

My favorite Christmas book, which I pull from the shelf every Advent, is *Children's Letters to God*, compiled by Stuart Hample and Eric Marshall. A few of my favorites include:

*Dear God, Are you invisible or is that just a trick* — Lucy

*Dear God, Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy.* — Joyce

*Dear God, Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other if they had their own room. It works with my brother.* — Larry

I discovered *Children's Letters* when I heard a superb Advent sermon preached by the late Walter Bouman, professor at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. Walt, a big bear of a man with a wonderful wit, introduced his sermon on Isaiah 64:1, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," by quoting from the original *Children's Letters*:

*Dear God, Are you real? Some people don't believe it. If you are, you'd better do something quick.* — Love, Harriet Anne

It's the oldest, most authentic prayer in human history and as current as the latest neo-atheist best seller. Are you real? Where are you? Why is this happening to me? Please do something.

Isaiah's version of the prayer comes from the time of exile when the people of God were wrenched from their homes and lived under house arrest in Babylon, separated from beautiful Jerusalem and the Temple, the heart of their faith and national pride. We remember them waiting for God to come every Advent when we sing, "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel."

The actual moment when the prophet prays "if you are real, you'd better do something quick" is when the people do return to Jerusalem and find it devastated, destroyed, the Temple leveled.

That is the situation that prompts the desperate human prayer. Human suffering, and God's role in it, or God's absence, is one of the enduring mysteries with which people of faith have struggled. Elie Wiesel's question "Where is God now?"—uttered while watching a young boy being executed by the Nazis—is asked by every human being who has ever suffered deeply. After the war, François Mauriac interviewed Wiesel and wrote an introduction to Wiesel's stunning memoir, *Night*, about his experience in a concentration camp. Mauriac said: "And I, who believe that God is love, what answer could I give my young questioner . . . Did I speak of that other Israeli, his brother, the Crucified, whose cross has conquered the world? Did I affirm that the stumbling block to his faith was the cornerstone of mine and the conformity between the cross and human suffering was in my eyes the key to that improbable mystery?"

That most human question, "Where is God?" prompts the answer of faith: God is there, as people return to their devastated city, as suffering happens, as innocents die, as disease claims its victims. God comes, God is there, in the midst of it all. And that is what lies beneath all the blessed hoopla of Christmas: an idea so big we simply don't have words adequate to express it and so, gratefully, we turn to art, poetry, music, the letters of children . . . "Are you real? If so, you'd better do something quick." And ancient words, more precious every year: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

The prophet Isaiah wrote, “Truly thou art a God who hidest thyself” (Isa. 45:15). Throughout Christian history, the question has always been asked: “When terrible things happen, where is God?” This question becomes more urgent and more agonizing when something happens to children; like with the news of the massacre at the Newtown, Connecticut, elementary school, there wasn’t, or shouldn’t have been, a Christian believer in this country who didn’t ask, “Where was God? Why does God permit these atrocities?”

This is the question that Christian faith must ask. It’s a very shallow faith if it does not ask. Many people have been conditioned not to ask these kinds of questions. Some worry that asking such a question is like opening a door to not believing in God at all. But the people of the Bible do ask, directly and bluntly. The wonderful little book of the prophet Habakkuk asks it this way: “Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear? Why are you silent when the wicked man swallows up the one more righteous than he?” (Hab. 1:2, 13).

Habakkuk’s questions are part of every believer’s struggle for faith. I suspect that many seasoned churchgoers have had occasion to ask why God so often seems to be absent. Anyone who has not asked this question hasn’t been fully tested yet.

The hymn by Walter Chalmers Smith says:

*Immortal, invisible God only wise  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,  
Most gracious, most glorious, the ancient of days,  
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.*

God dwells in inaccessible light—light that we can’t directly look at. It’s uncreated light that emanates from God’s very being. This light was already there before God created the light that we see — “In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.” This also is a basic biblical idea. God isn’t a product of human imagination, a human wish raised to the nth power, or a projection of human hopes and fears. God is outside and beyond our ideas of God, so we can’t see God from a human point of view at all. Put another way: God is invisible not only to our eyes; God is also invisible to our imaginations. But how then do we know who God is? How do we even know if there is a God?

“Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.” The name for this idea in Latin is *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God. But that doesn’t quite get at what Isaiah is saying, because God is not just hidden on general principles. If God is hidden, it is because he hides himself. He means to be hidden. It is God’s nature to be out of the reach of our senses. There is a distance between God and ourselves that cannot be bridged from our side.

There are two different ways of asking “Where is God? Why does God hide himself?”

One way is scornful and hostile like the abuse and mockery hurled at Jesus on the cross: “He trusted in God to deliver him, so let God deliver him!” The people who yelled that insult thought they knew who God was and what God would and would not do (Matt. 27:43; also Ps. 22:8).

But the other way of asking comes from deep faith. It comes from having at least a partial knowledge of God and of the darkness that opposes God. Anyone who has received even a tiny glimpse of the majesty, holiness, and righteousness of God will have an increased sense of the darkness, disorder, and malevolence that's loose in the world. These forces would swallow us up had not God set in motion his great plan to reclaim his creation.

It was widely noted, and noted with skepticism and even disdain by some, that every one of the funerals for the children of Sandy Hook Elementary School was held in a house of worship. This does not answer the question of why God did not stop the shooter when he opened fire at the school. We do not know why God appeared to be absent. What we do know is that God was present in this way: he was, and is still, present in the coming together of those who grieve with the families, to bring small lights into the blackness of their grief. They were not alone. Something or Someone drew the bereaved families deeper into the midst of the communities that continue to trust God even when he has hidden himself. Incomprehensible as it may seem, God is alive in the faith of his people wherever they are and in whatever condition.

The fact that God hides himself in the midst of revealing himself is paradoxically a testimony to his reality. Presence-in-absence is the theme of his self-disclosure. God isn't hidden because we are too stupid to find him, or too lazy, or not "spiritual" enough. He hides himself for his own reasons, and he reveals himself for his own reasons. If that were not so, God would not be God; God would be nothing more than a projection of our own religious ideas and wishes.

The Lord hides himself from us because he is God, and God reveals himself to us because God is love (1 John 4:8). Does that make sense? Probably not—but sometimes Christians must be content with theological paradox. To know God in his Son Jesus Christ is to know that he is unconditionally love. In the cross and resurrection of his Son, God has given us everything that we need to live with alongside the terrors of his seeming absence.

Many churches do not use the phrase "he descended into hell" in the Apostles' Creed, but for many who have pondered its meaning, it is a central affirmation. In his death on the cross, Jesus descended into the hell of the absence of God. That's what the cry of dereliction on the cross means. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He experienced the absence of God his Father as no one else ever has, not even in the greatest extremity, because he experienced it for all of us. The Son of God underwent the opposite course: he came out from the light and went into the darkness . . . to be himself the light in our darkness.

Toward the end of World War II, during the liberation of Europe, Allied troops found a crudely written inscription on the walls of a basement in Koln, Germany, by someone who was hiding from the Nazi Gestapo. Here's what it said:

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. I believe in love even when feeling it not.  
I believe in God even when God is silent.

The silence of God descended upon the cross on Good Friday—and on the morning of the third day the sun rose upon the empty tomb. As another writer reminds us: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever" (Deut. 29:29).