

THE AWFUL SILENCE OF GOD

by Donald M. Stewart



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The Awful Silence of God

A two-person play for
Maundy Thursday or Good Friday

by Donald M. Stewart

CAST OF CHARACTERS

MARY

The mother of Jesus

PETER

One of Jesus' disciples

PRODUCTION NOTES

The Awful Silence of God is intended as a simple chancel drama for a Lenten Service, perhaps for Maundy Thursday or Good Friday.

It may be performed in the chancel without a set. Or, if a set is desired, it could be as simple as a freestanding door, constructed to appear to be made of rough planks. The frame (and flats extending to either side, if desired) could be constructed to look as if it were part of a mud brick building, typical of first century Israel. Also, if desired, a back scrim or mural could be painted to look like the skyline of first century Jerusalem, with the temple prominent in the background. Furnish some type of stand or simple table for Mary to place her torch upon.

Sound effects of a dog barking and rooster crowing add to the ambience, but they aren't crucial to the performance.

Although lighting instructions are included, the play may easily be performed without theatrical lighting effects.

The costumes would be suggestive of the dress worn by men and women of Jesus' time and place. A simple robe and sandals for Peter and a simple long dress and head shawl for Mary should be sufficient.

No props are needed, other than torches.

1 *PLACE: The back entrance to the home of MARY, mother of*
 2 *Jesus. It is typical of the working-class mud brick homes of*
 3 *first century Jerusalem.*

4 *TIME: Just before dawn on the eve of Passover, 33 A.D.*

5 *AT RISE: (Lights, if available, come up to dimly reveal the rear*
 6 *entrance to MARY's home. MARY, mother of Jesus, comes*
 7 *out carrying a torch that she puts in a stand and looks out*
 8 *into the darkness for a brief moment. She appears to be very*
 9 *anxious. A dog barking in the distance startles her, and she*
 10 *shivers as if with a chill and draws her shawl more tightly*
 11 *around herself. As she starts to go back inside, the dog barks*
 12 *again. She quickly turns back as PETER steps out of the*
 13 *shadows Stage Right and quickly comes up to her. As he steps*
 14 *into the light of the torch, MARY recognizes him*
 15 *immediately.)*

16 **MARY: Peter!** *(They embrace, but PETER is uneasy and pulls*
 17 *back out of the embrace.)*

18 **PETER: Mary ... Are you alone? Have the temple police**
 19 **been here?**

20 **MARY: No one has been here except James and John, who**
 21 **were here just before you came.**

22 **PETER: Good. I'm glad they are all right. Did — did they**
 23 **tell you what happened?**

24 **MARY: James told me that the temple police captured Jesus**
 25 **and that all of you were now hunted men with a price**
 26 **on your heads. They only stayed a few minutes because**
 27 **they said they had to go warn the others. Oh, Peter,**
 28 **how can this have happened?**

29 **PETER: It's even worse than they told you.**

30 **MARY: (Grabbing his arm) Oh no, Peter! Is Jesus all right?**
 31 **Did they hurt him?**

32 **PETER: I — well, he wasn't hurt when they captured him.**
 33 **Did James tell you we were betrayed?**

34 **MARY: Betrayed? No! Oh, Peter, who would do such a**
 35 **thing?**

1 **PETER:** It was Judas, of all people! I don't know what came
2 over him.

3 **MARY:** Judas? But he and Jesus were friends! They grew
4 up together. There were times when I felt Jesus was
5 closer to Judas than he was to his own brother, James
6 — at least when they were growing up. Jesus used to
7 tell Judas his plans, and together they would dream
8 their dreams of the kingdom of God. Oh, Peter, are you
9 sure it was Judas?

10 **PETER:** Mary, I was there, remember? There is no doubt it
11 was Judas. When we came down from the mountain,
12 Judas was standing in front of the temple police —
13 right beside the servant of the high priest. And no
14 sooner had he greeted Jesus than the police rushed up
15 and grabbed him. That must have been the signal. I
16 never heard so much cursing and shouting and noise.
17 You'd think they were capturing a murderer. They even
18 took him away in chains.

19 **MARY:** Did the others escape?

20 **PETER:** As far as I know — if you can call running off into
21 the night like common thieves escaping. (*PETER walks*
22 *a short distance away and looks around to make sure there*
23 *aren't any temple police following him. Then he turns back to*
24 *MARY.*)

25 **PETER:** Listen, Mary, I really can't stay. If they find me
26 here, you could be in a lot of trouble.

27 **MARY:** All right. But before you go, please ... tell me what
28 happened. I have to know.

