

17 January, 2010; 3 Epiphany C
Is 62:1-5; Ps 36:5-10
I Cor 12: 1-11; John 2:1-11

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This week has been beyond imagining. Most of us, I think, have tried to live in two places, going about the tasks of our daily lives -- doing our work, feeding the cat, running our errands -- while part of us was crying out in pity and in rage at the suffering in Haiti. The images flooded in, and our stomachs sickened, and it was hard not to imagine being there, trapped. It was hard *not* to be there, hard to accept that we were powerless, that, apart from sending money, there really was nothing we could do. Only pray, and wait. And keep reading the articles, keep watching the images, as if, somehow, by participating even that much, we could let our love be felt by those in need.

It is hard to be a Christian -- or a person of any faith -- when things like this happen. If God were worth his salt, we think, he would have prevented this. Where was God, anyway? Does God not care? Does God not speak? We want to have things both ways. We want to live in an orderly, scientific world, in which the earth around us is not subject to the random whims of magic, but ordered, sane, predictable. And yet-- we want God to disrupt those same natural processes when they become destructive.

God does not work that way.

The writer Annie Dillard has explored more courageously than most the dark questions which haunt the small hours of the night. In her essay *For the Time Being*, she probes the apparent contradiction between the existence of God and the persistence of natural and human evil. Near the end, after cataloging the brutality of tyrants and the types of human birth defects and the presence of death in our lives, she finally addresses God, cataloging God's apparent powerlessness: "You cannot mend the chromosome, quell the earthquake, or stanch the flood. You cannot atone for dead tyrants' murders, and you alone cannot stop living tyrants."¹ But she does not leave it there and walk away. Instead, she continues, drawing on the work of Martin Buber to delineate a complex partnership between God and humankind: "God entrusts and allots to everyone an area to redeem: this creased and feeble life, 'the world in which you live, just as it is and not otherwise...It is given to men to lift up the fallen and to free the imprisoned'...The work is not yours to finish, Rabbi Tarfon said, but neither are you free to take no part in it."² It is one response to the silence of God.

That silence occupies a large space in Scripture. For a book that is supposed to be about God, it spends a lot of ink observing what we do when God does not seem to notice. From the Egyptians enslaving the Hebrews to Aaron's crafting of the golden calf to the rich trampling the poor into the dust, there is a long catalog of the acts of those who believe that God is indifferent. But there are also suggestions that the silence of God may sometimes evoke a different response.

Today's Gospel begins when Mary catches Jesus' eye and says to him, "They have no wine." (John 2:3) But Jesus does not jump up and fix the problem. Instead, he turns to her and replies, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?" (2:4) *Woman, why should we care?* The question hovers there, not as a statement of divine apathy, but as an opportunity for Mary to craft a response.

¹ P. 201. In saying that God "cannot" do these things, Dillard is picking up on a teaching of the Jewish mystics, who argued that, in order to make space for creation, God limited God's own omnipresence, withdrawing from a part of everywhere so that creation could exist without being overwhelmed. This sets up a dynamic in which creation is, precisely, the space in which God is not fully realized. Christians, in general, do not preserve this idea of creation as being separated from God, but tend to think of God as underlying and sustaining it. I think that most Christians would substitute "will not" for "cannot" in Dillard's address, although theologians wrestle with the extent to which God feels bound by the natural laws which God set in motion to govern the world. We would also say that God does, to pick up Dillard's word, "atone" for the murders, pain, and horrors; that's the meaning and work which Christ did on the Cross.

² Ibid, 201-202.

Because they are our friends. Because we want them to be happy. Because I'm your mother and I said so. There are any number of responses, but Jesus does not put one into Mary's mouth. Instead, he waits to see what she will do, what she will say. He waits for her to manifest the person that she is.

There are few places where this divine waiting is more apparent (or more disconcerting) than in the story of the Syrophenician woman. We all know the story. A woman approaches Jesus and his disciples, shouting to them, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon. But he did not answer her at all." (Matt 15:22) And with her shouts ringing in their ears, and the silence of Jesus stretching around them, the disciples decide to respond to the situation. "Send her away," they say. *Send her away, because she is not one of us. She is a Canaanite, a gentile. She has no place here.* The disciples, of course, did not need to say that. They could have urged Christ to have mercy. They could have chosen to see her as a human being. Instead, they ask him to send her away. And Jesus stands there and parrots back the words of the disciples. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matt 15:24) But the woman is not done. She comes to Jesus and kneels before him, and begs him to have mercy: "Lord, help me." And Jesus again responds as the disciples would have him respond: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But woman responds, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answers, "Woman, great is your faith." (Matt 15:26-28) With each reply, Jesus' rejection comes to seem more harshly exaggerated. With each reply, the disciples are given the chance to hear the ugliness of their own hearts. Until, at the end, Jesus throws the net wide: *great is your faith*, he says to the woman -- words he has never said to one of the Twelve. "And her daughter was healed instantly." (Matt 15:28) The healing of the disciples took a bit longer. It's a work in progress.

