

Experiencing the absence of God

Janet Peters

The Bible and the stories of the church are full of people encountering God—experiencing God’s real and tangible presence in myriad ways. Burning bushes. Mysterious visitors. Dreams. Angels. Visions. Nature. Healing. The Word.

My own experiences of God’s presence have been just as real and varied, if less spectacular. New insights. Serenity. The still, small voice. Love. Birth. Scripture. Church. Tradition. All of these, as well as our own stories, confirm that God is present and active in the world.

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that God is with God’s people—always—we also have a counter-testimony, an opposing witness, of people experiencing God’s absence. Our biblical heroes and heroines did not always feel close to God. And they did not always feel that God was close to them. Many of the psalmists bear witness to times when God feels distant, hidden, absent.

My own life has had many moments, and many months, when to all appearances God was absent. Unreachable. Even—dare I say it?—uncaring. Despite a lifetime of believing in and experiencing God’s love for me, at times I wondered if I had made it all up. Surely, if what I

believed to be true were true, people I loved would not have died far too young. Surely, if God were present and active in my life, I would receive the call to ministry for which I had been preparing and sacrificing. Surely. So why was it so hard to see, to find, to feel God? Why, when I needed God, did God feel far away and absent?

In those moments and months, it was good to have the witness of Scripture that others too have experienced God’s absence. Job experi-

enced devastating loss and grief, with no answers and a God who seemed indifferent, even cruel. “When he passes me by, I cannot see him; when he goes by, I cannot perceive him” (Job 9:11, NIV).

*Is it that You pass by and move on
or is it that we fail to see and perceive?
Our perception
is our lived experience
is our reality
Right or wrong
our perception of Your absence
is what is real and true in that moment
and so
You have passed us by and moved on.
Even though a small part of me may know
You have not
that is how it feels
and so it is, in some sense, true.*

Experiencing God’s absence is not something for any of us to be ashamed of or afraid of. It is a part of our journey of faith. Life is not always easy. Clouds cover the sun. Shadows obscure our ability to see clearly. But our hope and prayer is that somewhere deep inside we know that life will get easier again, that the sun is still there, that someone will bring a flashlight to cut through the shadows. The Bible and the stories of the church tell us that our experience of God’s absence is not the whole truth.

My own experiences also told me that the clouds and shadows were not the whole story. Within me was a nugget, maybe an ember, consisting of all the experiences I had had of God’s presence in the past. The sun had been out, warming me and lighting my way.

In Psalm 22 the psalmist expresses feelings of abandonment but is reminded that their ancestors trusted God and that Yahweh has been their God since birth.

*We feel abandoned by God
yet
we have stories of God’s goodness
God feels far away
yet
we have memories of God’s presence*

*Sometimes
the remembering
the knowing
the trusting
is all we have
until there is more
and we see, feel, experience, touch, taste
God again*

That nugget, that ember, kept me searching for God. Although I was angry and scared and not at all certain of what I had been certain of before—although I felt completely abandoned by God—something kept me from completely abandoning God in return. My own experiences of God’s presence and the stories of faith kept that ember alive.

Job heard God’s voice and was assured of God’s love again. The psalmist felt heard by God and was able to praise God again. I have also been able to hear God and to feel heard by God again. God did not remain absent forever. But my experience of God’s absence has changed how I experience God’s presence. I hold those moments of presence a little more loosely but with more attention. God’s presence is not something I take for granted anymore. It is a gift that I treasure more deeply for having felt God’s absence.

The psalmist says to God, “You turned away from me, and I was shattered” (Ps. 30:7, NLT).

*can what was shattered be put back together?
maybe
with time and patience
but it won’t look the same*

*the experience of God’s absence
changes things
changes us
just as irrevocably
as the experience of God’s presence*

About the author

Janet Peters works as the program director for Mennonite Church Manitoba’s camping ministry. She has recently rediscovered a love of writing as a way to converse with the Word.