29 **PETER:** (*Turns away and stares out into the darkness for a brief*
30 *moment.*) Mary, I'm so ashamed! When they captured
31 Jesus, a guard came up to me shouting, "There's one of
32 them!" I guess I just panicked because the next thing I
33 knew, I was running — just like the others. I ran ... and
34 ran ... and ran until the lights and sounds faded into
35 the blackness and silence of the night. I ran until I

1 couldn't run anymore — until I was totally exhausted.
2 And then I just fell into the first ditch I could find and
3 covered my head with my arms like a child.

4 **MARY:** (*Putting her hand on his arm*) But what else could you
5 do?

6 **PETER:** I don't know, but surely I should have done more
7 than run away. Mary, I betrayed him just as surely as
8 Judas betrayed him. I left him alone when he needed
9 me the most because ... I was afraid. I know it's no
10 excuse, but I didn't really understand what was
11 happening. Jesus even told us earlier tonight that he
12 would be betrayed, but none of us believed him.
13 Nobody except for Judas, and even he looked confused
14 when Jesus told him he was the one who would do it.
15 I guess I was naive enough to believe God wasn't going
16 to let this happen. But it did happen. And I still don't
17 understand it because ... it gets even worse. (*He stops*
18 *and turns away from MARY, looking out into the darkness.*)
19 I stayed hidden in that ditch for a long while and didn't
20 hear any sounds of pursuit. Finally I uncovered my
21 head and looked around. I saw no one. After my heart
22 stopped racing and I got my breath and strength back,
23 I decided I should find out what had happened to
24 him — to see if he was all right. It took all my courage,
25 but I forced myself to walk back to the temple. No one
26 was there, but I did see a small group of people milling
27 around in the courtyard of the home of Caiaphas, the
28 high priest. So I covered my head, hoping I wouldn't be
29 recognized, and I snuck into the back of the crowd and
30 asked some people what was happening. They said —

31 **MARY:** What? What did they say?

32 **PETER:** (*Turning to her*) Mary, they said that Caiaphas did
33 not keep Jesus, but turned him over to the Romans.

34 **MARY:** The Romans? Why? I thought it was just the priests
35 who were upset with Jesus because they felt he was

1 turning the people against them. I guess I did think
 2 they might try to arrest him because of what he did at
 3 the temple. But not like this! And why would they give
 4 him to the Romans?

5 PETER: I'm not sure, except that earlier today I was told —
 6 in fact, I think it was Judas who told me — that shortly
 7 after Jesus threw the money changers out of the
 8 temple, Pilate sent some people over to ask the priests
 9 what had happened.

10 MARY: But what he did at the temple wasn't directed
 11 against Rome. That was directed against the corrupt
 12 priesthood.

13 PETER: I know, I know. But — well, you know how Pilate
 14 likes to set examples. Somehow he was told that a
 15 revolutionary prophet was going to try to incite a riot
 16 during Passover. It's happened before — too many times.
 17 So Pilate did as only Pilate would do: He decided to
 18 crucify three people on the eve of Passover to scare off
 19 any such political demonstrators. *(Taking her hands)*
 20 Mary, you have to be brave. I was told that some kind
 21 of deal had been made by Caiaphas and that ... that
 22 Pilate
 23 was ... Oh, I'm so sorry, Mary, but I was told that Pilate
 24 was going to have Jesus crucified as one of the three.

25 MARY: *(She gasps as her hands fly up to her throat.)* Crucified?
 26 Jesus? Oh, Peter, you must be mistaken.

27 PETER: You don't know how much I wish I were. But I'm
 28 not. After I heard this, I screwed up my courage a little
 29 more and went over to the palace and talked to some of
 30 the servants there to see what else I could find out. I
 31 even lied and told them I didn't know who Jesus was,
 32 but was just curious as to what was going on. They said
 33 that Pilate had already decided to crucify him with the
 34 others. And Mary, I was — I was also told he's been
 35 scourged.

