

Thin Places: 3. When God is Silent

Matthew 11:2-6

February 20, 2022

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The past two weeks we've looked at Thin Places – those places where the distance between heaven and earth are so thin that we can glimpse the eternal. Two weeks ago, I shared one such moment for me. We don't go looking for a thin place, the thin place finds us – when we are open and receptive to God's presence. Last week, we learned that God's preferred way of communicating with us is in the silence. In Psalm 46, we hear the voice of God saying, "Be still." God is waiting to speak to us in the silence, but what are to make of the times when God is silent.

Many of you know what Amanda and I have been experiencing over the past six months. The story actually began in January 2016 when my wife, Amanda, was diagnosed with breast cancer. That diagnosis hit us like a ton of bricks, but after more than a year that involved surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation, she was declared "cancer-free." And periodic checkups renewed that declaration, even as recently as last May. But then, last summer she began having difficulty breathing when we walked long distances, but in an emergency room visit nothing was detected. But her breathing became so labored that she sought a second opinion and received the news that she had metastatic breast cancer. It was not the same cancer that she had had previously and though it was treatable, we were told it was not curable. Over the next five months, several different chemotherapies were attempting but the cancer continued to spread and her health continued to decline until during a January visit with her oncologist, I asked for a prognosis. "What can we expect?" I asked. What we had in mind were at least 8-10 years. But her doctor's response left us stunned. "Months," she said. And in the next few weeks Amanda's health reached a point where she was not healthy enough for further treatment and we even inquired about hospice care. To be completely honest with you, this was the lowest point we have ever experienced in life. We began to get Amanda's affairs in order and our family looked for opportunities to spend whatever quality time together that we could. I share this, not because we want you to feel sorry for us. That's the last thing we want. We are not the only family to face the unexpected or stare at the present reality of death. Many of you have been in this place or you have a close friend or family member who has. After multiple hospital stays, her health has improved to the point that a new chemotherapy has begun and we have hope for more time.

But for me, the low point stretched from the end of November to the beginning of February, and as often as I called out to God, I heard nothing. I'm up very early most mornings, and I would sit in the dark for hours, waiting and listening. I went for long walks on some of the coldest morning, calling out loud for God to answer me. But I heard nothing. God, if you are out there or in here, give me some indication that you care. And I got nothing. It's what causes many people to walk away from faith altogether or at least question whether God exists. Cancer cannot be God's will. Seeing someone I love suffer – surely God does not want that. I've devoted most of my life to following you and helping others follow you – and now you choose to be silent! Didn't Jesus say, "ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be open to you?" In John 15 in his final message to his disciples, Jesus says, "Whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give you." All I'm asking God is that you give me a sign that you care. crickets...

This was not the sermon that I had planned months ago, but as many of you have asked, Steve, how are you doing? I want to invite you to come with me as I try to make sense of God's

silence. In today's scripture, we have the story of one of the greatest people who ever lived and yet, God did not answer his prayer. A little history will help us understand this story. At the time Jesus was born, King Herod the Great was king over all of Israel. When Herod died, Rome divided the kingdom between two of Herod's sons, Archelaus and Antipas. A third son, Philip was given nothing to rule. This third son, Philip fell in love with Herod's niece, Herodias. They were married and had a daughter named Salome. But one day, Philip's brother, Antipas, came to visit and fell in love with Herodias, his brother's wife. They ran off to Galilee. She divorced her husband and married her husband's brother, and now Herodias was the Queen. Into all of this comes John the Baptist. God told John to preach a message of repentance – that is, clean up your act and if you are doing anything immoral, stop it and turn to God. John said that God was preparing to do something amazing, but you will not recognize it unless you repent. John developed quite a following. He was bold and afraid of no one. In fact, John spoke out against the sin of Herodias and Antipas so much so that Herodias appealed to her husband to silence John. In Mark 6, we read: **Herod himself had arranged to have John arrested and put in prison because of Herodias, the wife of Herod's brother Philip. Herod had married her, but John told Herod, "It's against the law for you to marry your brother's wife!" So Herodias had it in for John. She wanted to kill him, but she couldn't. This was because Herod respected John. He regarded him as a righteous and holy person, so he protected him. John's words greatly confused Herod, yet he enjoyed listening to him.** Apparently when Antipas wanted entertainment, he would bring John from prison who was an amazing preacher.

