

SIGNS OF GOD'S PRESENCE

Jeremiah. Always before me, prophet who speaks personally to my heart. You, Jeremiah, in your vocation, make my own vocation real. Your vocation is the prototype of every vocation. Without you, I would give up and say it is foolish to serve God this way. But because of you, I know I was called before I was born, that God cares enough to send even you, even me, to be God's mouth and broken body. And we listen because God speaks through the most improbable instruments. They who seem to be God's instruments, but really aren't, speak words that last only for their own lifetimes because they are their own mouthpieces and the message dies when they do. They who speak for God live forever in God's Word, which outlives the instrument of its speaking.

✱ The healing power of God. Rarely do we realize the healing power that is going on inside us. We do not notice it because we mistake it for something else—we mistake it for an evil. If we have learned to enter into prayer, then we see with new eyes and hear with new ears. And what we perceive is that what we previously thought was surely some scourge of Satan in our lives is in fact the healing hand of God leading us through the fire of suffering in order to purify and heal what only suffering *can* heal.

We never love the suffering, and it is not lessened by our new consciousness, but our *faith* is strengthened because we begin to see connections and patterns in our lives. We see that each new pain—each new difficulty—leads us to a new level of maturity and healthy dependence on the God who loves us. Why this growth must come through suffering is a mystery, but we know that the mystery is somehow inseparably linked with the cross of Christ. Only one who has accepted the reality of the cross and its redemptive power can ever accept the fact that suffering is growth, that paralysis is movement on another level. Only in the mystery of the cross are T.S. Eliot's lines intelligible: "Suffering is action and action is suffering."

What more can we say of suffering? How do we explain, for example, the terrible pain and suffering some bear in this life though they pray for healing, and no healing comes? To me there is something inscrutable about physical pain and suffering. We know that in the Gospels Jesus wants to heal, and we have many instances of Jesus healing physical illness. In fact, Jesus always heals those who are brought to him for healing.

But what about those who were not brought to Jesus? What about those who were not healed during Jesus's lifetime though he walked among them? Is it only that they were weak of faith, those of whom Jesus said are of little faith? Or was it, is it, God's choice that some suffer and some don't? Does God, then, choose evil for some? That cannot be, for God is all good and all loving. And so the problem of suffering and pain and illness and how God fits into it all is again inscrutable.

One can say that illness is built into the very essence of reality as we know it. What is born and dies experiences pain and

illness as a part of what it means to be a living being on this earth. But then does God create an imperfect world, or did something we did or do make it so? Again, we go round and round with difficult questions, and the only answer seems to be Jesus, God's Son, who suffers and dies like we do. It is as if he says to us, "There is no answer, there is only this: my own willingness to suffer with you and as one of you."

When we suffer, then, we know it is a mystery why it should be so. But because of Jesus, when we are suffering or dying, we also hear Jesus's invitation to ask for healing; and if a cure is not forthcoming, we join with Jesus in his suffering and dying, certain that if we suffer and die in him, we will rise with him. That, it seems to me, is where we place our faith, even when we or those whom we love are not healed.

✱ Poetry works too powerfully on me to submit myself lightly to any poet. It is like friendship. I have to trust before I can love. Most people I know start with love. I love poetry as an abstraction, but individual poems grow on me as I learn to trust the poet through each poem, for the poem is the poet and what is said is who is saying it. Some sayings are unreliable. I look for the transcendent in the particular. Particulars in themselves tend to be self-serving and convoluted. Only the transcendent, the metaphysical, frees the particular concrete experience from the poet's own introversion.

✱ The real signs of our faith are often the men and women we know. Some are evident signs of faith, hope and charity, and others are signs of contradiction. It is the latter people who disturb us and make us question whether we are seeing things

aright. Those who are hostile and aggressive and speak like self-righteous prophets make us wonder if they are real. The meek and humble somehow beguile us by their gentleness and littleness.

✱ Trying to write something every day is like trying to pray every day: You have to discipline yourself because there are always more “important” or fun things to do. But if you steel yourself to set time aside, things begin to happen while you write or pray. Flannery O’ Connor once said, “Every morning between nine and twelve, I go to my room and sit before a piece of paper. Many times I just sit for three hours with no ideas coming to me. But I know one thing: If an idea does come between nine and twelve, I am there ready for it.” That quote is one of the most perfect descriptions of what happens in prayer.

For me, prayer and writing often go together. But even if they don’t for someone else, the process of the two is much the same. I must be willing to sit before a blank piece of paper, as it were, if I am ever going to learn to pray. Time for staring and time for waiting. Patience to wait for God to act, for God to speak. If I expect something tangible to happen inside me every time I pray, then my prayer has become superstition or magic. Uttering certain formulae does not make God appear like some genie. If this were the case, God would not be God, but some puppet of ours. And *God is the Lord, God is God.*

Therefore, I make myself available to God and I pray. God will come when God will come if I persevere in prayer, just as the idea comes and “happens” on the paper if I persevere in writing. Inspiration comes while I am in the process of putting

words on paper, and God comes while I am involved in that process called prayer.

I write even when I am tired. It reminds me to pray even when I'm tired. With both writing and prayer, there is something to show afterward. Not much, usually, but enough to make me glad I did it, if only because God is my witness.