

WHEN GOD PRETENDS

Why does God play hide-and-seek so often with his children? As Christians we believe we are in the hands of God, that all things work together for good to those that love God but in day by day experience we often feel we are in titanic hands, cruel hands. There is an illusion of divine indifference that haunts us all of our days. Think of the terrible things in nature. They say about Australia it is a land of droughts and flooding rains. When I was out there it seemed to rain every second day and when I left, an area larger than France was under water. Whole cities had been flooded but that is nothing compared with Mosambique, Madagascar. Think of earthquakes, volcanos, droughts, famines, pestilences. Nature seems to be entirely indifferent to the good. Makes no distinction between the believer and the unbeliever. And history is the same. In the French Revolution you are _____ to _____ off with your head. Another time if you were a priest, stab, them. At the time of the Russian Revolution millions perished in five years, many, many times more than perished in the whole time of the reign of the czars. Nature seems entirely indifferent. History seems indifferent and you and I have many days when it seems to us that if there is a God, he is playing hide-and-seek.

Scripture has warned us. I love the scene in Matthew 8 where the disciples are filled with fear because of the storm and there is Jesus asleep on the prow of the boat and they can't stand it after a while. They are sure they are going down so they shake him, "Master, don't you care?" And there they speak for me and there they speak for you. "Master, don't you care, if you are there,

if you care, why don't you do something?" Of course, he did--but in his time. And it was wonderful, as a matter of fact, it was much better than if they had never had a storm. Have you ever thought about that? Life is the richer for its storms. Geologists tell us that nature could not endure without earthquakes. Earthquakes are a safety valve, otherwise our world would cease to be. Never forget it, they were the richer for the storm. It cannot be said too often that it is awful to go through trouble but it is wonderful to have been through it. It cannot be said too often. So the disciples were the richer after that storm for having had the storm. However, we are thick headed so the Bible tells us again and again it is only an allusion that God is playing hide-and-seek. Mark 7: A broken hearted mother comes pleading for her child. The very love she has for the child is only a spark of the love of God. I am frankly amused when I hear people calling into question the goodness of God. I ask myself where did they get their high standards from, if there should be such a thing as goodness? And so, here is this broken hearted mother and Jesus answers her not a word. But, finally, he cannot restrain himself and says, "Woman, great is thy faith, be it unto thee even as thou wilt." So at first he plays hide-and-seek, ignores her but, ultimately. Then, in the same book, Mark 10, Bartimaeus is shouting, rending the atmosphere with his piteous cries and Jesus ignores him and just goes on. So Bartimaeus cries out so much the more because of the silence of Christ and, ultimately, he gets what he wants.

Then there is the story of Lazarus. The message is sent to Jesus, "Lord, he whom thou lovest is sick." Jill and I gave this message to dear friends in Australia where the husband had just had a stroke.

"Lord, him whom thou lovest is sick." We have another verse from John 13, "What I do thou knowest not now; thou shalt know hereafter."

The thing that encourages me most is that God played hide-and-seek with his own beloved Son. Look with me at Matthew 27, verse 45: "From noon onward darkness came over the whole land until 3:00 in the afternoon and about three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ' Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani,' which means, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" He could stand it when his own nation turned against him. He could stand it when the religious leaders appointed by God stood against him. He stood it when his disciples forsook him and fled; he could stand it when one of his disciples swore he never knew Christ. He could stand it when the representatives of justice were unjust but now when God forsakes him, "My God, my God, why have YOU forsaken me?" Of course, he asks that question that our attention might be directed to the why. I want you to think on that darkness for a little bit. It is full of symbolism. He was, of course, a sacred concealment of the agonies of the Lord as he endured the second death. The second death is separation from God. No one knows that until judgment day or they have sinned away their day of grace. So it was a concealment, the sacred cloistering of the Master. It was also a hint that we will never fully understand what happened there, that it is a mystery. We have all sorts of metaphors about the cross, propitiation, reconciliation, justification, and sacrifice--they are all pictures. They all tell some aspect of the truth but the whole meaning of the cross we will never fully understand. It is a great mystery and the darkness betokened that. It was also a symbol of the way evil tries to obscure the cross.

