

Coping with God's (Seeming) Silence

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Hi, I'm Emily Stimpson Chapman, and today we're going to talk about what to do when God seemingly gives us the silent treatment. First though, let's pray. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Come Holy Spirit and fill the hearts of thy faithful and enkindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your spirit, and we shall be recreated and you shall renew the face of the earth. Amen.*

Now, before we dive into how we cope with God's seeming silence I want to make one thing clear. Our God is many things. A bad communicator is not one of them, okay. God is an excellent communicator. There's no one better, he has been doing it, literally, forever. Just a little Trinitarian theology here, from all eternity, God the Father has been communicating everything that he is and everything that he has to God the Son, who in turn has been receiving everything the Father has to give, and then giving it right back. And that exchange of love and life, like that communication of being, it is so complete and so real that it, too, is a person. It's the Holy Spirit. So God doesn't just communicate. God uses communication, like to communicate himself to communicate who he is, is an essential part of God's nature.

But God's communication skills aren't confined to the inner life with the Trinity. Again, God doesn't work that way. God's actions in human history, what he does in time, always reflects who God is from all eternity. So, in other words, God is consistent, like in time and out. And so, he also has always been communicating in time. Like, he's been doing it since the dawn of creation. We know this, first from the Bible, which tells us that God created everything through his Word, like God's spoke creation into being, he communicated himself into the world. And so because of that, everything in creation, from mountains and skies and seas to broccoli stalks, and bumblebees, and you and me, somehow reflects something of him. You could say, I guess that everything God created speaks in some way of God. So, the world, all of creation, is like a constant act of communication from God to us.

But God's communication in time didn't end with creation. As time went on, he also communicated directly with human beings. So, God walked in the garden with Adam and Eve. God called out to Noah and told him a storm was coming. God made a covenant with Abraham. He met with Moses on a mountaintop. And then

he spoke to David and all of Israel through his prophets. Then, to make sure we all knew what he'd been saying to those people, he inspired men to write down those conversations and much of what he wanted humanity to know about himself.

But because God is communication, even that wasn't enough, God took his communication to humanity to a whole new level, when the Word of God took on flesh, like was born of a woman, and walked among us. In Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Son of Man, God revealed himself completely and perfectly to the world. In Jesus, God doesn't just tell us who he was, he showed us, like he showed us who he is, by teaching us and forgiving us and healing us and dying on a cross for us. And by doing all that, he also showed us the lives of love and mercy and service and virtue and sacrifice, that he wants us to lead. But there's more. Even after Jesus returned to the father, God kept communicating to us, he left us with the church, and the sacraments and martyrs and saints, all who in different ways have continued to make the voice of God known in the world.

All of which is to say, is that God is always communicating, like, in time and eternity. He never stops, like, he never goes silent. God can't not communicate, it's who he is. But it doesn't always feel that way. For each of us, there are times in our walk with God where we hear his word loud and clear. Like, you know, scripture passages jumped out at us and it feels like God has had some prophet, write those words down just for us. We know when we hear it, that God is speaking to us. But it's not always just words that we know, during some of those seasons, like consolations flood our hearts and prayer, and we hear God in our souls, assuring us of his love and directing our actions. God is just, sometimes, so clearly and obviously there. And sometimes he's not. Sometimes we pray and pray and all we hear is silence. Like we look for consolations where we used to find them, in adoration or prayer or the sacraments, but no consolation comes. Sometimes even scripture doesn't come alive anymore. And we start to wonder if God has forgotten us, or if he's really there at all.

No matter how silent God seems though, he's always there, okay? He could never forget you. And these seasons of quiet are normal, you know. Every disciple of Jesus is going to experience them at least once and usually many times. I should note, when God seems silent, sometimes it's possible that the issue isn't on God's end but on ours. It's possible that it's us who've tuned him out, you know, we don't want to hear what he has to say, because it doesn't line up with what we want to hear. There are, right now, a lot of people running around this world with their hands over their ears, shutting out any and all of the things God is trying to say to them. But, if you are participating in this retreat, I'm willing to hazard a guess that you're not doing that.

So why does God seemingly go silent on us? Like even when we're being faithful, why does it sometimes seem like God's busy elsewhere? And what are we supposed to do when that happens? Well, the saints and church doctors and people who are much wiser than I am, have talked about a few of those reasons. And what they boil down to, is that those periods of quiet are times when God is helping us. He's helping us grow in faith and spiritual maturity. You see, God, a loving God, does not want us to become spiritual consolation junkies, you know, always needing a fix of comfort or assurance or always needing your constant direction about what to do and where we go in life. Instead, God wants to have us - he wants us to have a mature faith, that can withstand trials and suffering and persecution. He also wants us to exercise wisdom and prudence and justice and fortitude.

Basically, God wants us to put our knowledge of him and his ways to work with in the world, right? He wants us to do what all that communication has been forming us to do. Remember, God is a father, and a good father never wants to buy his child's affection with toys and treats. A good father wants the child to love the father as he is. Like not for what he gives him. A good father also wants his child to make good decisions, right? To exercise discernment, and integrate all that the father has taught him into his life on his own accord. No dad or mom, works either way - no parent wants to have to always be there, like hounding his child's every move, every day of their life, telling them when to go to bed and when to eat and when to go to the bathroom. If the parent has to do that with their child, they have failed as a parent.

