

“Is God No Longer In Zion?”

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

Hebrews 12:1-2

Chances are you didn't notice anything different even if you were up early, but at 5:51 this morning, the Autumnal Equinox began. If, as the TV reporters remind us every year, summer ends unofficially on Labor Day, today it is official! Summer is over! But don't worry. Because of the temperate climate in which we live, winter is a safe 90 days away! Maybe! You just never know when it may come.

It's not likely you'll remember but my Buffalo family reminds me that October 12, less than three weeks from today, marks the first anniversary of a surprise October snowstorm that measured at least two feet. The heavy wet snow caught everyone unawares, wrecked havoc with traffic, closed schools for day, disrupted power for weeks, and left hundreds of stumps where beautiful trees once stood. But that's Buffalo you say. To say Buffalo and winter in the same breath is redundant. Winter is what happens to others, not to me.

Martin Marty is Professor Emeritus of religious history at the University of Chicago Divinity School. He is respected as one of the most, if not the most, prominent interpreters of religion and culture today. About 25 years ago he wrote a book that was not about church history but about faith and life. In *A Cry of Absence*,ⁱ Marty distinguishes between *wintery spirituality* and *summery spirituality*.

Summery spirituality is typically expressed in people who are very emotive – those who are very vocal in “praising the Lord” for everything from finding a parking place to being healed from some affliction. Their personalities are very bubbly. “Everything's coming up roses.” They spend a lot of time in the garden where Jesus “walks with me and talks with me and tells me ‘I am his own...’”

Wintery spirituality is typically expressed in people who are more quiet and reserved, some would say boring! They don't like wearing “religion on their sleeve,” so to speak. Though they are not outwardly emotional, it doesn't mean they aren't committed Christians or that the Holy Spirit forgot to visit them.

It's not that one is right and the other wrong. It's not that one is more spiritual and the other less spiritual. It's more about differing personality types; more about different ways of being spiritual. There's no doubt about it, however, summery spirituality gets more press.

The focus of Marty's book, however, is not so much about the way the Spirit expresses itself in different personality types but the experience of winter, where white-outs can disorient you. “Winter is a season of the heart,” he begins, “as much as it is a season in the weather.” Winter might make you conclude that the Lord is no longer in Zion; that he is out to lunch, or maybe in some southern clime soaking up rays! In the Old Testament story of Job, winter is expressed this way: **“I travel East looking for [God]— I find no one; then West, but not a trace; I go North, but he's hidden his tracks; then South, but not even a glimpse.”**ⁱⁱ

Sometimes winter never seems to end. A few weeks ago, I was watching the 11:00 News on Channel Six. Just before a commercial break, Jim Gardner teased the next story this way:

“Coming up, new information about Mother Teresa that will forever change the way you think about her.” My goodness, I thought to myself, what obscure sin has someone dug up from her past that will undermine the reputation she has earned with her years of compassionate ministry in the slums of Calcutta?

For once I stayed awake during the commercial because I wanted to know what would change my mind about Mother Teresa. This is what I heard: “In never before published letters written by Mother Teresa, it is revealed that for the last nearly half-century of her life she felt no presence of God whatsoever.” That’s not breaking news, I said to myself. That’s the common experience of God’s people since day one, even though whom we call saints. There’s more wintery spirituality out there than we are led to believe.

Mother Teresa wrote these words to Jesus at the suggestion of her confessor.ⁱⁱⁱ The reveal the intensity of her struggle:

Lord, my God, who am I that you should forsake me? The Child of your love – and now become as the most hated one – the one – You have thrown away as unwanted – unloved. I call, I cling, I want – and there is no One to answer – no One on Whom I can cling – no, No One. – Alone ... Where is my Faith – even deep down right in there is nothing, but emptiness and darkness – My God – how painful is this unknown pain – I have no Faith – I dare not utter the words and thoughts that crowd in my heart – and make me suffer untold agony.

So many unanswered questions live within me [and I’m] afraid to uncover them – because of the blasphemy – If there be a God – please forgive me – When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven – there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. – I am told God loves me – and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. Did I make a mistake in surrendering blindly to the Call of the Sacred Heart?

She heard a clear call from Jesus to enter her ministry to the forgotten and forsaken ones in Calcutta. Once that ministry began, however, she heard and felt nothing, only “the dark night of the soul.” Did that news change my regard for her? No, but it helped my own spiritual formation and re-formation. I realized that I’m not so out of the loop after all. I know all too well that I’m only a human being. Unfortunately, I can easily use that knowledge as a cop out. “I can’t possibly live according to the Sermon on the Mount; I’m only a human being.” And I can’t, nor can you. The issue is, we don’t even try. After all, we’re only human beings! Now I know that Mother Teresa is also a human being. That puts new pressure on me. If she, then why not me?