Even in churches today if you raise up the cross too high you may be rebuked. You may be accused as Paul was accused. As a matter of fact, you don't have the same accusations come against you as were made against Paul, "You are not proclaiming the Gospel." They said about Paul, "Paul you are saying the law is abolished: Paul, you are saying we can sin and get away with it. Wherever the Gospel is preached, those accusations always come. Truth and error lie very close together. So in that darkness we see the hatred of evil for the cross and all who try to live by the cross. That is the challenge of our lives to live by the cross. Life isn't a playground, it is a school room. That is very important. You and I are such fragmented creatures; never expect too much from each other. Never expect too much from any man or any woman. We are shadows of what God made. We are fragmented creatures. None of us have a perfect inheritance. None of us have had a perfect early home, upbringing. And since we went out into the world for ourselves we have made lot of bloomers, lots of mistakes. We are the product of all we have inherited, all that was done to us and all we have done to ourselves. The last one is usually the worst. So you must never expect too much from people and the Bible says, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God, all turned aside. There is none that knoweth God. The way of peace they know not. The venom of asps is in their lips." He is talking about me, about you. Don't expect too much of each other or of anybody in the world. We are only fragmented creatures. So the world is here to try and reshape us. Life is meant to be a divine education. That is the meaning of trouble. That is the meaning of when God plays hide-and-seek. You see, the original sin was when the woman SAW the tree was good for food. Sorrow

was pleasant to the eyes. Sorrow would make her wise. She took the visible thing and thrust in the back of her mind the invisible word of God that said, "Don't touch it." So the original sin was going by sight and denying faith and to be saved we must dance that dance backward. That is the meaning of those early stories in the Bible. To be saved we must dance that dance backward until I have learned to trust Him where I cannot trace Him. "Lord, he whom thou lovest is sick," and Jesus stays three days where he is. But they did not give up on him. And, often, you and I are in situations where God does nothing. He stays where he is or he has gone on a journey or he just does not care--but it is a challenge that like Mary and Martha who believe he loves us just the same.

It cannot be said too often that it is easier to take the blaze out of the sun and the salt out of the sea than love out of the heart of God. It is only if you believe in the love of God that you can withstand the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. If you don't believe God loves you, life is very hard to bear. People who best survive the bumps and the bangs, the contradictions and the absurdities of existence are the people who believe they are loved and, of course, we are here to do that for each other. Our love for each other is an image of God's love for us but remember it is always a love for the unlovely. That is what real love is. It is not Hollywood stuff which is so ephemeral, so transitory and has so much by way of wrong motivation behind it; so much of self-exaltation behind it.

Well, come back to that darkness at the cross. It is to remind us that Jesus is fighting his last battle with the powers of evil,

a battle which He will win. And we often have to fight the same way. It is not terribly hard to fight when you feel well, the sun is shining, you have weapons, plenty of rest--the test is to fight when you are in darkness. The test is to resist evil when you want to give up, when you want to surrender, you want to throw in the towel. Jesus fought his greatest fight in darkness and so do we.

The darkness is also a testimony of how nature sympathized with its creator. All lights are dimmed where Jesus does not shine. It was not possible for nature to be resplendent when its author was going out. The light of the world was going away. The light of the world was shrinking and diminishing until it would be no more for a moment. When in the womb as in the tomb deity would be quiescent. And so, nature is reflecting the sorrows of its author. The sun refuses to look upon the sun of righteousness upon the cross. It was also a very solemn warning to the wicked. The people who were insulting Christ at the cross are suddenly paralyzed. A midday midnight; imagine it. The busiest time of existence, 12:00 o'clock, when everyone is doing everything and suddenly the sun disappears. What a solemn warning. The axe is suspended in mid-air. The plow stops in mid-furrow, everything is silent, a solemn appropriate quietness for the great death bed of the Savior. The thoughtful anticipate terrible things. There is a shattering awe over the many thousands around the cross but his own horrible experience is veiled in mercy. Most of all, we are to understand that this outward darkness was a mirror of his heart, this is the main point. The three hours of darkness represent those three hours in which Christ was made sin for us. The Bible says, "He was made a curse for us." God could not smile upon the prisoner at the bar.

He represented all of sinful humanity. You and I were in him. We died with him. We were on the cross with him. He is suffering the penalty for the sins of the race. And so, hope does not present to him his coming forth from the tomb as a conqueror. His sun is set. His day has been the smile of God. Remember, he is delighted to say, "He that sent me is with me; the Father has not left me alone." What a great verse! That was true all of his life until now. In Gethsemane a great burden had sunk upon him. A cloud came between him and God. The sins of the world are resting upon him. In the judgment hall he does not fight to declare his innocence because he is guilty in the sense that he represents us. He shutters under the cross as he goes to Calvary. It is not the physical weight, it is symbol of the sins of the world that oppress him. He bleeds, the thorns press upon his brow, his hands and feet are bleeding, his back is bruised raw, he is suffering for the sins of the world. Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin. So the darkness represents the state of his heart and mind but, ultimately, after he endures the second death, by faith, he is victor and he cries out, "It is finished." Then the light comes again. He died in victory.