John is in prison. He has done everything God asked. He is the cousin of Jesus. He even baptized Jesus. His boldness in doing what God asked him to do put him in prison. If ever there was a time for a miracle, this was it. But day after day, John languished in prison. John had received visitors who told him that Jesus was healing people – strangers – doing miracles for strangers. Meanwhile, Jesus was not doing anything for his own cousin – and John began having second thoughts about Jesus. Matthew 11, verse 2: **Now when John heard in prison about the things Jesus was doing, he sent word by his disciples to Jesus, asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"** John had been the one to tell others that Jesus was the one and now John wondered if Jesus was really the one. And isn't this where we live? "LORD, I just need a word. Give me some sign, some indication that you are here." When everything is going well, faith is easy. I don't need to know. When everything is great, we are not even sure we need God, but then something happens – lost a job, struggling with depression, or it's something with a child, or a relationship is in trouble – and we start praying – we pray and we pray and we pray. LORD, give me something, some assurance that you are here. Because I'm not hearing anything from you and I'm beginning to doubt.

John sends his followers to Jesus with this question: Jesus, are you the one? And Jesus responds but not how we expect. Jesus doesn't say: "Of course, I'm the one. Go and tell John I'm on my way and I'll get him out. I'll rescue him." No! Jesus says: **"Go, report to John what you hear and see"** John cannot hear past the pain of his prison. He can't see past his prison, so you go tell him what you see and hear. John can hear and see only what he can hear and see – and that's pain. His focus has become God is not doing what I want. So Jesus says, You go tell him what you see and hear. Do you understand why we need Christian community? Why we need other people to come alongside when our world is crashing down around us. And Jesus says, tell John this is what you hear and see: **Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled are walking. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. The poor have good news proclaimed to them.** And then I picture the disciples of John turning to leave and Jesus says, don't forget to tell him this. This could be the most important part! **Blessed are those who**

don't stumble and fall because of me. Huh? Jesus, do you mean you might actually allow things that would cause us to fall away from you? Let's try to understand this: John is losing his faith because Jesus has not shown up, because God is silent – so John must not be very important to God – maybe his faith is weak so God is not there? But when we keep reading, Jesus tells us that John is the greatest person who ever lived. So John, hang in there, don't lose faith and by the way, Jesus is not coming? God won't answer your prayer?

Here's what we've got to understand: your circumstances are not an indication of how God feels about you. I may be in this place where the walls of life are closing in around me and I may think my circumstances are an indication of what God thinks about me. But don't let faith hinge on what you think God is not doing for you today. Look back and remember what God has done – all those times you prayed and got well, those times when you reached out to God and God took hold, that time when God transformed your life. Remember, remember, remember. And then, look outside your circumstances and see what God is doing. I've got to tell you that among the most profound experiences of my life have been my trips to Kenya. I got close to people who have almost nothing – a pastor who is making the equivalent of \$2.50 a day when his church can afford to pay him. Living in a place that I would not even keep my dog. He will never come close to what I take for granted, and yet he is clinging to Jesus and has more hope than I have ever had. I can get so focused on me and what God is not doing for me that I forget God is doing. Look around. Look outside your circumstances. Remember. Remember. Remember.

The story does not end well for John. Herod Antipas has a birthday party and Herodias sends her daughter to dance for the king. The king is having a great time, the alcohol is flowing, and he says to Salome, "I will give you anything you ask for. Whatever you ask I will give up to half of my kingdom." And she goes out and asks her mom, "What should I ask for?" And Herodias says, "Ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter tonight." Antipas doesn't want to do that, but he made this promise in front of everyone and he doesn't want to look bad. So he sends soldiers to do what Salome asks. Where is God? Where God always is.

