

“God Is With Us”

Job 21:10, 23:1-5, 8-9, 16-17 42:8, Ecclesiastes 3:11, Psalm 22:1-2, 6-8, 14, Matthew 11:28 & Hebrews 4:14-16

Pastor James York

October 13, 2024

Prayer for Understanding God of grace, you promised to never break your covenant with us. Amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your words of eternal love. Amen.

Twenty-four years ago, I was going through a difficult season. I was hurting, suffering, grieving, miserable, angry at God and confused as to what to do, so I went for a hike. I picked a portion of a trail I had hiked before with spectacular views of the valley below. The rain was forecasted to stop by the time I got to the trailhead, instead it was still pouring. I sat stewing in the vehicle for an hour. I decided to hike anyway. Soon I was soaked and my boots became caked with gooey heavy mud as I clawed and slid my way up the mountain. I got to the section with the great view and could see only dense cloud. Exasperated I sat down on a rock and screamed. A sudden gust of wind blew the cloud away. I saw I was sitting on the edge of the cliff and the view was spectacular. The spectacular view is always there and yet I often cannot perceive it.

Throughout scripture, God promises in numerous ways that God is always with all of us. Nothing can separate us from God. God will never abandon anyone. And yet, we often cannot perceive even a hint of God’s presence. Seasons when we cannot perceive God are often called dark nights of the soul. These dark seasons are common. There is an abundance of literature from renowned Christians to wanderers who detail the pain and difficulty of these dark seasons when God cannot be perceived even though God is always with us.

The Bible contains wisdom literature, Ecclesiastes and Job, to reassure us of God’s presence in the drudgery of dark times. Ecclesiastes begins with a list of seasons, some wonderful, some awful, to convey that everyone goes through a myriad of seasons and God is with us in every season. And God has imprinted in our essence the image of God, eternity, woven into every fiber of our being. And all will be glorious. Ecclesiastes sums it up this way. **Ecclesiastes 3:11 “God has made everything beautiful for its own time. God has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God’s work from beginning to end.”** And when one is in an awful season, being assured that God is with us and all will someday be well often provides little comfort.

Job is wisdom literature written in the extreme, so everyone can find their situation, thoughts, and feelings in Job’s journey through the dark night of the soul, through the awful seasons. Job had everything. Job by no fault of his own lost everything. Most of Job describes the pain, suffering, confusion, anger, devastation, and despair of the darkness. An excerpt from Job: **Job 23:1-5, 8-9 “My complaint is still a bitter one and I try hard not to groan aloud. If only I knew where to find God, I would go to God’s court. I would lay out my case and present my arguments. Then I would listen to God’s reply and understand what God says to me. If I go forward, God is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive God; on the left God hides, and I cannot behold God; I turn to the right, but I cannot see God.”** One’s tendency in awful seasons is to blame God. Job says: **Job 23:16-17 “God has made me sick at heart; the Almighty has terrified me. Darkness is all around me; thick, impenetrable darkness is everywhere.”** God is pure grace, love, and joy. God never does anything to hurt anyone. Job knew this. Job knew God is always with us. Job knew that glorious resurrection is our future. In a moment with more clarity Job stated: **Job:21:10 “God knows where I am going.”** And this knowing did not alleviate the pain.

A couple of weeks ago I had continuing education with the Presbytery. They pointed out numerous things that most of us need to change. They stressed we are not here to beat you up. Learn, let it go, grow, and become more loving. The presenter quoted Maya Angelou: “Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better.” Then the presenter went on with more challenging teachings and urged us to be self compassionate.

Job’s supposed friends needed to know better and do better. They did not listen to Job, instead they lectured, spoke platitudes, and judged. They insisted that Job did something to bring about his suffering. They clung to the false notion that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. God spoke to Job’s friends. **Job 42:8 Select Phrase “I will not treat you as you deserve, for you have not spoken**

accurately about me.” Often our loss, grief, and suffering has nothing to do with our choices or the way we live life. Platitudes are often toxic.

This next section has wisdom on how to be a good friend and how to coach your voice in your head to be a good friend. When the voice in your head says something false, hurtful, and exaggerates, say to yourself “Ouch! Stop!” and imagine the voice as a cartoon villain.

Platitudes are often toxic. If some of these platitudes comfort you then examine them for why. Keep the aspect that comforts you and be cautious in sharing them for they will probably be hurtful to others. When in doubt as to what to say, say nothing, listen, or ask a question such as, “How can I help?” My hope is not to shame rather to help us all be true friends.

Many pastors, counselors, and social workers find the following platitudes toxic. “It was God’s plan.” “You will get over it.” “It is what it is.” “You just need to have more faith.” “You have failed.” “Pull yourself up by your bootstraps.” “God won’t give us more than we can handle.” Examining the last one, nowhere in scripture is there anything even close to the concept that “God won’t give us more than we can handle.” You will find the opposite. The Psalms are full of pleas and sorrow written by people who are a mess unable to handle their circumstances. The Apostle Paul boasts about his weakness, not so that you can see how strong of a person he is and how much he can handle, rather so that we can see that it is only through God’s loving presence that we are able to endure. Jesus said: **Matthew 11:28 “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”**

The myth that “God won’t give us more than we can handle.” is harmful because it ignores our need for God. If one can handle everything without God, then there is no need to be in relationship with God. Rather than connecting with God, it encourages one to be self-focused and self-reliant. It is harmful, because it is an insult to the one who hears these words. They may hear, you are weak, you need to try harder, you are not good enough, you are doing something wrong, do not ask for help, do not share your situation, do not ask for prayers all because you should be able to handle it. It is harmful because it shuts down conversation. It is harmful because it often creates more suffering for someone already overwhelmed with suffering. When we feel weak and unable to persevere through suffering, rather than trying to handle it we should look to God for help and hope. We should reach out to others for help. Subconsciously, platitudes may be used because the speaker is uncomfortable and wants to get out of there.