The darkness of the cross is meant to tell us two things: it is meant to be a revelation that Christ is our Saviour. He took my sin, why should I cuddle it to my own heart and moan over my shortcomings which are more than the grains of sand on the sea. If Christ took my sins, I have no right to be depressed about my shortcomings, my failures and my mistakes. When you stumble, get up and go on. We will have bleeding knees when we enter the kingdom of God. If he bore my sins, I don't need to bear them. If those

cruel thorns pierced his brow, I don't need to pierce my own mind with anxieties and fears and guilt. He took it, he took it.

So the first thing it is trying to teach us as God plays hide-and-seek is there is the saviour for me, for you. There is my Saviour. The second thing, he is there as our example. There are many times in everybody's life when they are overwhelmed by darkness, when they see no light and no hope and all the future looks dreadful, many times in everybody's life--there are no exceptions unless you die in swaddling clothes and we can say, the fact I feel forsaken does not mean I am. Every child of God at times feels forsaken, feels the divine indifference, feels they are in the grip of titanic forces, finds it hard to believe the promises, every Christian. I am not talking about unbelievers, every Christian has an Elijah experience under the Juniper tree, has a Jonah experience, way down there. That is pretty hopeless. They say every clock tells a story. The old fashioned clock can get very run down and yet get wound up again. You know, the moon dies every month and is reborn. In cold climes particularly you see the world dying with us. But it is reborn. We act it out every day of our lives without thinking about it. We pull the shroud over ourselves, we check out of existence every night. We are born again when the sun comes up if you are lucky enough to sleep until then. So there, secondly, he is our example. In the story of our Scripture reading, the two that are on the road to Emmaus, we get a hint of how we are to behave when it looks as though God is playing hide-and-seek. The Scripture says in that record, "He made as though he would go on." He does not seem to give a further thought to their fates and their fortunes. It is very dark in their souls. They have lost

the one they loved and he does not seem to care. He is leaving them. What should we do when God plays hide-and-seek? We should do what they did, with holy gentle violence they prevailed on him and said, "Abide with us for the night is far spent."

Now, if you and I had been Jesus, we would have had to do the same. It would not have been courteous to push our way into someone else's home. We would have had to do the same thing. However, they had an option, they could let him go or they could say, please stay. They had an option.

In the early years of life Jesus is walking with us as he walked with those men on the road to Emmaus. In the early years of life before we know anything about God or before we are committed to God, Jesus is walking with us and he whispers to us by conscience, by reason, by the Holy Spirit but then there comes a time of crisis when we have to make a decision in life. We either let him go on the way or we say come in and abide with us. Everyone of us can have as much of Jesus as we want. Those without Jesus are those who don't want him. We can all have as much as we want. Isn't it marvelous that a peasant can prevail with the Prince of Heaven. Artimaheus, the Syrophoenician woman, the sisters of Lazarus, in a sense they could stay the sun in the heavens like in Joshua's day, the long day. By faith, by prayer, by emulating his holy life of love, we can prevail on Jesus to abide with us when it looks as though he is playing hide-and-seek, when we think he is disappearing again into the darkness we can lay hold of him and they did. And what a difference it made. What a wonderful revelation came to them because they laid hold of him, because they prevailed on

him to abide with them. They suddenly find and recognize, this is him! This is the one they thought they had lost forever. This is him! He is alive!

I remember, nearly 60 years ago, reading a beautiful chapter in the book DESIRE OF AGES on the resurrection of Christ. "He is no longer a saviour in Joseph's new tomb, he is alive." He loves, he loves you, and you and you and he is willing to abide. He will stay and stay and stay; having loved his own that were in the world, he loved them unto the end. They were a pretty mixed bunch which is very encouraging. So there are times when God seems to play hide-and-seek with us and we must prevail on him to stay by faith in the darkness, belief in his love when all things look black, by prayer, by following his holy example of love you learn to love by loving; you learn to be patient by going through a lot of times when you don't want to be. You learn to exercise faith when you want to throw in the towel. You go against nature when you keep taking yourself back to the cross. We all have so much ego. We have to keep taking it back to the cross to be crucified. We have so much pride, so much conceit, in the darkness go back to the cross. It hurts but it is good for us.

