Experiencing God’s Hidden Presence

Psalm 17: 1-6

Evan Lature

This is a psalm David wrote when he was being chased, most likely by Saul who was jealous of him. His life was in danger. Saul sent his men to David’s house trying to kill him; David ran away saved by his wife who knew the killing schemes (1 Samuel 19). David must have been in deep distress as he learned that Saul had killed the priest of Nob to whom he went for counsel (1 Sam 22). In this Psalm, 3 times he uses the word *hear: hear me, Lord; hear my prayer* (v.1)*; hear my prayer* (v.3)*.*  Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you were in need of God’s intervention? A hard relationship (marriage & dating), the intolerable pain of singleness, financial difficulties, the sickness or death of loved ones, predicaments with career and education, and a constant clinical depression? If you have experienced any of these forms of distress, you might be able to resonate with David’s prayer as he said, “*Hear me O, Lord…hear my prayer”.*

When we are in those kind of scenarios, we want God’s answers instantly. But let’s be honest. Don’t sanitize our prayer lives. Yes, it’s true; sometimes God does answer, but yes, sometimes God doesn’t.

Dad had diabetes which finally had taken a toll on his heart. I was in the hospital when he had bypass heart surgery. The doctors allowed me to see him after he had the surgery. Wearing a mask, a robe, and gloves for the sake of hygiene, I entered the room. My Dad and I were separated by a window glass. He was lying there, looked fragile, with a tube infused to his nose and mouth. His chest raised and fell. He would exhale and inhale alternately in a very long second. In between I remembered my sweet-bitter memories with him. The memory when I was a little boy standing between him and the scooter hand bar cruising the afternoon together; the memory when I left our house for my school in a different town yet he didn’t take me to the airport because he couldn’t deal with the feeling of losing me; and the memory of his sweet smiles every time I came home for Christmas. Now, I was seeing him like a slaughtered lamb: helpless, vulnerable, and fragile. I couldn’t hold back my tears as I whispered, ”Lord, would you please heal Dad?”

Weeks later my mind was constantly thinking about Dad. I had learned that now Dad had to do hemodialysis routinely. Apparently, Dad’s kidneys couldn’t function normally anymore. His situation was getting worse and I cringed at the worst possible scenario that could happen to him. There were moments when fear overwhelmed me and my tears mixed with water as I submerged my body in the pool, “Lord, would you please heal Dad?”

I got the call in the middle of the night when my sister stammered that Dad had gone. God didn’t answer my prayer, “Lord, Dad is with you now.”

I always had been taught that nothing is impossible in God. That was my conviction when I prayed for my Dad’s healing. All the sweet things that I’ve heard about God -He answers prayers; He sees tears that fall- couldn’t fit the reality I experienced when Dad died. God had had something else instead.

I said this before in my previous sermon. But let me say this again. It’s easy to love God when everything seems fine. **But what happens when things turn ugly, depressing, and the opposite of our wishes, will we find ourselves loving God?**

Please don’t misunderstand me. I’m not suggesting that God is a capricious God who takes pleasure in people’s suffering nor we should hold back our prayer requests to God. Isn’t Jesus himself saying, “*Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*” (Luke 11:11-13)

*The Invitation*

Larry Crabb wrote, “If we are satisfied with good health, responsible children, enjoyable marriages, close friendships, interesting jobs, and successful ministries, we will never hunger for God’s best. I’ve come to believe that **only broken people truly worship**. Unbroken people -happy folks who enjoy their blessings more than the Blesser—say thanks to God the way a shopper thanks a clerk*.” (Shattered Dreams).*

In our brokenness nature, we want something instant; we can’t tolerate delay, we can’t stand unanswered prayers. What seems like a silence of God is a source of our great disappointment. As a result, we lose heart and become very discouraged. Crabb continues, “The highest dream we could ever dream, the wish that if granted would make us happier than any other blessing, is to know God, to actually experience Him.”

Our disappointments, failures, and shattered dreams actually are an **invitation** to God’s heart, to experience Him. They are roads on which we get to know God’s heart closer. If we take them as the invitation to God’s heart, disappointment, failures, and shattered dreams are a furnace where our hearts are wrought to produce a desire for God himself. Yes, just God himself!

*Then how do make a case for unanswered prayers, the silence of God?*

We might benefit from Shusako Endo’s *Silence. Silence* deals with the silence of God. It follows a young Jesuit priest, Sebastian Rodriguez, who goes to Japan in a mission to find a fallen priest who renounced his faith. With his priest fellow, they endure a terrible journey to arrive in Japan. As a young priest, Rodriguez does not feel deeply how meaningful is the life of a priest. He sees that Japanese Christians are like a ship lost in a storm, without a single priest or brother to encourage and console; they are gradually losing hope and wandering bewildered in the darkness.

Rodriguez and his friend have been warned prior to their coming to Japan about how Japan officials are really against Christianity. In fact, rumor says that because of such opposition the priest they’re looking for had left his faith. The horror about torture imposed on Japanese Christians now becomes a reality before his eyes. From his hidden place provided by local Christians, he sees the cost of Christianity in Japan. Christians are tied to stakes in the sea in an effort to make them renounce their faith. When the wave comes, their heads are drowned by the waters. One of them was singing while death is coming closer. His voice is a knife that stabs into a heart. *“We’re on our way, we’re on our way// We’re on our way to the temple of Paradise// To the temple of Paradise// To the great Temple…”* As his voice faded, the dark silence envelopes the place. It left a deep mark in Rodriguez’s heart: God was silent.

The officials managed to catch Rodriguez and put him in a prison to see day by day Christians being tortured. The evil things he had to witness were a horrible psychological terror in order to make him give up, trample the *fumie (*an image of God), and renounce his faith. After so many days of holding on, he could no longer hold back the pain and sufferings that other Christians have to endure, Rodriguez gave up. He could bear no more the silence of God. He placed his foot on the *fumie.*

Rodriguez became a fallen priest who carried around his personal guilt and shame. One day, after an encounter with Kichijiro whom he despised due to his betrayals so many times. Rodriguez sees himself as no better than Kichijiro. Yet, Kichijiro still treats him as a priest to whom he’s making confessions. Something happened in the heart of Rodriguez the Fallen Priest. He remembered the day when he placed his foot on God’s face, on the face of the Man who has been ever in his thoughts, on the face that was before him on the mountains, in his wanderings, in prison, on the best and most beautiful face that any man can ever know, on the face of Him whom he had always longed to love. Rodriguez whispered, “Lord, I resented your silence.” Miraculously he heard the voice, “I was not silent. **I suffered beside you.”**

The silence of God doesn’t mean the absence of His presence. Our unanswered prayers and shattered dreams are never strong enough to cast away the mighty presence of God. He is always be with us. He even suffers beside us.

Recently, I’ve been stuck with a song that I’ve listened to and sung over and over. Jimmy McCarthy, an Irish musician wrote this poetic song called *No Frontiers,* inviting a plethora of interpretations out of it. He likens life to a river and the heart to a boat; he sees life as a place where we sing until dawn of our fears and fates, a place to encounter death, and a place to thirst and hunger for justice and right. Nevertheless, in the midst of hopelessness and brokenness, he sees a glimpse of heaven in somebody’s eyes. Check out the chorus.

*In your eyes faint as the singing of a lark*

*That somehow this black night feels warmer for the spark*

*To hold us ‘till the day when fear will lose its grip and heaven has its ways,*

*When all will harmonize and you know what’s in our hearts*

*The dream will realize Heaven knows no frontiers And I’ve seen heaven in your eyes*

The beauty of the music and lyrics struck me. In the hustle bustle of the fallen world, what a luxury to encounter heaven! For Christians, what could be more beautiful than to experience God in our lives? Remembering that God is with us and suffers beside us makes us able to see that heaven and earth actually overlap.

*Your Kingdom Come, Your Will Be Done, on Earth as It Is in Heaven*

That’s part of the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. I guess we need to remind ourselves of this prayer all the time. Most often times what we think is the best way to glorify God turns to be the ugliest way to boss around God. Rather than us serving God’s agenda, we end up having God serve ours. When we pray, it is good to have confidence that the Resurrected Jesus we stand before is the mighty God who rules the world. Yet at the same time it is always commendable to stay humble before God whose thoughts and plans never could be comprehended by small beings like us.

In this fallen world we know that disappointments, and shattered dreams are inevitable. Let’s stop for a while and look back on things that have happened in our lives. Let’s be honest, aren’t our lives loaded with disappointments, failures, and shattered dreams? For me, the answer is a resounding yes. The story I shared with you earlier about Dad is one of them. Nevertheless, looking back on the past journey, I see God’s hands all over the place.

*Conclusion*

With that, I’ll leave us with a story of a lady who’s desperately seeking for God (John 20: 11-16). She has been following and witnessing hopelessly all pain, suffering, and humiliation of the One who had saved her life. Her heart was breaking to pieces when she saw her beloved die on the cross. She went to the tomb the next day when it was still dark to give him proper respect and love. To her dismay, she found the tomb was empty. The body of the One she loved so dearly had gone! She was crying when someone asked her, “*Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, with tears in her eyes she answered helplessly, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” Softly and tenderly that person called her name, “Mary*.” Right that moment when she heard her name, a rush of electricity ran through her veins. She recognized that voice. That was the **voice of someone she deeply loved.**

God promised to never leave His beloved. To experience His hidden presence needs a pure heart that often needs to be broken. Nevertheless, He is always with us, even he suffered with us through thick and thin and in every season of life.