And you, what are you calling into the silence of God? Are you begging God to help them, to heal them, to let parents find their children? Are you tugging on God's sleeve like Mary, "They have no wine! They have no water! They have no bread!" What was the world calling out last week, before this happened, when their only problems were famine and disease and hopelessly corrupt government, when they were still among the poorest people in the world? Have we discovered the compassion in our hearts?

If you have, that may make you a better person, but that does not make this suffering all right. And God does not think it is, either. In all of Scripture, there are few places in which God intervenes to prevent calamity, but everywhere -- everywhere! -- God works to heal it. "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch....You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight is in Her, and your Land Married. Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels; all day and all night they shall never be silent. You who remind the Lord, take no rest, and give him no rest, until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the earth." (Is 62:1, 4, 6-7) Our God who moved over the chaos at the beginning of creation, who breathed over the moving waters and brought forth life, is still bringing order and life to all the barren places of earth. The desolate lands will be healed, even if we cannot now see it; the forsaken lives shall yet know the delight of our Lord. The Lord has posted sentinels upon the walls of the cities; he has told them not to be silent, not to cease from crying out until it is done; he has told *us* not to be silent, not to cease from crying out until it is done. For who do you think those sentinels are, if not you and if not me? Who do you think they are, if not those who have learned to wait upon the Lord with a holy impatience, crying out in the dark, crying out by day, "Where is our God?"

In the agony of the cross, Jesus did not deny God, but he cried out, "Why have you forsaken me?" He meant, *You, whom I know to be there; where are you now?*

Dillard writes,

“God is no more blinding people with glaucoma, or testing them with diabetes, or purifying them with spinal pain, or choreographing the seeding of tumor cells through lymph, or fiddling with chromosomes, than he is jimmying floodwaters or pitching tornadoes at towns....The very least likely things for which God might be responsible are what insurers call ‘acts of God.’ Then what, if anything, does he do?...Sometimes God moves loudly, as if spinning to another place like ball lightning. God is, oddly, personal; this God knows. Sometimes en route, dazzlingly or dimly, he shows an edge of himself to those who seek him, and the people who bear those souls, marveling, know it, and see the skies carousing around them, and watch cells stream and multiply in green leaves. He does not give as the world gives; he leads invisibly over many years, or he wallops for thirty seconds at a time....(Having seen, people of varying cultures turn -- for reasons unknown, and by a mechanism unimaginable -- to aiding and serving the afflicted and the poor.)”³

When Mary speaks into the silence of her son, she does not, in fact, argue that he needs to help the bridal couple. Instead, she turns to the servants and says, simply, “Do whatever he tells you.” (John 2:5) She does not appeal to Christ, but to us, the servants who wait. And she gives no new commandment; she only recalls them to who they are: *Do whatever he tells you*. And what does our God tell us to do, over and over, if not to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24)? And what did God command us from the very beginning, if not to till and keep the garden of this earth? And what did God show us in Jesus, if not the very face of divine love, speaking to us, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:34) It should not take a disaster of this magnitude to open our eyes to the suffering which was already there, but, having seen, we can not turn away. “The work is not [yours to finish, but neither are [we] free to take no part in it.”

Or, you can decide you have had enough. You can decide that, if our God allows such things, you will have no part in him. But think, for a minute, before you take that path. If you did not believe in God, would this week have been any easier? Would you not still have wept in the dark? Would you not have raged? Would you not have turned this over in your mind, asking continually, *why why why*? The only difference would have been that you would have no one to ask your questions, that your anger would have faded into an empty sky. And, of course, that when you looked at those pitiful heaps of bodies, you would have had no promise of resurrection. You would have had to say *that was all*.

For myself, I will not say, *that is all*. Even if it is delusion, I prefer to live in a world with hope. Even when God seems to show no mercy, still, I will believe in ultimate mercy. I will believe in goodness even when there is no wine.

³ Ibid, 167-168.