Jesus sent this message to John: Blessed are those – Blessed means God knows you by name, God knows your circumstances and God will remain faithful even when God doesn't do what you want God to do for you. Blessed are those who don't stumble and fall because of me. God is saying: I see, I see, I see – don't give up on me. God may be silent but God is not absent. Blessed are all who refuse to fall away.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of February 20, 2022

Weekly Prayer: Merciful God, I do not know how to pray as I should. I speak too much and listen too little. I get impatient in waiting. I am more concerned with listing my needs and wants than in discovering your will for my life. Lord, forgive me. By your grace, teach me to pray so that I may come to know the heart of Jesus in fresh and living ways. Amen.

Monday, February 21

Scripture: Mark 10:46-52

Jesus and his followers came into Jericho. As Jesus was leaving Jericho, together with his disciples and a sizable crowd, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, Timaeus' son, was sitting beside the road. When he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was there, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, show me mercy!" Many scolded him, telling him to be quiet, but he shouted even louder, "Son of David, show me mercy!" Jesus stopped and said, "Call him forward." They called the blind man, "Be encouraged! Get up! He's calling you." Throwing his coat to the side, he

jumped up and came to Jesus. Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said, “Teacher, I want to see.” Jesus said, “Go, your faith has healed you.” At once he was able to see, and he began to follow Jesus on the way.

Observation: Jesus passed through Jericho, about 12 miles from Jerusalem, just before the last week of his life. A blind man named Bartimaeus cried out in prayer: “Son of David, have mercy on me!” (“Son of David” was a Messianic title, expressing faith. “Son” meant “descendant” in this phrase.) Jesus, keenly tuned to human need, called the man to him and restored his sight.

Application: Passover pilgrims jammed the Jericho road (verse 46). The town leaders did not want a noisy beggar front and center, so they tried to quiet him (verse 48). Jesus heard Bartimaeus and responded. What makes you feel like giving up on prayer? What helps you keep bringing your needs to Jesus even in the face of disappointments?

Prayer: Lord God of mercy, there are times when I don’t know if you hear me when I pray or when I call out in pain. Give me the faith of Bartimaeus to keep calling and to keep praying until I know that you are near. Amen.

Tuesday, February 22

Scripture: Mark 2:1-11

After a few days, Jesus went back to Capernaum, and people heard that he was at home. So many gathered that there was no longer space, not even near the door. Jesus was speaking the word to them. Some people arrived, and four of them were bringing to him a man who was paralyzed. They couldn’t carry him through the crowd, so they tore off part of the roof above where Jesus was. When they had made an opening, they lowered the mat on which the paralyzed man was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Child, your sins are forgiven!” Some legal experts were sitting there, muttering among themselves, “Why does he speak this way? He’s insulting God. Only the one God can forgive sins.” Jesus immediately recognized what they were discussing, and he said to them, “Why do you fill your minds with these questions? Which is easier—to say to a paralyzed person, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take up your bed, and walk’? But so you will know that the Human One has authority on the earth to forgive sins”—he said to the man who was paralyzed, “Get up, take your mat, and go home.”

Observation: Many houses in Jesus’ day had an outside staircase to a flat roof. Families went to the roof to enjoy the evening breeze (no air-conditioning!). Such roofs were made of branches or rushes placed over beams, then covered with a layer of dried mud sturdy enough to walk on. Making the effort to dig through it was a wordless prayer the disabled man’s friends offered.

Application: Perhaps you have known a “stretcher bearer,” like the man’s four friends in today’s story. Who has carried you emotionally or spiritually in a time of need? Say a prayer of thanks for them. Who has given you the privilege of carrying them? Ask God to be with them, and to guide you as you serve their needs.

