

“Waiting for Godot” Sermon 05/10/2025

Elie Wiesel was one of the best known Holocaust survivors. He had been imprisoned at Auschwitz and Buchenwald, then after the war became a human rights activist, a journalist, a prolific author (57 books!) a professor in the humanities department at Boston University and a Nobel Laureate.

In a book simply titled “Night”, Wiesel described how Auschwitz, SS guards forced him and a number of other Jews to stand and watch while a young boy was being hanged. The child was still alive when Wiesel came to face the scaffold. For more than half an hour the child twitched on the rope, his tongue still red and his eyes not yet glazed over. Wiesel heard someone behind him say, “Where is God? Where is He?”

Wiesel heard a voice inside him answer him: “Where is He? Here He is — He is hanging here on this gallows.”

Wiesel describes this as a coming-of-age experience. Karen Armstrong, in her book *The Case for God*, complains that children are allowed to grow up in their understanding of Father Christmas, but not in their understanding of God. As far as our understanding of God goes, most of us remain infants.

We can see the same kind of bitterness Wiesel describes here all the way back in 587 BCE in our Old Testament reading, when the Babylonian Empire turned the holy city of Jerusalem into rubble, burned the Temple to the ground, put an end to the royal dynasty of David by executing king Zekariah, and carried off those they hadn’t killed into exile in Babylon.

The poet who wrote the Book of Lamentations says, “God ground my face into the gravel. He pounded me into the mud. I gave up on life altogether. I forgot what life was supposed to be like. I only saw death. I said to myself, “This is it. I’m finished. God is a lost cause.”

God has become silent. The house built for him by King Solomon was no more, the dynasty he had promised to maintain forever was no more. God was silent, as good as dead, a lost cause. And so it is today. We still wait to hear God speak, but he remains silent. Like Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, we can wait forever.

In the psalm we sang, “By the Babylonian rivers,” there is a bitterness so deep that it never gets read in our worship. Here is how the psalm ends:

“How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,

let my right hand forget her cunning,

If I do not remember thee,

let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth;

If I prefer not Jerusalem, above my chief joy.

Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom,

in the day of Jerusalem

Raze it, raze it, even to the foundation thereof.

O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed;

Happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.

Happy shall he be, that taketh

and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.

Andrew tells me that in the psalm books at York Minster when he was working there this last bit was crossed out with red lines. The church is embarrassed about emotions that the Bible knows are human and real.

As we come up to the October 7th anniversary of the Hamas attack on Israel and the beginning of the war between Israel and Gaza, we can see the emotion pictured in psalm 137 driving both sides of the conflict.

So what we need to talk about today is the unavoidable intersection between these lectionary texts and the events of the day, with the added relevance of the attack on the Manchester synagogue on Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year in the Jewish calendar, when we acknowledge how far away from God we have drifted, and seek reconciliation, at-one-ment. But the ancient emotions of Psalm 137 that separate us are still alive today.

It remains to be seen whether Trump's take-it-or-leave it diplomacy is going to work. Weariness of the conflict seems enough to make it look acceptable.

What I want to focus on is the honest bitterness toward a silent God that we see in the Bible that we also see in our world today and maybe in ourselves. There is no vision of peace as reconciliation here, only Trump's vision of the art of the deal with its winners and losers. And where is God? Is God left among the rubble, hanging half dead from a scaffold? God seems to die so many times in Scripture. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

We can ask this not just in relation to Gaza, but also to an entire generation exiled in a world of authoritarian domination by the billionaires that own us, xenophobic, homophobic, racist, sexist, self-centered and therefore godless, though applauded by the twisted and obscene Christianity of their supportive base.

What do we do?

The poet who wrote the Book of Lamentations says: wait, sit silently and maybe God will speak one day.

Many of us have been waiting, watching, praying for years, but God remains silent, does nothing. The strong still prevail, keep mining and drilling; more species become extinct, and a changing climate drives poverty, conflict, migration and misery.

The apostles in our story want Jesus to increase their faith. Jesus makes a sarcastic answer. Come on, he says. If you had the faith of a mustard seed, you could uproot this tree and have it planted in the sea.

Grow up. Learn to "BE" faithful. Embody the God you worship, PRACTISE your faith, live it. Be the people of God. Let's just think about that for moment, what it means for us. Amen.

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Tom Arthur