

When Nothing is Something (Ps. 27.1, 4-9)
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Do you remember that scene from the movie *Cool Hand Luke*? It was a card-playing scene where a group of prison inmates gathered around a table. A few of them betted and bluffed while the rest leaned on their bunks or stood over the table watching the game. The inmates were dressed in white undershirts and denim work pants; some wiped sweat from their brows after the day's work. At the table, the card players swilled ginger ale from the bottle as they slowly raised the stakes.

I don't really know anything about poker, but a knowledge of the rules isn't required to appreciate the scene. What is clear as we watch is that each player is gradually bowing out, folding as the pot gets richer and richer. Finally, there are only two players left. One is a nervous looking middle-aged prisoner who has been seeing his opponent's dollar raises until he finally runs out of money and no one will lend him any more. The other is a young Paul Newman, his blue eyes never quite making contact as he gazes serenely downward, dropping dollar after dollar into the pot. As the tension rises, Newman sits unaffected, the trace of a smile almost visible on his lips. Finally, when the other player folds and the pot goes to Newman's character, one of the inmates reaches for his cards to see the winning hand. As he lays them on the table, the group roars with laughter. Newman had one face card and nothing else. "A handful of nothing," the inmate whoops. "He beat you with nothing!" Then the scene cuts to Newman, who reaches for another bottle of ginger ale, his eyes still turned strangely downward as he grins. "Yeah, well," he says, "sometimes nothing can be a real cool hand."

I don't think that the screenwriters of that 1967 film had liberal faith in mind when they wrote the line. I think they probably had a movie star in mind, someone like Paul Newman, who could mutter the words as coolly as they imagined and make them ring so memorably in our ears. But what has rung most true for me is the philosophy at the heart of the quip. In its negative affirmation, that sometimes nothing can be a real cool thing, it seems to get right to the heart of liberal faith. Or perhaps just a kind of mystical faith. It is a faith that begins in negation and then moves on from there; a faith that starts, in a sense, with nothing, and then sets out in search of something.

Deep within our Christian tradition lies a theological thread known as apophatic or “negative” theology.¹ According to the practice of apophatic theologians, one begins theological work by finding things to which we need to say no. Working primarily with the idea of God, apophatic thinkers began by saying what, precisely, God was not. It was an interesting exercise for people with deep religious commitments, but they devoted a great deal of time and attention to pointing out what God's names were not, what God's attributes could not be, how God would not act, and so on. And while we may smile for a moment as we imagine theologians of centuries past arguing and developing these negatives, we may also see more than a bit of ourselves in their work. For who among us hasn't taken the negative step and begun to line out our own identity by something we do not believe?

Compared to many of you, I remain a relative novice at this faith business. I've been at it only thirty-nine years now. But in even my limited experience, as a student, as a minister, as a partner, parent and aspiring follower of the rabbi, I have heard over and

¹ See Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 130-158.

over again the stories of negative theology. Growing up, my earliest religious lesson, one to which I still cling, was that whatever God is, God is love. That was an undoubtedly positive lesson, but it began in me a series of negative steps. For whatever was not love, I reasoned, as I backed my way down the path of apophatic faith, was not God. In seminary it was no different. All of the big questions of Christian faith were deconstructed, their pieces carefully examined. Did the resurrection have to be literal? Did God have to be a being of a sort envisioned by ancient myths and legends? Did one have to choose between religious commitments and scientific truths? Among my own group of liberal classmates, the answer to each of these questions, a resounding negation in every case, actually opened up surprisingly rich pathways of exploration; more than fifteen years later our conversations are as vibrant as ever, and our faith more relevant than we could have known or suspected. And ministry, of course, has taught me to expect and listen for the important negative steps in the lives and stories of people. As a minister I have been privileged to walk with so many of you kindred spirits as we step away from the things that do not make sense to us and walk together in the direction of we don't always know what. Covenant folk are especially good at doing this; our church was born in reaction to something that was happening at another church, something to which our founders needed to say *no*. This *no* was the first step. We set out with no real cards to play, nothing much in our hand, save a small band of people deeply committed to the questions, and I think we have been learning ever since how cool that can be. Yet we are not the first or the only ones to do such a thing.

The old Hebrew poet of the psalms cannot rightly be called an apophatic theologian, but he probably can be called a mystic. And in his mysticism we find something of a

dual affirmation, something of the idea that his God is constituted of both positive and negative elements. We get a hint of this both/and in the lectionary's cutting of Psalm 27. In the first few verses, the psalmist sings out to the divine that he says is as a light to him and a saving presence. Expressing deep confidence in his God, the poet claims that God will shelter him in the day of trouble and set him always in a safe place. Yet in the last few verses, the same poet cries out to a God who seems to be hidden. The psalmist says that he is seeking the divine, desperately imploring his God not to hide or turn away or forsake him. It says, in essence, "I have faith in you. I am seeking you. But do not hide from me." According to Hebrew scholar Sam Balentine, such a sentiment was not peripheral to the ancient Hebrews.² Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the close reader finds a thread of the theme of God's absence to counterbalance the notion of God's presence. According to Balentine, this absent God does not undermine faith; rather, the absent God stretches faith. The God who cannot be found invites the people along the path of searching. As with many of us, it may not have been the path they first imagined nor may it be a comfortable or a certain way. But the hidden idea may be like the negative idea, moving us away from what we do not affirm and toward new commitments that we hadn't imagined before. Which brings us to the real work of apophatic theology.

It seems to me that what the negative theologians were after was the mystery that lay beneath all of the words and behind all of the concepts. Perhaps what they were trying to do was preserve a space for the divine that hadn't been hardened into static attributes and known definitions. In all of their negations, they were implicitly affirming that the God

² Samuel E. Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 171-172. For a broader development of the theme of God's eclipse in Hebrew thought see Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Hidden Face of God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

that might withstand the scrutiny was wilder, more free, and perhaps even more real than the God that could be spoken of with casual ease. They were deep lovers of God, though they really weren't sure they could say what God was. And that reminds me of us.

For we gather in this place week after week to share what we don't know and what we wouldn't say even as we search our experience and struggle to name what we do hold to be sacred. Sometimes, when compared with other, more certain, ways of being religious, it may seem like we've got nothing in our hand, no cards to play that will save us. But if Paul Newman is any guide. Or the old Hebrew poet. Or the journey itself, so often begun with the step of negation, then perhaps nothing can be a really cool hand. At least for those who can see it as such. And hear in it the call to keep going, find in it the faith to keep asking, in the hope that out of nothing something comes. Something still and small and true.

May this be so with us.