Prayer: Just as the paralyzed man could not reach Jesus on his own, help me, O God, to allow others to come alongside and carry me. Help me to be a “stretcher bearer” to others. Amen.

Wednesday, February 23

Scripture: Matthew 19:16-26

A man approached him and said, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus said, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There's only one who is good. If you want to enter eternal life, keep the commandments." The man said, "Which ones?" Then Jesus said, "*Don't commit murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't give false testimony. Honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.*" The young man replied, "I've kept all these. What am I still missing?" Jesus said, "If you want to be complete, go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come follow me." But when the young man heard this, he went away saddened, because he had many possessions.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I assure you that it will be very hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. In fact, it's easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God's kingdom." When his disciples heard this, they were stunned. "Then who can be saved?" they asked. Jesus looked at them carefully and said, "It's impossible for human beings. But all things are possible for God."

Observation: On the surface, this story seems simple. The rich young man asked Jesus how to find eternal life, but he could not bring himself to act on Jesus' answer. A closer reading suggests the story is less about the young man's wealth than about the spiritual condition that led him to cling to it. Jesus is saying that God can change any heart that is open to God's call.

Application: God in the flesh answered this young man's questions directly. Not liking the answer, he went away sad. How can you discern if an answer is from God? When did you follow an answer from God? Did you ever get an answer from God you didn't like? How can trusting God's grace bring good even when you may have turned away?

Prayer: God, open my heart so that I am ready and receptive to what you have for me today. Give me the patience to wait and the silence necessary to hear so that the path before is truly what you want for me. Amen.

Thursday, February 24

Scripture: Mark 10:35-45

James and John, Zebedee's sons, came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. They said, "Allow one of us to sit on your right and the other on your left when you enter your glory." Jesus replied, "You don't know what you're asking! Can you drink the cup I drink or receive the baptism I receive?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said, "You will drink the cup I drink and receive the baptism I receive, but to sit at my right or left hand isn't mine to give. It belongs to those for whom it has been prepared." Now when the other ten disciples heard about this, they became angry with James and John. Jesus called them over and said, "You know that the ones who are considered the rulers by the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around. But that's not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. Whoever wants to be first among you will be the slave of all, for the Human One didn't come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people."

Observation: James and John were two of Jesus' disciples. They spent a great deal of time with him. But this passage shows that some of his lessons sank in very slowly. In verse 44,

Jesus had to repeat a lesson on humility that he had taught them in the previous chapter. In Mark 9:33-37, Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and the servant of all.”

Application: James and John began this prayer by telling Jesus, “We want you to do for us whatever we ask” (verse 35). How often are you tempted to pray like this? James and John gave in to the urge to seek their own gain. (Remember, it’s not wrong to ask for our needs; see Bartimaeus in Mark 10.) What share of your prayers is about yourself? What share is about others’ well-being or God’s purposes?

Prayer: Lord of us all, thank you for the reminders in scripture that you remain with me even when I have no tangible evidence of your presence. Let faith confirm for me that I have value in your sight and that you will never let go of me. Amen.

Friday, February 25

Scripture: Luke 7:1-10

After Jesus finished presenting all his words among the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion had a servant who was very important to him, but the servant was ill and about to die. When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to Jesus to ask him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they earnestly pleaded with Jesus. “He deserves to have you do this for him,” they said. “He loves our people and he built our synagogue for us.” Jesus went with them. He had almost reached the house when the centurion sent friends to say to Jesus, “Lord, don’t be bothered. I don’t deserve to have you come under my roof. In fact, I didn’t even consider myself worthy to come to you. Just say the word and my servant will be healed. I’m also a man appointed under authority, with soldiers under me. I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and the servant does it.” When Jesus heard these words, he was impressed with the centurion. He turned to the crowd following him and said, “I tell you, even in Israel I haven’t found faith like this.” When the centurion’s friends returned to his house, they found the servant restored to health.

