

I hear no voice

***Prayers for Children* and the apophatic tradition**

by [Timothy Jones](#) in the [December 2022](#) issue



(Century illustration)

Going through some belongings the other day, I came across a book from my childhood that has accompanied me through decades of moves.

Leafing through *Prayers for Children* struck me as it always does for the visuals on display: the dreamy-soft focus to Eloise Wilkin's colored pencil and watercolor illustrations, the scenes of sentimental rural calm and homey loveliness, the chubby-cheeked children.

As many times before, something in me went still as soon as I opened the frayed edges of the cardboard cover. But I realized this time how the Little Golden Book's well-thumbed pages also hint at the ways in which prayer can leave us dry and casting about for adequate words.

In one scene, Wilkin paints children running under majestic clouds that are dispersing from a darkened sky. While most of the pictures are saturated with light, and many of the prayers focus on child-friendly assurances about God, one entry, the anonymous "Evening Hymn," hints at what anyone might *not* see or grasp, how prayers may stall for a moment in a thundering silence:

I hear no voice, I feel no touch,
I see no glory bright;
But yet I know that God is near,
In darkness as in light.

These words capture a yearning for connection that follows us through life. They suggest what faithfulness looks like when prayer seems hard. Even as we mature, we get frustrated with words at times, like a child might. Our days are weathered and uncertain, and we don't always have glib, ready language for what we feel and experience. We love a God we know as invisible and at times inscrutable. Our prayers in reply may tarry or not always flow. They may even seem like an exercise in fumbling, a spasm of catchphrases and half-remembered lines, little more than an inchoate ache.

"Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden," writes T. S. Eliot. How do we keep at it when words slump under the weight of our longings? Can something so slight and whispered as a phrase help us make living contact? How can what we say do justice to the intransigence of suffering? Or hold fast under the intensity of true intimacy? Even a child's primer can't get away from such wrestling.

There's a good reason that prayer sometimes seems hard and words seem inadequate and inelegant. The apophatic tradition in Christian spirituality stresses how rarely our analogies approximate the inestimable, how faintly our fragile words allow us to express the depths—or heights. It reminds us that human categories can never capture a God who eludes by sheer glory our verbal attempts. There's even a name for such prayers.

The word *apophatic* has ancient Greek roots meaning “negative” or “moving away from”—from images, words, or attempts to pin down. Such sternness might seem off-putting. I used to see the apophatic stream as a warning about the limits of language, a gloomy reminder of what can’t be said or prayed or described.

But lately I see how it’s freeing. It gives us permission not to always have the words. To not *have to* have the words. We are taught through this approach not to fret when we don’t know what to say in the presence of the Eternal. It’s okay to fumble around. Considering how far God is beyond our fathoming, there’s something right about such a recognition. As any green pastor or caregiver tempted to rush in with advice or easy answers will learn, we say some things best by not saying, or at least not over-saying.

“Tell all the truth but tell it slant,” says Emily Dickinson. Whatever else she means by this, God will not be possessed by even our supposed flights of eloquence. “Success in Circuit lies,” Dickinson suggests, because language grows richer more through patient sitting by and unforced looking at rather than overconfident blabbing.

In the apophatic tradition we let ourselves live some days with a sanctified bafflement. We stay open to new insights when we recognize the limits of inherited categories. We move beyond a Jesus who is, as Rowan Williams puts it, “a prisoner to our current thoughts and experiences.” We remember that talkativeness may break the spell of communion or betray the ache of a person lamenting tragedy. So we need not be troubled when our words sputter. A willingness to stammer or even go wordless in the presence of the Divine can be a healthy spiritual practice.

By itself, however, apophasis leaves us empty of any expectant connection. We are creatures of language, and we need it. So we hunt for images for what we want to say. We cast about for handles or patterns for how to convey what’s on our minds and hearts. We turn to a book of prayers.

Here the cataphatic tradition gives us complement and contrast to the apophatic. It plants some reminders in our field of vision that inspire our imagination, that jump-start our uttered responses to what God is about, that help us even to know what God is like. Cataphasis stays on the lookout for images that enlarge our faltering faith or help us better utter our praise. It accents what we can say or pray. While analogies for the Trinity like water taking three forms (ice, liquid, gas) are woefully

simplistic (and mechanistic), there is a place for the concrete as we wrestle with relating to the invisible and intangible.

Indeed, according to the biblical tradition we have no choice. Images such as God as rock, shield, or fortress move words beyond the vague to the visceral. They focus our praying; they create a climate that helps us make connection. Scripture abounds in images that awaken an expectation for relationship. Like another of the prayers in my children's book:

Jesus, tender Shepherd, hear me;
Bless Thy little lamb tonight;
Through the darkness be Thou near me,
Watch my sleep till morning light.

The Bible's characters even reach for anthropomorphic analogies, something downright daring for a people determined not to reduce Israel's God to graven images. We witness intimate names applied exuberantly to God: Son, Spouse, even Lover. We are bold to speak to a heavenly Father, to a God Jesus likens to a maternal hen who gathers her chicks under her protective wings. There are nicknames (like Abba) that stir something in us, that draw out our continued bids to commune and ask, that plunge us into the realm of the relational.

Many of our saints knew this. Julian of Norwich's writing is an immersion in vivid images: the everyday things you would find in a home or on a walk. A hazelnut, small enough to be held in a hand, comes with the assurance that God holds all things. Even more intimately, God "is our clothing that enwraps us and enfolds us . . . surrounding us out of tender love." Such language filled Julian's days of conversation with God, fed her intimacy with one she called our maker and "carer," our "unending joy and bliss."

In actually praying and reflecting, not only do our cataphatic glimpses shine, they come to reveal their dimness next to God's piercing light or galvanizing presence or loving-kindness. Our vision of God's handiwork in creating a gloriously variegated humankind gets stretched. We find a word or image to use in prayer, only to see how eventually it too cannot contain the fullness of glory. That experience need not be troubling, either.

Our two-year-old granddaughter Hazel insists on taking a turn saying grace at dinner. She clasps her small hands and offers a string of mumbling, murmuring sounds. Next to her seminary-schooled grandparents, is what she pours out any less meaningful? Her grab bag of proto-words and toddler dialect expresses a world of meanings.

However language matters as we begin to pray and as we mature, some days it falls away in the presence of an encounter beyond words, as *Prayers for Children* also reminded me recently.

The book's last spread shows the backs of a brother and sister, clad in jammies on a front porch, staring up into a dusky, twinkling expanse that somehow conveys a contemplative's awe-quieted joy.

Beneath the illustration, alluding to the star-spread expanse above the horizon, a prayer reads, "God watches o'er us all the day . . . And when the sun has left the skies, He watches with a million eyes."

Or better, God watches with *attentive* eyes. God sees with a loving gaze that invites us near, that lets our inadequate, antsy, sometimes even articulate phrases melt into a communion beyond telling.