The myth that “God won’t give us more than we can handle” is misleading, misguided, and hurtful because it suggests that God is the one who sends horrible things into our life and world. God created a good cosmos. God is pure goodness. God never hurts, harms, or diminishes anyone. Many experts agree we would be wise to check our toxic positivity and correct our word choices. Sharing a personal experience of a time when you experienced more than you can handle and needed help and the grace of God to endure can be liberating for someone suffering. We cannot handle the mess of the world, wars, hurricanes, violence, disease, that is why God took on human flesh in Jesus to save us. God does work through us to address these issues. Ultimately, only God can fully perfect the cosmos. Awful seasons, dark nights of the soul abound, pain, and suffering are common. We would be wise to be present and listen. God promises to be present and listen to you. God promises to be present and listen to everyone.

In times of suffering a good friend, a good inner voice, listens, asks questions and owns their own stuff. No one can ever know what another person is feeling or experiencing even if you have gone through an identical situation. Avoid transferring your baggage onto another. Everyone’s journey is unique, so own your stuff. Use I statements. When I experienced blank, I felt blank, and found blank to be helpful. While that may be helpful, realize that when you do that you are shifting the focus from them to you. Usually, it is best to keep the focus on them. Often it is helpful to ask questions. What are you feeling? Where is God in your situation? What do you want to talk about? How can I help? Be an active listener. Speak the words that seem helpful back to the person without advice, a desire to fix or judgement. Often hearing one’s own words and feelings echoed back gives direction and comfort to the one suffering. Ask, what can I do to support you? Sometimes the one suffering is so overwhelmed they are unable to answer. In a compassionate, loving way offer things you are gifted in providing. Would you like me to go for a walk with you? Would you like a meal, your laundry done, something cleaned, yard work, childcare etc.? Would you like me to read scripture, a poem or a story to you? Would you like me to call someone and tell them about your situation? More great questions are; How is God

caring for you? How do you want me to pray for you? Strive to be fully present for them. Or if you do not have the capacity to help then say, “I cannot help right now”.

Barbara Brown Taylor said: “The hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as the self - to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it.”

Notice the interactions of Jesus with people who were suffering. Jesus had compassion. Jesus listened. Even though Jesus knew what they needed he asked. “What do you want?” Jesus made space for them to share their pain, suffering, ordeal and longing.

A couple of months ago, we explored how many psalms follow a pattern. Pain is described, followed by lamenting, grieving, agonizing, venting, crying, screaming, confessing, repenting, changing, praying, worshiping, hoping, waiting, doing, evolving, followed by a redemption component. The pain in the psalms is severe, debilitating, awful. In all situations God is with us, guiding us, carrying us, out of the pain, often in an agonizingly slow journey. David comforted Saul not with words, but rather with presence, listening, playing the harp and singing prayers.

David prayed: **Psalm 22:1-2, 6-8, 14** “**My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are you so far away when I groan for help? Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer. Every night I lift my voice, but I find no relief. I am a worm and not a person. I am scorned and despised by all! Everyone who sees me mocks me. They sneer and shake their heads, saying, “Is this the one who relies on the Lord? Then let the Lord save them! If the Lord loves them so much, let the Lord rescue them!” My life is poured out like water and all my bones are out of joint. My heart is like wax, melting within me.**”

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, “to be human is to live by sunlight and moonlight, with anxiety and delight, admitting limits and transcending them, falling down and rising up. Learning to walk in the dark is an especially valuable skill in times like these — or maybe I should say, *remembering* how to walk in the dark, since people of faith have deep pockets of wisdom about how to live through long nights in the wilderness. We just forgot, most of us, once we got where we were going and the glory days began. The remembering takes time, like straightening a bent leg and waiting for the feeling to return. This cannot be rushed, no matter how badly you want to get where you are going. Step 1 of learning to walk in the dark is to give up running the show. Next, you sign the waiver that allows you to bump into some things that may frighten you at first. Finally, you ask darkness to teach you what you need to know. ...

Meanwhile, here is some good news you can use: even when light fades and darkness falls — as it does every single day, and every single life — God does not turn the world over to some other deity. Even when you cannot see where you are going, and no one answers when you call, this is not sufficient proof that you are alone. There is a divine presence, that transcends all your ideas about God, along with all your language for calling God to your aid. ... Darkness is not dark to God; the night is as bright as the day.”

Jesus’ struggled, suffered, cried out in pain and prayed, God why have you forsaken me. God was always with Jesus. Jesus is a person of the Trinity, three that are one in love and yet Jesus fully God in human flesh could not perceive God. So, when you cannot perceive God, recall that Jesus also could not perceive God for a while. Hebrews declares: **Hebrews 4:14-16** “**So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. We do not have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. Jesus has been through weakness and suffering, experienced it all—all but the sin. So let us walk right up to God and get what God is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.**”

The author of Hebrews makes it sound so simple. Get what God is ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help. And a multitude of people have shared how it took them decades to experience God and relief. Some spend their entire earthly life suffering. I do not have answers for suffering. I believe God is with me. I believe God loves me. I believe all will be glorious. As you go through every season be comforted by the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. **Ecclesiastes 3:11** “**God has made everything beautiful for its own time. God has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God’s work from beginning to end.**” Amen