Observation: A centurion commanded 100 soldiers, part of the Roman occupying force in Palestine. This decent, wise centurion dealt generously with the citizens of Capernaum. As a result, they told Jesus he deserved help. However, the centurion disclaimed any deserving and instead expressed full trust in Jesus’ power. Jesus put more value on his faith than on his “deserving” actions.

Application: In his commentary, William Barclay noted other godly traits in the Roman. “Roman law defined a slave as a living tool...a master could ill-treat him, even kill him if he chose.” What’s more, “The Romans... spoke of Judaism as a barbarous superstition. Anti-Semitism is not a new thing.” Might this centurion show the fruits of what John Wesley called “prevenient grace”—God’s work in someone who’s not formally one of “God’s people”?

Prayer: Lord, may I not trust in my own righteousness but in your profound mercy and grace that you extend without merit. Remind me that it’s you and not others – not even me – who determines my value. Thank you for your amazing grace. Amen.

Saturday, February 26

Scripture: John 11:1-44

A certain man, Lazarus, was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This was the Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was ill.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, saying, "Lord, the one whom you love is ill." When he heard this, Jesus said, "This illness isn't fatal. It's for the glory of God so that God's Son can be glorified through it." Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and Lazarus. When he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was. After two days, he said to his disciples, "Let's return to Judea again." The disciples replied, "Rabbi, the Jewish opposition wants to stone you, but you want to go back?" Jesus answered, "Aren't there twelve hours in the day? Whoever walks in the day doesn't stumble because they see the light of the world. But whoever walks in the night does stumble because the light isn't in them." He continued, "Our friend Lazarus is sleeping, but I am going in order to wake him up." The disciples said, "Lord, if he's sleeping, he will get well." They thought Jesus meant that Lazarus was in a deep sleep, but Jesus had spoken about Lazarus' death. Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died. For your sakes, I'm glad I wasn't there so that you can believe. Let's go to him." Then Thomas (the one called Didymus) said to the other disciples, "Let us go too so that we may die with Jesus." Jesus with Martha and Mary When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was a little less than two miles from Jerusalem. Many Jews had come to comfort Martha and Mary after their brother's death. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary remained in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you." Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha replied, "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She replied, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son, the one who is coming into the world." After she said this, she went and spoke privately to her sister Mary, "The teacher is here and he's calling for you." When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to Jesus. He hadn't entered the village but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were comforting Mary in the house saw her get up quickly and leave, they followed her. They assumed she was going to mourn at the tomb. When Mary arrived where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." When Jesus saw her crying and the Jews who had come with her crying also, he was deeply disturbed and troubled. He asked, "Where have you laid him?" They replied, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to cry. The Jews said, "See how much he loved him!" But some of them said, "He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?"

Jesus was deeply disturbed again when he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone covered the entrance. Jesus said, "Remove the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said, "Lord, the smell will be awful! He's been dead four days." Jesus replied, "Didn't I tell you that if you believe, you will see God's glory?" So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, "Father, thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me." Having said this, Jesus shouted with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Untie him and let him go."

Observation: In verses 3, 21 and 32, we find prayers from Jesus' good friends, the sisters Mary and Martha. Their brother's deadly illness was a major crisis. Jesus at first seemed painfully slow and puzzlingly unmoved. Then, in verse 41, Jesus prayed a prayer even death itself could not defy. God's power at work through Jesus made real the promise we Christians trust in

today: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die.”

Application: This story shows us many facets of prayer. The sisters trusted Jesus—when Lazarus fell ill, they sent him word. When Jesus seemed slow to respond, they openly conveyed their pain and distress. Verse 35 showed Jesus’ deep empathy for our tears. In verse 42 he showed his total faith that God always hears our prayers. In what area do you most need God’s caring about your hurt, and God’s power to restore and give life? Visualize Jesus weeping with your pain and creating new life for you as he did for Lazarus.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, hold me close. Let me not be afraid even when what I am facing is totally beyond my control – and even when life is uncertain. Remind me that your presence and power is the hope beyond all else, even life in this world. Amen.