Born and raised in Buffalo as I was, I thought winter was a way of life – metaphorically speaking. My Scot-Irish ancestors didn’t express feelings very often. That doesn’t mean they didn’t have any, it just means their feelings were not the engine that pulled the train. So in that context I learned to worship God whether I feel God’s presence or not. I learned to try to do the right thing whether I feel like it or not. I learned that sometimes I have to love whether I feel like it or not. As I understand it, that’s what 1 Corinthians 13 is all about. Only love that isn’t dependent upon feelings can be **“patient, kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude;**

does not insist on its own way; is not irritable or resentful, does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Such love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Such love never ends.” Such is the love God gives to us.

We live in a time when feelings rule the day. Worship services are regarded as empty ritual unless God is experienced. If feelings toward one's spouse begin to wane, no problem, just walk away. (More than half of American couples who married in the late 1970s never made it to their 25th wedding anniversary, says a recent survey.) If people don't feel like doing something they should, they won't; and if they feel like doing something they shouldn't, they will. Better it is to do the right thing whether you feel like it or not. Do it and perhaps the feelings will follow. If not, do it anyway! You'll be better for it and so will the world. That's how Mother Teresa played it.

We can learn something very important from Mother Teresa's dark night of the soul. There was an outstanding essay in a recent *Philadelphia Inquirer*^{iv} by Kenneth Briggs, a professor at nearby Lafayette College. He writes: "It turns out that Mother Teresa was more like the rest of us than we might have thought." That's a bitter pill for many to swallow. They resent the idea that she has feet of clay. They want to assign sainthood and holiness to specialists. Briggs continues,

[They] assume it's the task of a chosen few to endure the rigors of faith, providing a handy exemption for those who cannot be expected to take on a full-born exploration of what it might be like to apply faith to a world of endless casinos, Little League travel teams, luxury condos, and *American Idol* - and grinding poverty such as Mother Teresa couldn't ignore. Charity and "giving back" help, but ... those actions rarely come close to the sacrificial love she espoused.

If she was not privy to an overwhelming sense of the Divine Presence in her life and still she did what she did in the name of Jesus, then we all have to ask the question I asked myself - if she, then why not we? Disciples of Jesus can't live by proxy. Someone else whom you mistakenly believe is more qualified cannot do it for you. I can't do it for you! Langdon can't do it for you! Does not our bulletin affirm that every week - we are all called to be ministers of Jesus Christ, each in our own way.

*If you cannot preach like Peter,
If you cannot pray like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus
And say, "He died for all." v*

No, Mother Teresa is not unique in her spiritual struggles. The prophet Jeremiah was called by God to preach to the people of Judah that their nation was doomed because of their idolatry and sin. He was faithful to his calling even when he didn't feel like it. He loved his people and hated the message God gave him to preach. He often fought with himself, trying to ignore the message but it just could not be ignored.^{vi} In the passage that is before us, we hear a very personal lament by Jeremiah who grieves for his people. No matter whose fault the situation may be, when things get bad it feels as if "**the Lord is not in Zion,**" that God has abandoned not only his people, but his prophet as well.

Feelings do not always reflect reality. It's hard to differentiate between Jeremiah

speaking and God speaking in this passage. Jeremiah's hurt is also God's hurt. Jeremiah is heart-sick and so is God. God takes no delight in his people's misery, even though they brought it on themselves. God hasn't abandoned them. God grieves with them. God shares their pain.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"^{vii} That's how Jesus felt on the cross. But that was not reality.

How often have you heard it said that if only we lived in simpler, less complicated times, faith would be a lot easier? If only we lived in Bible times, for example? If only? Would the presence of God be more real? Listen to these words by Edmund Steimle, a well-known preacher in the Lutheran tradition:

We have to rid ourselves of any notion that the experience of the absence of God is unusual; rid ourselves of all those sentimental notions of wanting to get back to a time when God was apparently present and his presence was as plain as the nose on your face. There was no time when God's presence was as plain as the nose on your face. He delays. He refuses to answer the question, WHY? But when you come right down to it, isn't this what faith is all about? If God were forever whispering in our ear, tapping us on the shoulder, tripping us up just to let us know he's around, he wouldn't be the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, or the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In an interview on PBS a few years ago, Martin Marty said,

I have always found that in the discussion of the absence of God is where the presence is most felt, that in the wintry spirituality one sees more clearly. You see the structure of the tree when the leaves are gone; you see the whole horizon when all the bushes are down. In winter you see a great clarity of outline, and I think that's what I look for...^{viii}

Maybe those words sound a bit hollow to you, but consider this: one of the prettiest places around here is the William Penn Inn at night. The trees twinkle with hundreds of little white lights. Don't you agree that the lights are more beautiful in the winter when there are no leaves on the tree?

Winter really isn't all that bad – metaphorically speaking!! You just have to be prepared for it and know how to dress for it.

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- i. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983)
 - ii. Job 23:8-9, *The Message*
 - iii. From the cover story of Time Magazine, August 23, 2007
 - iv. September 9, 2007
 - v. From the African-American spiritual, *There Is a Balm in Gilead*.

vi. See Jeremiah 20:7-18

vii. Mark 15:34

viii. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/religion/jan-june98/marty_6-4.html