Jesus’ response to the questions about the mingled blood and the fallen tower does not indicate that God was gone or that God was angry – rather Jesus turns their questions around on them – ‘Repent, turn again to God; for you are no less mortal than those people.’

So where was God during the bombing of the exile invaders in Cuba? Where was God when Carlos’ uncle was arrested and disappeared? Where was God when my cousin slammed his car into another and died? Where was God during the Holocaust?

Was God asleep? Was God infinitely angry?

Hebrew Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann says that God’s silence is “attentiveness not neglect.” The 14th century mystic

Walter Hilton described God as like a mother who plays a hiding game with her child until the child weeps in desolation, and then she comes and scoops her up with loving arms. Others, following Nietzsche's madman, say simply 'God is dead.'

How do we answer these questions? I believe that God is here with us now. God was there with those exile invaders as they suffered on the shores of Cuba. God was there with the people crushed under the tower of Siloam. God was there with Carlos' uncle when no one knew where he was. God was there when the Hebrew slaves cried out in their suffering. God was in the car with my cousin as he died. God was in the cell blocks and gas chambers of Germany. God was here. God is here now. God will be here.

Does my saying this prove it? No. Carlos shares with us his proofs for the existence of God – from an early memory of his head stuck in a church pew that led to his discovery of paradox to the Cuba-shaped clouds that appear when least expected. To this day, the Children of Israel rehearse the saving actions of God, begun with these words from that burning bush, in their yearly celebration of the Passover. We hold onto these things, these experiences, these stories to remind us of God's presence and love. We rehearse and remember them – we gather weekly to celebrate them in the body and blood of Jesus Christ. And when we cannot remember them, when we feel utterly abandoned by God, that is when we rely on our community to carry us, to remember for us, to trust for us in God's love and God's presence.

When we do feel abandoned, it helps to remember those Israelites whose cries came up to God – God delivered them. Or to remember the words of the gardener about the fruitless tree – 'don't cut it down, leave it this year, I will dig around it and put manure on it' – words of patience, mercy, forgiveness, nurture.

Was God asleep?

No – God suffered alongside them. God suffers with us. God became intimate with us – donning our flesh and suffering and dying. God stands in solidarity with the powerless and the oppressed. God cries with the wounded and hurt. Our God knows what it is to suffer. But... we don't necessarily like this God – we want a hero in shining armor that will rescue us before we are hurt or injured. We want a God who will intervene on behalf of the

victim. We want a God who will hold towers up, who will keep things from mixing together, who will fast forward time until we are on the other side of the Red Sea. We want a God who will come down from the cross.

But Jesus does not do that.

Instead, God blows our minds and gives us the unknown and the unthinkable – the Resurrection – and hope in life everlasting with the God who is always – ever has been and ever shall be – present with us.

Amen.

1. Tracey R Rich, Judaism 101 website.
2. Exodus Rabba 3:7 (a medieval midrash)– cited in The Bible as It Was by James Kugel

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