

When We Feel Forgotten

Isaiah 49:14-16

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Sometimes we feel that God has forgotten us. We must not say so. We think that if we said it out loud, we would reveal our lack of faith. Or worse, if we said it out loud, it would break the spell for other people who are barely able to believe as it is. If the emperor has no clothes, we don't want to be the child who points it out.

So we hardly know what to make of it when Jesus himself calls out from the cross, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Surely he must intend it to refer to the whole of Psalm 22, which ends more hopefully. Or perhaps he is talking about an event within the Trinity, so that Christ is the only human who has of necessity been abandoned by God, at least for a moment.

But the idea that this is a common human experience hardly registers with us. Whether God does in fact forget us or not, that is how we experience suffering. We feel that God has forgotten us. Isaiah hears Zion complaining. Zion here means the city of Jerusalem, imagined as feminine, with a feminine verb. She says, "The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me."

And with good reason. Jerusalem has been overrun by the enemy, its walls knocked down, its temple destroyed, its leading citizens deported. If you looked at the ruins of that once-great city, "godforsaken" might be the adjective that came to mind. The people Isaiah is addressing are living in Babylon, in the capital of the evil empire, and for them the Temple is their World Trade Center—gone, and too painful to contemplate.

What other explanation can there be, but that God has turned his back on us? In their prayers, the Jews are not afraid to say it. Psalm 31 begins, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" Psalm 42:9 says, "I say to God—the one I have called my Rock—'Why have you forgotten me?'" Psalm 44:24 asks, "Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?" Psalm 77:9 raises the question, "Has God forgotten to be merciful?"

And here's the thing: these questions were not blurted out just once by some histrionic singer in an outburst. These questions were included in the hymnbook of God's people. They became standard prayers that have been prayed over and over by both Jews and Christians through the centuries—with God's permission and God's authorization, as if God *wants* us to give voice to that dark question, "Have you forgotten me?" Just imagine if you picked up the bulletin and saw that the unison invocation was "Where are you, God? Why aren't things getting any better? Have you forgotten all about Harbor Church?" We are too timid and, we think, faithful to pray that way. But the Scriptural patterns of prayer suggest that if we asked the question from the heart—if our prayers connected with the darker more doubtful part of our hearts—we would be more likely to get an answer like the one Isaiah gave and more likely to work our way to a robust faith.

Adults of a certain age will remember Richie Havens frantically strumming his guitar at Woodstock and singing, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child." Others may remember versions by Paul Robeson or Louis Armstrong or John Legend. Can you imagine putting that song in our hymnal? But that old spiritual hits us somewhere deep because whether we had perfectly good mothers or not, all of us have moments when we feel like a motherless child a long way from home. We feel like "we ain't got nobody." We feel like "we done been

forgotten.” If we keep that feeling a secret it just gets worse, because we feel more and more alienated from God. But if we sing that feeling or say it in a prayer, then God can deal with it.

Here is what God says when his people say “My Lord has forgotten me:” “I *cannot* forget you. How can a mother forget the child that is nursing at her breast? How can a mother have no feeling for the child that grew within her and that she gave birth to through hard labor? You can’t forget your own child. But I’ll tell you what: I am mother to you in a way that no earthly mother can ever be. I made you. I gave you life. Maybe some human mother can forget her child and give her up, but I will never forget you.”

Then Isaiah uses this strange image to underline the point—God says that he has us tattooed on the palms of his hand. We say “I know that place like the palm of my hand.” God says to Jerusalem, “You are as familiar to me as the palm of my hand. I can’t forget about you. Every time I look at my hand I see you.” The word “inscribed” most likely means a tattoo, not something written down just for a moment as a reminder, like when you write down a grocery list or a sermon outline on your hand. This is something permanent. A tattoo is there to stay.

The rest of verse 16 says “Your walls are continually before me,” which I understand to mean that when I look at my hand I see a picture of Zion. I see a picture of Jerusalem and her walls engraved there. You remember that when God is saying this Jerusalem had been destroyed. There *were* no walls. They were gone. The walls of Jerusalem were just a memory or a dream. But God says “I have not forgotten them, and I still see them because my plan is to rebuild them.”

When God looks at us, he sees what *is*, but he also sees his plan. He sees what once was and is gone, but he also sees what can yet be. When you cry out to God as a motherless child, from a place of abandonment, feeling that you have been forgotten, that life has just gone on without you and there is no way you are ever going to get your life back, God says, “I have not forgotten you. I cannot forget you. And I see before me every day the person that you can be, even now. Your rebuilt life is continually before me.”

We are not motherless children, and we are not forgotten. After the terrible earthquakes in Sichuan province three years ago, the Xinhua news agency posted a photo of a soldier gently cradling a round-cheeked tiny infant, about three weeks old. In the picture the baby is sleeping peacefully, without a scratch, wearing a quilted green vest and wrapped in a blanket. The story said that the baby was found in the wreckage of a building, under the body of her mother, who did not survive. The mother was kneeling over the baby to protect her. Inside the baby’s blanket, the rescue workers found a cell phone. The mother had typed a text message on the screen, “My dear, if you survive, please remember I love you.” That is the message that God has been sending his people through the centuries. It’s the message that he sent most clearly when Jesus gave his life to protect us: “Please remember I love you.”

The gospels are full of stories of people who thought they had been forgotten, but Jesus proved otherwise. There is a sequence of stories in Mark’s gospel, the end of chapter 4 and most of chapter 5, that I want to remind you of. In the first story, Jesus and his disciples were out on the sea of Galilee in the midst of a storm. The boat was rocking just like the boat from Galilee was rocking on Friday afternoon on its way to Block Island. The passengers got scared. They looked around and saw Jesus asleep in the back of the boat on a cushion. Isn’t that how we imagine God sometimes? The disciples woke Jesus up and asked him, “Don’t you care that we are going to die?” That’s us, frantic, assuming that God is oblivious to our plight. *Don’t you care that we are going to die?* Of course Jesus does care. He calmed the storm and asked his closest followers, “Do you still have no faith?”

When they all got out of the boat, they encountered a man who lived among the tombs, with chains hanging off his body. He would howl like an animal and cut himself with stones. Apparently, this man was schizophrenic, but if you prefer you can say he was possessed. Jesus asked the man, "What is your name?" and he said "My name is Legion"—I am like a company of six thousand soldiers, there are so many of me. He was a hopeless case. He was one we would like to vote off the island. Nobody understood his condition and they were all afraid of him. If anyone ever had a reason to think that God had forgotten him, it was this man. But Jesus touched him, and everything evil and wild left him, and he sat there in his right mind.

Then come two stories intertwined. Jesus was walking into town when one of the leaders of the synagogue, a religious man, came up to Jesus because his daughter was dying. Nothing in life is more tragic than losing a child. Jesus agreed to go to the man's house, but when they got there people came out to tell him "Your daughter is dead. Why bother the teacher anymore?" Surely this man thought, "God, why have you turned away from me?" But Jesus said "No, she's not dead. She's just sleeping." And he said to the child, "Little girl, get up," and she did.

In the midst of going to the dying girl's home, Jesus was interrupted by a woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. She had been to many doctors. She had spent all that she had, but she did not get any better; she only got worse. She must have asked herself after twelve years, "Why has God forgotten me?" But then she heard about Jesus and his healings, and there was some little spark left inside that responded to the possibility that God might still do something in her life. She said to herself, "If I could just touch his clothes, I think that man can make me well." And Jesus said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well."

We are not forgotten. We are in fact loved with an everlasting love.

That same prophet Isaiah asked a series of questions (40:27-31):

Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.