

## Meditations for Deep Church

### The Absence and Presence of God

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#### Introduction

**Words:** The theme of these meditations is the absence and presence of God or more precisely how relationship with God necessarily involves both God's presence and His absence. The first meditation will focus on the Old Testament and explores how Israel's relationship with God can be seen as a dance that involves moments of both intimate closeness and withdrawal. The second meditation will invite you to consider the paradoxical dynamic whereby God is made present through his absence and made absent through His presence. This will be done through comparing the sculptures of Rachel Whiteread and the waxworks of Madam Tussauds. The third meditation draws our attention back to central drama of Christianity and reflects on Jesus' crucifixion and entombment as revelations of how God is absent and present to us in the midst of a sinful and suffering world.

These meditations are not a systematic overview of the rich and diverse theological theme of absence and presence. Instead, they are meant to be explorations, mining the theme, uncovering points for reflection and elliptical or indirect in how each meditation relates to the other.

At the end of each meditation there will be an invitation to reflect on a particular question or point. These are meant to be an aid to your thoughts and prayers but feel free to go in other directions.

**Pictures:** There are some images relating to the text. Some of these will be referred to directly in the meditations, others are meant to complement what is being said but will not be referred to or discussed. Again, they are there to be enjoyed and to serve your prayers and reflections.

## 1. Meditation One: A dance of withdrawal & intimacy

One way to read the Old Testament is as a dance, albeit an at times painful and difficult dance, between God or Yahweh and his chosen people, Israel. The opening moves of this dance are set out in Genesis.



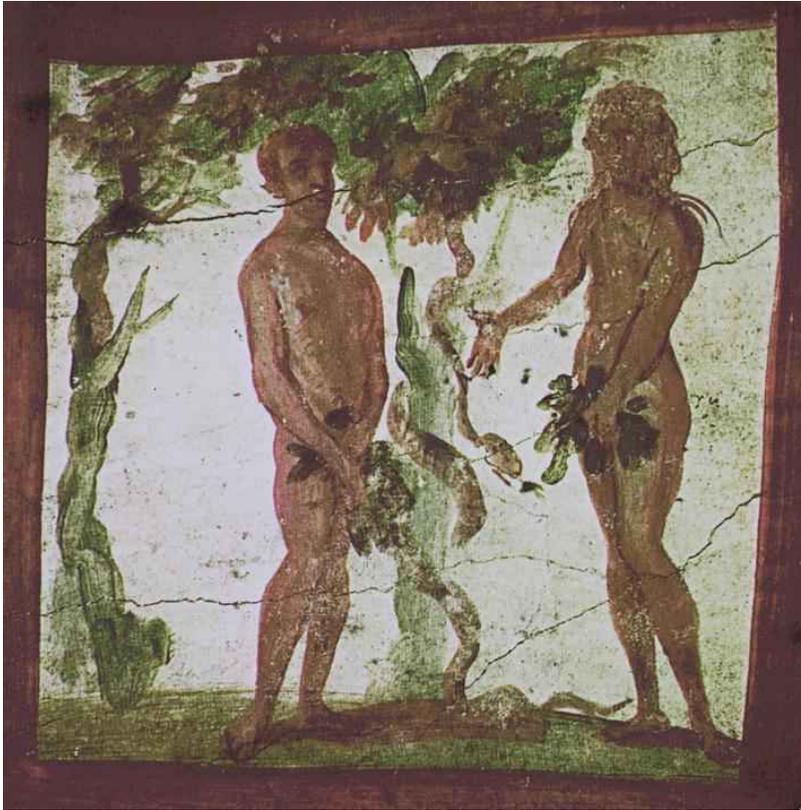
### **(Marc Chagall's *Paradise*)**

We are given several poignantly beautiful pictures of intimacy between God and humans and between men and women. Such was the intimacy of Adam and Eve that as Genesis 2 vs. 25 puts it: *'the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.'* They were utterly vulnerable before each other and before God and were without fear or guilt or shame or anxiety or any of those things we experience in our relations with each other and with God. And so they could be freely present to each other. Genesis here describes for us what it means to enter fully into the Sabbath: it is to be at rest with each other and with God, it is to

enjoy relations that are free from competitive rivalry, free from striving to be understood or listened to, free from wrong expectations or disappointment, free from all that cuts us off from or binds us into others in destructive ways.

But, as we all know, into this Sabbath moment comes mistrust, pride and envy so that Adam and Eve seek to cover their nakedness and in withdrawing from God they simultaneously withdraw from each other: (Gen 3.8-9)

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?'