And so, because of that, because of what God wants us to learn and how he wants us to mature, he gives us spiritual dry spells, where our faith and hope in him are stretched and tested and strengthened. God also gives us seasons, where choices are put before us where there is not a clear and obvious direction from him. And so we have to integrate, all that we know and believe into making those choices. But, but, if we persevere during those seasons, like if we hold fast to him and what we know to be true, these are going to turn out to be some of the most fruitful seasons of our life. Like these are the seasons that make us saints. They are a gift, even though they don't always feel much like it at the time.

So, that brings us to the question: how do we endure, welcome, receive these gifts? Like, what do we do when God seems to go silent? First, we always have to be honest with ourselves and make sure that we, you know, us are not the problem, that we are not stubbornly clinging to some sin or bad habit. We have to ask ourselves, if God is talking to us plenty, and it's us who are not doing the listening? If the answer to that question is no, it's not us, then we have to practice relying on what we know to be true, about God and about the sanctifying grace that dwells

within us. Like Israel of old, we can recall all of the good gifts that God has given us. Like all the good, he's brought out of our struggles or our suffering in the past, and all the ways he has revealed himself to us at other points in our life.

Actually, I have a prayer that I pray when I'm really struggling, and I call it the Litany of Trust. It's not a complicated litany, you don't have to memorize anything, it's just me going over all the blessings God has given me and thanking him for that. So, I name them one by one, like, friends by name, things I love by name, Brussels sprouts, whatever it is, and after each one, I say, "Thank You, Lord." Doing something like that, that might help you, too.

Another important thing to do, during these seasons of silence is to keep talking to God. Like don't stop praying or going to mass or sharing your heart with the Lord, just because you're not hearing him clearly right this very second. God is always listening to you. He is always looking on you with love, and he always wants to hear what you have to say. So even if he's not talking back, keep saying it.

Third. Remember that God, he's never really silent. You might not be hearing his word in your heart, but he is always speaking to us through his word, in sacred scripture, and in the church's liturgy and in the teaching authority of the church and in his saints and in creation. If you are struggling or in doubt, rely on all the ways God has already made his will clear. God, remember he is communication, so he has given us an overabundance of guidance, and the ability to use common sense to apply that guidance to our situation. Again, he's a father, and so he expects us to use both when we're making decisions.

It's also important to remember, if you're struggling to make a decision, and you're not sure what direction God wants you to go, remember that God doesn't just speak to us through clear words. He also speaks to us through our desires and our opportunities. Sometimes God uses our hearts and our interests to help us, show us, you know, show which direction he wants us to go. So as long as your heart is telling you to do something, that is in line with God's clear teaching and scripture and tradition; all right so, if it's telling you to do something that contradicts the moral law, that it's not God's direction, but if it's in line with the moral law, then it's okay to listen to it. It's okay to stay put and wait, if that's what it says to do, or move forward in a different direction if doors are opening that way.

What I do know is that if we step out in faith, we can trust that God is going to direct our steps. He might not be super chatty in how he gives that direction, but he will give it one way or another. God will use whatever we're doing in faith to lead us to him and that's what matters. God does not expect us to be mind-readers,

okay? And guess his will. He expects us to be faithful and trust that he's there and he is helping us even when he seems silent.

In every marriage, in every friendship in every relationship, there are going to be times of conversation and there are going to be times of silence. Like there are going to be times where we talk and we listen to one another, and there will be times when we just look at one another, or where we just walk alongside each other. Those times of silence, of looking, of walking side by side, they're not less intimate than the times we're talking. They are more intimate. They are often where the truth about the other and the truth about the relationship is revealed. We can learn in all these relationships, more about ourselves and about our feelings for another in quiet, than we often can anywhere else. This isn't less to our relationship with God. It's more true.

When God is silent, he is still there. He is still looking at us, he is still loving us. And the question is not, "What is he going to do?" The question is, "What will we do?" Do we love God enough and trust him enough to sit with in the dark and the quiet? Do we really want him? Or do we just want the consolations he gives us? Have we been listening to him? And learning from him while he has been communicating, so that our mind is growing ever more conformed to his? Or is it the world's voice? Is that the one we want to listen to?

That, that's what we discover in the silence. We discover our faith. We discover our love. We discover our hearts and our wills and where they really are. And we discover that if we hold fast to what we know and what we believe, like if we hold fast to God, even when we can't hear him, God is going to bless us. If we hold fast to God in the silence, he will strengthen our faith and our love so that when he speaks again, his Word is going to touch us in a whole new way.

Don't fear the silence. You don't take it as a sign that God has forgotten you. Because he hasn't, he couldn't. He couldn't if he wanted to. Instead, welcome the silence as a sign of God's confidence in you. As a sign that you are ready for more. More faith. More love. And more intimacy with him. Let's pray. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. *Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for your word. Thank you for talking to us and consoling us and directing us in a million ways that we don't even realize where we're receiving direction from. Help Lord, for our hearts to always be attuned to your heart, to always be open to what you have to say. Help us to respond in love, even in times of silence. Even in times of quiet. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*