

## Living Before God without God

Acts 1:6-14

John 17:1-11

“And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one.”

Elizabeth Strout opens her latest novel with a chapter about a man named Tommy Goptill. Tommy once owned a dairy farm about two miles outside the fictional town of Amgash, Illinois, a town that seems, for all the world, like the farm town in Illinois where I grew up. The night his dairy farm burned to the ground, Tommy “understood that all that mattered in this world were his wife and his children, and he thought that people lived their whole lives not knowing this as sharply and constantly as he did.” Strout’s book goes on to illustrate this fact in the broken relationships of every other character. “But [Tommy] had [also] felt that night, . . . just as the roof of his house crashed in, fell into the house itself, right into their bedrooms and the living room below with all the pictures of the children and his parents, as he saw this happen he had felt—undeniably—what he could only think was the presence of God, and he understood why angels had always been portrayed as having wings, because there had been a sensation of that—of a rushing sound, or not even a sound, and then it was as though God, who had no face, but was God, pressed up against him and conveyed to him without words—so briefly, so fleetingly—some message that Tommy understood to be: *It’s all right, Tommy*. And then Tommy had understood that it was all right. It was beyond his understanding, but it was all right. And it had been. . . .” It had been, except for one thing: even though Tommy “had felt the presence of God since, at times, as though a golden color was very near to him, . . . he never again felt visited by God as he had felt that night. . . .”

I imagine the disciples saying the same thing to one another as they remembered the forty days before a cloud took Jesus out of their sight. Perhaps they had felt the presence of God since, at times, as though a golden color was very near to them, but they never again felt visited by God as they had felt on those forty days after Easter. If the disciples’ experience and Tommy Goptill’s experience of God have something to do with our own, then the story of Jesus’ ascension invites us to reflect on the experience of living before God without God.

If you were to trace the human experience of God’s palpable presence from the beginning to the end of the biblical narrative, you come across stories like Jacob wrestling until the break of day with a nameless stranger who turns out to be God; or encounters such as Moses had on Mt. Sinai that gave him only a glimpse of God’s hind parts to go on as he led God’s people through the wilderness for forty years; or liminal experiences like that of Elijah when God was not in the earthquake or fire or the sound of sheer silence but in a voice that asked him what he was doing in a cave. God is nothing if not elusive. In fact, the quality that set Israel’s God apart from the gods of other tribes was God’s invisibility. No graven images or likenesses were to be made of the God whose name was “I will be who I will be.” A cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, a voice so terrifying that the people asked never to hear it again, a word spoken to patriarchs and judges, to kings and prophets: this is as close as human beings came to the felt presence of God.

Then came Jesus. “No one has ever seen God,” John reminds us as if we needed reminding in his prologue. “It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” For thirty years on earth, there was a man who, according to those closest to him, was God’s Word become flesh. He spoke to them and it was as though God were speaking. He touched their wounds and it was as though God’s hands were on their broken parts. He accompanied them and it was as though God were by their side. He was the image of the invisible God.

Then with death only days away and because Jesus was human enough to understand the problem that his physical absence would be for his disciples, he assures his disciples before he dies that the invisible God will not leave them orphaned. God will send the Comforter, the Holy Spirit to teach them all things and remind them of his words. Moreover, in the prayer he prays before he is arrested, he asks God to protect, guard and speak to his disciples in his physical absence so that they may be one as he and the Father are one: “I in them and you in me,” he prayed, “that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” God’s presence after the ascension would be experienced as a community-creating presence.

Then Jesus died. He died just as they would die; except that, beginning on the third day, he appeared as their living Lord again and again and again. For forty days they saw him with their eyes, heard him with their ears,

talked with him, ate with him, and walked the dusty roads of Galilee with him. Death had not taken him from them. Love had prevailed. Still, as he had said to Mary Magdalene in the garden beside his tomb on Easter morning, his followers could not hold him because he was ascending to his Father and their Father, to his God and their God. Forty days after Easter morning, he did ascend and they were on their own again, left to live before God without God in the world.

The rub, however, continues to be this: in the face of life's uncertainties or difficulties or downright tragedies, when all we have to go on are the words in Scripture and the fallible witness of believers, we want a God whose power is palpable, whose protection is visible, and whose guidance is audible. We want a God who is real enough to help the people we love out of the fixes they are in. And religion has been all too eager to oblige, doubling down on its witness to an all-powerful God who protects those who believe what religion says about God and saves those who behave in ways that conform to religion's social norms. Christians were one after Christ's ascension, to be sure, united under the authority and orthodoxy of religion.

But sometime during the Late Middle Ages, the religious consensus of Christendom began to crumble in the face of the Enlightenment, dividing believers according to a host of conflicting certainties. According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's later letters, written in Tegel Prison weeks before the plot to assassinate Hitler failed, the world had come of age. Human beings were learning to deal with the questions of science, social and political matters, art, and ethics, without recourse to a "working hypothesis called 'God'." Over the last hundred years, he adds, this has also become increasingly true of religious questions. "...everything gets along without 'God'" he says, "—and, in fact, just as well as before... 'God' is being pushed more and more out of life, losing more and more ground."

In response, religion attempted to restore oneness by demonstrating "to secure, contented, and happy humankind that it is really unhappy, desperate and simply unwilling to admit that it is in a predicament about which it knows nothing and from which only [religion] can rescue it." Bonhoeffer called this effort pointless, ignoble and unchristian: "Pointless, because it seems...like an attempt to put a grown-ups...back into adolescence, i.e. to make [them] dependent on things on which [they are], in fact, no longer dependent, and thrusting [them] into problems that are, in fact, no longer problems to [them]. Ignoble, because it amounts to an attempt to exploit [human] weakness for purposes alien to [them] and to which [they have] not freely assented. Unchristian because it confuses Christ with one particular stage in...religiousness..."

As I was wrestling with Luke's account of Christ's ascension, it occurred to me that Bonhoeffer understood our true situation before God in a way that few theologians have before or since. Living in a world come of age, "God would have us know," he writes, and here is his pivot to life after the ascension, "that we must live as [men and women] who manage our lives without [God]...The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us."

How can that be? How can a God whom we can neither see, nor hear, nor hold on to, help? "He took our infirmities and bore our weaknesses," Bonhoeffer replies, which "makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering." It is how we help one another, is it not? Whereas religion directs us in our distress to the power of God in the world, Scripture "directs us to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help." After Christ's ascension, we are summoned to share in God's sufferings at the hands of a godless world (think of the children in Manchester), to feel God's presence as we bear another's infirmities and weaknesses (think of your own child), to live before God without God.

Tommy "knew too well what people would make of [his experience the night his dairy farm burned to the ground], and this is why he would keep it to himself until his dying day—the sign from God." But then, in response to the mental suffering of a reclusive neighbor named Pete Barton, Tommy told him, in detail, how he had felt God come to him, and how God had let him know it was all okay. "When he was done, Pete, who had listened intently, sometimes looking down, sometimes looking at Tommy, now looked at Tommy with wonder on his face. 'So you believe that?' Pete asked. 'I don't believe it,' Tommy said, 'I know it.'" "Why had he told," he wondered as he drove home. "Because he wanted to give something to that poor boy.... Why did it matter that he had told the boy? Tommy wasn't sure.... *So you believe that?*, Pete Barton had said. Tommy... said, quietly, 'God, what have I done?' And he meant that he was really asking God. And then he said, 'Where are you God?' But the car remained the same, warm, still slightly smelling from the presence of Pete Barton, just rumbling over the road." Thanks be to God.