**(Adam & Eve, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Fresco. Catacomb of St Piretro and St. Marcellino, Rome)**

This question still rings in our ears. For God's question 'Where are you?' is addressed directly to us. In this question - 'Where are you in relation to God? - so many other questions abound: What are you hiding from and what are you hiding from others? What are you afraid of? How are you guarding against the intrusion of others into

your vulnerabilities? What defence mechanisms have you established that keep you from God and those around you? What are you looking for?

In exploring the theme of absence and presence I am really trying to help us answer this most profound and revealing question: 'Where are you?'

And in seeking to answer this question we have to understand how God is both absent and present to us and how we make ourselves absent and present to God.

But let us return to Genesis. God responds to the withdrawal of Adam and Eve by withdrawing from them: the place of Sabbath is no longer accessible to them. This rupture of relations takes the form of being cast out of the Eden, yet God does not abandon them, despite their withdrawal.

We see played out through the rest of the Old Testament this dance of withdrawal and intimacy. First man withdraws and so God withdraws his presence in response, giving freedom to disobey, then God tries to re-establish intimacy and man responds by either drawing close or turning away. This dance is the history of salvation, a history that involves a movement up and down, of ascent and descent, as we swing in and out of the presence of God.

in Noah, and creation gathered around him in the animals and birds, God draws man above the waters of chaos that overwhelm sinful humanity. Yet from Mount Ararat we descend until we reach Babel and the attempt by humans to force their way into God's presence. At which point, beginning with Abraham and Sarah, God raises up a particular people who he will be present to, and through whom, he will be present

to all nations. And after blessing Abraham and Sarah he descends to Sodom and Gomorrah and destroys them. In contrast to the lawlessness of Sodom and Gomorrah and the oppression and tyranny of Egypt, God liberates his chosen people in order that they may live a free and well ordered pattern of life, a life that bears faithful witness to God's created order, that is to show how humans can be present to each other and present to God in creative and life giving ways.

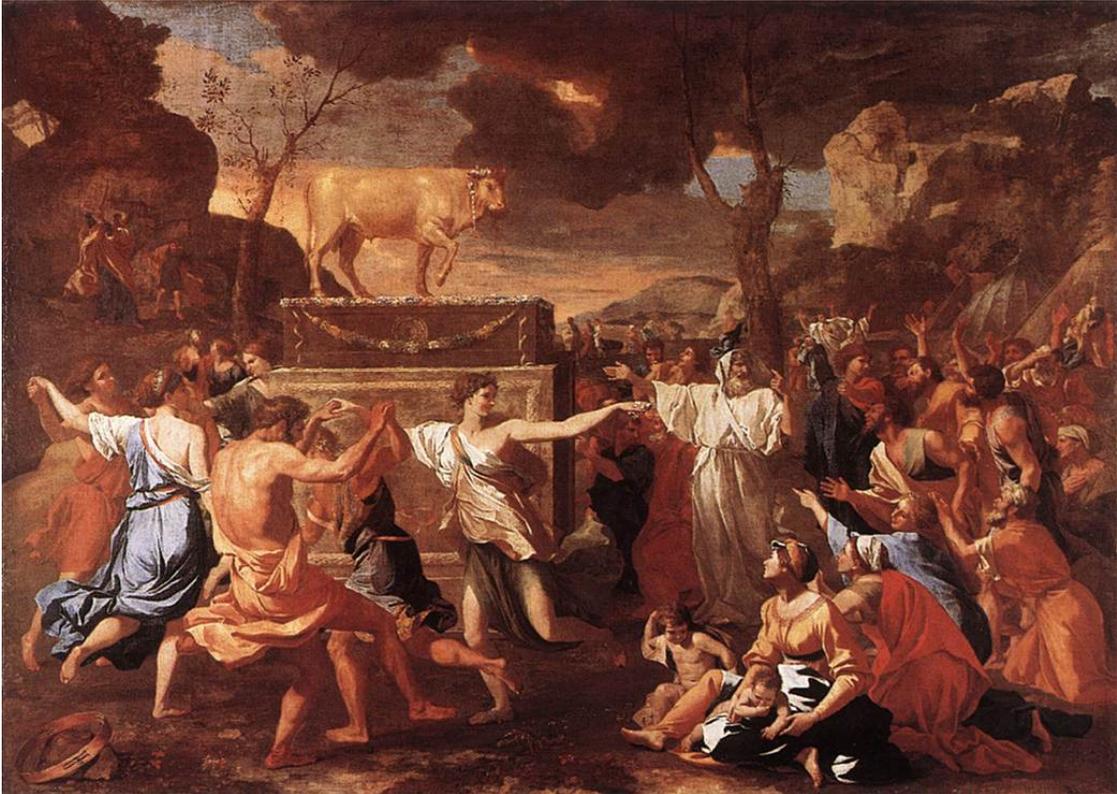


So after liberating the children of Israel from Egypt, God draws Moses up on to Mt Sinai and lays out for him this pattern of life in the ten commandments (which we all know what that looks like from Cecil B DeMille's Biblical epic *The Ten Commandments!*).