And so, when they do prevail on him, don't let him go away and hide, they get a radiant revelation and they are given a commission to help others. They have just walked 8 miles. Having motor cars is not entirely an advantage to them like our modern age. It is not that they run us down but they take us off our feet. The disciples have just walked 8 miles, now they do another 8 going back to

Jerusalem. They say to the disciples gathered in the upper room who were weeping, fearful, broken hearted, "He's alive, he's alive! And if you and I will cling to God when he seems to be hiding from us--we have no one else to cling to--never depend on humanity, don't depend on yourself, that is the weakest reed and experience should teach us that but we never learn. You don't depend on humanity. "Put not your trust in princes or in the son of man in whom there is no help; his breath goeth forth and in that very day his thoughts perish...cursed is the one who makes flesh his arm, his heart departeth from the living God but blessed is the one who makes the Lord his trust. He will be like a tree by the rivers of water that won't cease from yielding fruit once even drought comes." So we are to hold onto God and we will receive a revelation from him about life. He will hallow every daily common thing. You can turn earth into heaven, you can make every meal banquet of paradise. That's what happened. When they knew him in the breaking of bread, they entered paradise. When Luther found out that righteousness by faith--hey, it is not what I developed, it is not what God is in himself, it is his gift to those who accept what Jesus has done. That is what righteousness is, a gift to those who accept what Jesus has done. Luther said, "The gates of heaven flew open, I was in paradise." And so when these disciples won't let Jesus go, "Abide with us, the night is far spent." They get a wonderful revelation...he is alive! Things aren't what they look like. That is very important. Even death isn't always what it looks like. Sometimes death is preferable to life. That is true in many parts of the world. Who knows what God has in store for the innocent in the world to come. That is in his hands. Only God knows the whole story so Jesus says, "I'm

alive," and everything is suddenly different. That common table becomes sacred. The night becomes day. It gives them a commission to go and help others so they go another 8 miles to tell the story of joy and goodness.

I want you to think in closing on the line, "Abide with us for the night is far spent." Once you are over about 10 or 11 years of age the day is well spent. For those of us who are over 50 or so, every year is only 6 months. When you hit 70 it is about 3 months. Life goes so quickly, it is unbelievable! I never believed as a kid it was eternity until the next Christmas or the next birthday, one could get out of school. It was an eternity. As you get older you^{are}/a little bit wiser. A few things are drummed into thick heads and we know the day is far spent. So while there is a sense in which the very earliest years of life we must plead with the Saviour who has been talking to us through conscience, reason and the Holy Spirit, as early as possible we should say abide with us. We must never venture into the later years without Him, the day is far spent. And the day is far spent for the world. This is the evening of the world. Our world is shrinking, shrinking, shrinking and it is now very fragile, a neighborhood but no brotherhood. The world is very much like the times of the tower of Babel when God said, "See what they are doing? Now nothing will be restrained to them, so let's go down." And that is where the world is now. The world with its wonderful power over time and space and matter seems to be able to do anything. Nothing should be restrained of them. That is a dangerous time. As Nebuchadnezzar said, "Isn't this great Babylon that I have built,"

the kingdom was departed from him, cut down. And so, the day is far spent for the world. It is well advanced into the evening and our only hope is to lay hold of the God who seems to play hide-and-seek but that God is like a mother. She has a little child in the center of the room and she walks to the door and the child cries piteously and the mother goes back and picks up the child and smothers it with kisses. The mother wants to be wanted and God wants to be wanted, not for his sake, but for our sakes.

Can I remind you of the great words of _____, one of the greatest hymns was ABIDE WITH ME, written by a minister who had worked for many years in a parish that was sterile and barren and it broke his heart. He got the sentence that he was dying, went into his room and wrote these words and it is based on this story that we have just been talking about. You know them, "Abide with me, fast falls the eventide. The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide. When other help has failed and comforts flee, help of the helpless, oh, abide with me. Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day, earth's joys grow dim. Its glories pass away. Change and decay and all around I see, oh thou who changest not, abide with me. I need thy presence every passing hour. What but thy grace can foil the tempter's power? Who like thyself, my guide and stay can be, through clouds and sunshine, oh, abide with me. I fear no foe with thee at hand to bless. Ills have no weight and tears no bitterness. Where is death's sting? Thy victory, I triumph still if thou abide with me. Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes, shine through the gloom and point me to the skies. Heaven's warning breaks

and earth's vain shadows flee. In life and death, oh Lord, abide
with me.