- 1 **MARY:** *(Holding onto the wall or door frame for support)* Oh, no!
- 2 **PETER:** The servant telling me this also said that during the
 3 scourging, Pilate's men mocked him by placing a crown
 4 of thorns on his head and calling him "King of the
 5 Jews." He said that Jesus would be crucified this
 6 morning as one claiming to be "King of the Jews."
- 7 **MARY:** *(Defeated, still holding on to the door frame)* He never
 8 claimed that title for himself. He always said he was just
 9 one of us.
- 10 **PETER:** I know. But this is what Caiaphas must have told
 11 Pilate. That is the only reason I know why Pilate would
 12 want to crucify him — unless it was just out of
 13 meanness. Don't forget that last year, after some soldier
 14 was assassinated and no one knew — or would tell —
 15 who did it, Pilate had his soldiers crucify about two
 16 dozen
 17 people — took them right off the street — just to let us
 18 know that none of us are safe from him if we don't
 19 cooperate.
- 20 **MARY:** *(Looks up as the full realization of what is happening hits*
 21 *her.)* Oh, Peter, they're really going to do it, aren't they?
 22 After they beat him up and torture him and ridicule him,
 23 they're going to ... they're ... *(A pause, then with a sob)* Oh,
 24 Peter, they're going to kill my son! *(Sobbing, she runs to*
 25 *PETER, who holds her as they both weep for a long moment.*
 26 *Then, all cried out, she pulls away from him.)* What can we
 27 do, Peter? There must be something we can do. Isn't
 28 there anyone we can talk to? What about that friendly
 29 rabbi that Jesus used to debate with? What's his name
 30 — Gamaliel? Can't you talk to him? Couldn't he help?
- 31 **PETER:** I don't think so, Mary. Now that Pilate has chosen
 32 his "examples," it's out of our hands. No Jew can
 33 intercede now. There's only God. But I don't think God
 34 is going to help him, either — at least not in the way we
 35 want. And I don't know what to do. I don't know what

1 to think. I don't know how God can just let this happen
 2 to someone who loved him so much and gave his whole
 3 life in serving him. I don't know how God can just ... let
 4 him die. (*The two of them stare bleakly out into the night for*
 5 *a long moment.*)

6 MARY: (*In a quiet voice*) Yesterday, before I came down here
 7 to Jerusalem, I visited the home of your mother-in-law.
 8 She was overjoyed to see me and told me to tell you that
 9 she and her household were doing just fine now, thanks
 10 to Jesus. She told me that meeting Jesus had been the
 11 most important event in her life. I said I knew just how
 12 she felt and that not a day went by that I didn't thank
 13 God for letting me give him birth. But now ... now I don't
 14 know. (*Speaking in a firmer, louder voice*) How many lives
 15 has Jesus touched, Peter? How many people has he
 16 healed? But for what? What has really changed? Rome
 17 still rules the world. The corrupt priesthood still rules
 18 the temple. The self-righteous, holier-than-thou legalistic
 19 Pharisees still lord it over the rest of us. And ordinary
 20 people like you and me are just as downtrodden and
 21 destitute and outcast as we were before. So, Peter, I ask
 22 you: Is it worth it? Is it worth it that my son must die a
 23 criminal's death on a cross so people can still be abusive
 24 and unjust to one another? Maybe Judas is not the one
 25 who betrayed Jesus after all. Maybe it was God who
 26 abandoned him.

27 PETER: Mary! You mustn't think such a thing.

28 MARY: (*Angry*) What else am I supposed to think? You said
 29 it yourself! My son is going to die for nothing, and more
 30 horribly than I even want to think about. (*After a beat*
 31 *and in a subdued voice*) The silence of God — Oh, Peter,
 32 this is harder to take than his anger. And this is an
 33 awful silence. (*Pause*) Maybe Job was right. We should
 34 just curse God and die. At least then we would know
 35 why we were dying.

1 **PETER:** Oh, don't say that, Mary. No matter what I just said,
 2 I don't believe that God will simply abandon Jesus. Deep
 3 down I could never believe that.

4 **MARY:** How can you know that?

5 **PETER:** I'm not sure how. I — I just have this feeling. God
 6 may allow Jesus to die — why, I don't know — but I feel
 7 in my heart he has not abandoned him. *(A short pause)*
 8 Did I tell you that several days ago Jesus told me he
 9 thought he was going to have to die? When he told me
 10 this, I told him straight out that God would never let
 11 such a thing happen. But he turned on me, his eyes
 12 flashing with anger. And he called me a Satan. A Satan!
 13 He said I was thinking just like everyone else in the
 14 world, and hadn't I learned anything from being with
 15 him? I never saw him so angry. And I was never so hurt
 16 in my life. He knew it, too, because later, when he
 17 calmed down, he came over to me and said that the most
 18 natural instinct in the world is self-preservation, but that
 19 sometimes what you are and how you live are much
 20 more important than saving yourself. And then he said
 21 something that I had forgotten until just a minute ago.
 22 He said that sometimes a person has to die in order to
 23 really live. *(After a beat)* Mary, I don't know how — or
 24 even if. But I do know this is what he believes, and,
 25 senseless as we may think his death on a cross to be, I
 26 have to believe in what he believes. Because I *do* believe
 27 in him. Even now. And if he's wrong, then my whole life
 28 is wrong. Maybe sometimes a person *does* have to die in
 29 order to really live. *(The lights have been slowly coming up.*
 30 **MARY** hugs herself and walks away from the house, looking
 31 into the distance. A rooster crows.)

32 **MARY:** *(Resigned)* