

The Opening of Eyes: Here and Not Here

Acts 1:1-11

Graduate students, in every discipline, are people who focus intensely on things no one else in the world cares much about. When you focus that tightly—on anything—you see oddities that are entertaining to scholars, not so much to anyone else. Seminary graduates have their own set of amusing stories from the study of religion. One of those, a piece of historical biblical trivia came back to me with that story of Jesus' ascension to heaven that we read a few minutes ago. See if it makes sense to you.

You probably know that the Bible was an oral tradition first. For hundreds of years, before there was much writing in the ancient world, storytelling was how the Bible got passed from one person to the next. When those stories finally were written down, scribes—professional text writers with ink pens in their hands—copied whole books by hand, letter by letter, on long sheets of parchment. There was no punctuation at the time; just letters. How to separate the letters—where to put periods and commas, even spaces—came later, in decisions left to next generations of scribes. They too copied those parchments by hand. They could mostly figure out the intended meaning from the context of the story, but sometimes it got a little tricky. The original author's intent wasn't always obvious. The scribes' editorial decisions could make a huge difference in the meaning of the text. A scribe's mistake could get *inscribed*—permanently incorporated into an accurate, or inaccurate, meaning of the text.

Here's the example my professor used to illustrate. Imagine you saw these letters in the biblical text:

G O D I S N O W H E R E

What does that say? Where would you put the spaces to make a sentence out of those letters? Remember, Christianity was an almost brand-new religion. It had no well-understood theology to work from at that time. Does this sentence say *God is now here*, or does it say *God is nowhere*?

Now we're pretty sure we know, right? *We believe* the whole point of Jesus' presence in the world was to say to people, 'God is now here, among you, all the time.' But the story we read today suggests something else. Unlike every every other story we've read together since Easter, this story isn't about Jesus' coming to the disciples. It's about Jesus *leaving* the disciples.

Here's the scene. They're all there together. The disciples had finally gotten used to the idea that Jesus—the one who died and then came back to life—could show up anywhere. Make them breakfast. Share their dinner. Talk about forgiveness, starting over, continuing the work they'd begun together. And then he leaves. He actually floats up into the sky, the text says; disappears. They see it for themselves. This time he tells them he's leaving. This time, he isn't coming back.

The disciples are literalists, just like I tend to be when I'm afraid. They fix their eyes on the exact spot where he disappeared. They twist their heads upward, searching the sky. I wonder how long you can you stand with your neck craned like that.

“Why are you standing there looking toward heaven?” two strangers ask, maybe angels. ‘I don’t know,’ I imagine they said. Looking for traces of holiness? Where are you supposed to look—what shall we do—when it seems that God has withdrawn from the world? From us?

We know some next chapters of the story those disciples didn’t. Next week we’ll celebrate Pentecost, when God came to earth in a different form, the Holy Spirit, who filled those same left-behind disciples with a different experience of the presence of God. But what about in between? What happened to people who were trying to be faithful in that in-between time when God was absent from the world?

It still happens, this sense that God has withdrawn from us. In John Updike’s novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies* there’s a Presbyterian minister, Rev. Clarence Wilmot, who loses his faith one day in the spring of 1910. ‘The sensation was distinct,’ he says. It was like ‘a set of dark sparkling bubbles escaping upward.’

For some of us it’s a much more gradual realization; we have not heard God’s voice, or felt God’s presence, in a long time. And we miss it...or sometimes we realize we haven’t missed it enough.

People—people who long for solid faith—have always wondered this: What do I do, where shall I look, when I’ve lost a sense of God’s presence?

The easy answer, one you no doubt have heard, is ‘You moved. God did not.’ OK, whatever; I can’t find a connection. Somehow, the thread slipped from my hands.

I’m not attentive to God at every moment, so I don’t always know God’s whereabouts. But I can suddenly be conscious that God is missing. Maybe been missing for a while already. I worry that I misplaced God somewhere and neglected to go back; or that the presence slipped away when I wasn’t looking. When I do realize it, the absence—the silence—of God is unnerving, worrisome, a little guilt-inducing.

I want to suggest to you today it is not always your failure that makes you feel like this. That absence—silence—has always been part of God’s way. That maybe sometimes it is God himself who leaves.

Way back in Old Testament times, the prophet Amos spoke to God’s people these words:

*The time is surely coming, says the Lord God,
when I will send a famine on the land;
not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the Lord.
They shall wander from sea to sea,
and from north to east;
they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord,
but they shall not find it.*
Amos 8:11-12 (NRSV)

A famine of God's words, God's presence; not a physical famine, but a spiritual one. We usually explain biblical passages like this like they're punishment; a stick held out over a people who haven't been trying hard enough to be faithful. But is that true? Is the God you know a God who wins people over by threatening them?

When I think about famine stories in the Bible, every one of them is the story of a harsh condition that uprooted God's people and sent them to a new place, to begin another chapter of their God-filled lives. What if famine—hunger—is a *holy* discomfort, something that prompts faithful people to move, to start some journey they needed to take but wouldn't have roused themselves for otherwise? What if missing a steady stream of God's words is a way of uprooting us, shifting our hearts or our bodies so we are better positioned to hear? It takes us a while to know what we are hungry for. Often we only discover our hunger for God by process of elimination; and there are so many other things to try first.

Maybe silence too is an element of the language God speaks. Maybe it's only humans who demand words for every occasion.

Sometimes I wonder if we do all the talking because we're afraid God won't. A lot of us feel like we can't get God to say something, no matter how sincerely we ask. We wonder: am I doing something wrong? What if I've moved beyond earshot of God without intending to, without even knowing I was doing it? What if there's some magic formula for connecting with God, a password for turning on God's voice, and I missed church the one Sunday somebody spelled it out?

You can tell this sermon is mostly wondering. It's an invitation to you to wonder with me. But here's one thing I know: There is no magic formula. You did not misplace the password. It's possible you haven't been paying attention. But I think sometimes God chooses not to speak. I think maybe from time to time God says, 'I've given you enough words for a while. Now I'm going to give you a little space to take them in.'

Only an idol speaks on demand. A real God, the one who is beyond our projections, does not. People who have researched these things say that the words *hester panim*, the Hebrew phrase that means 'the hiding of the face' occurs more than thirty times in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament.¹ God makes clear, unmistakable appearances; and then they're followed by long periods when God's features go a little foggy, when divine presence feels less like a sharp tap on the shoulder, more like wondering whether a middle-of-the-night dream might have some meaning. God conceals his face, retreats for a while. Maybe that's punishment of a stubborn, disobedient people; but what kind of ineffective parent would put herself on time-out that many times? It feels to me more like a dance between the Divine and humanity, a rhythm of God stepping forward and then stepping back from human beings, so we can practice leading too. *Being* the presence of God on earth.

Or maybe it's a little like hide-and-seek. Hiding is part of the game. The point is to keep looking until you find the thing that is lost to you, not to just give up when the first closet turns out to be empty.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God Is Silent*, p. 52

I see this same rhythm, presence and absence, in Jesus, who came to show us what God is like. Flashes of clarity, and a lot of blurriness in between. When people asked Jesus for answers, he asked them questions instead.

Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? a man asked.

Well, what is written in the law? Jesus responded. What do you see there?

Who is my neighbor? another asked.

Here's a story. Who acted as the neighbor here?

Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

Who among you is without sin? Let him cast the first stone.

This is what Jesus did, the Jesus who was God himself: he created a silence for people to fill in themselves. He gave them space, an opening to seek God...or not.

Maybe this has always been God's way.

Maybe this too is how God is with you, now.