But in being drawn into God's presence, Moses is drawn away from the people. They feel bereft and abandoned.. In their immaturity, they cannot wait, they cannot cope with absence, they feel directionless, and in their impatience demand a false resolution to their sense of absence.

As Exodus 32 puts it:

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'



**Nicholas Poussin, *The Adoration of the Golden Calf*, 1634**

How like us. In our insecurity and impatience, in our quick judgements on those who have helped us, but now seem absent or distant, we rush to fill that space with false gods and false leaders, gods we can control and leaders we can manipulate, but who are not interested in our freedom or welfare, but only in keeping us happy so they can enjoy their privileges.



So Moses descends to find the people worshipping a Golden Calf, forcing Moses to ascend once more in order to plead on behalf of the people for mercy (Ex 19-33).

And in the process of pleading for mercy Moses enjoys an extraordinary intimacy of God's presence (Ex. 33) (above is Charlton Heston doing intimacy with God and here is a slightly different take:



**Marc Chagall, *Moses Receiving the Tables of the Law*, 1960-66**

Chagall draws our attention to the illumination and glory of God – Moses is caught up in the brilliant yellow, transfiguring divine light.



This 16<sup>th</sup> etching focuses on the intimacy of Exodus 33.11 when we are told that God spoke face to face with Moses – an intimacy that prefigures a time when, as 1 Corinthians 13 puts it, we shall all see God face to face. Moses is privileged to see God, yet, as both the etching and Chagall make clear, he only glimpses a small fraction of God. There is always more to God than we can

comprehend. For in seeing God, we realise how much broader, higher, and bigger is God compared to what we can see. As God reveals himself, we discover, like Moses, how much of God is also veiled from us. For every disclosure of God is

simultaneously an act of obscuring. This is the over-abundance of God, God's excess, there is simply too much of God for us to grasp.

Through the divine-human interaction of Moses and God the covenant is renewed. Moses receives the promise, repeated many times after, that: *'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'* (Ex. 33.14) And so that initial intimacy of presence and Sabbath rest experienced in Eden is promised to be renewed. And not only renewed but its creative potential fulfilled – for remember, Eden was a beginning not an ending. It looked forward to greater things to come.

And with the renewal of this promise the stage is set for that continuing movement of ascent and descent, marked each year in the Tabernacle on Mount Zion when the high priest ascended to God's presence, bearing the sins of the people, and then descended in order to bless them. And throughout the Old Testament the Spirit of God raises up Prophets to speak for God and casts down those impostors, whether in Israel or among the nations, who would falsely claim to be the bearers of God's presence.

But we must also remember that, after the Fall, the terror of God's absence is also felt. In the Psalms of Lament, in Job, in Jeremiah, in Lamentations and Ezekial we hear that cry of dereliction given voice in Psalm 22:

*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer me; and by night, but find no rest.*

And so it goes until the promised one, Emmanuel, the true bearer of God's presence, descends. But before the true Son can ascend bearing our humanity into communion with God he endures that cruel parody of the Ascension, when men, on a blood soaked hill, on a man-made tree, force Jesus Christ heavenward on the Cross.

**Reflection point:** Where are you in relation to God?

As we listen to the music I invite you to reflect on where you are in relation to God. There are a number of stories you can use to do this. If you would like to, close your eyes and consider the following:

- Are you like Adam and Eve: you once enjoyed intimacy with God but now feel estranged and withdrawn from God's presence?
- Are you, like Noah, someone who feels caught up in the chaos and tumult of life, surrounded by a hostile world, and you know God has saved you, but, amidst the storm of your present circumstances, you find it hard to trust that the storm will end and the waters subside.
- Are you like Abraham and Sarah, enjoying God's presence with you, but unsure what it means for your future, and struggling to make sense of God's call upon your life?

- Are you like Israel in the wilderness, life feels hard and dry, and God seems distant to you, and your old pattern of life seems safer and better than the life of faith?
- Or are you like Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai frustrated with what God is doing, impatient for results and in your impatience are you turning to false comforts, are you filling your life with false gods and thereby withdrawing from God?
- Or are you like Moses upon the Mount Sinai, caught up in the ecstasy of God's presence and yet aware of how much more there is to God, that you are only catching a glimpse of who God is.

And in reflecting on where you are in relation to God, think about where God is in relation to you. If you have a pen, you might like to write down your thoughts or draw a picture or diagram that symbolizes where you are in relation to God and where God is in relation to you. Then pray for yourself and where you are at with God.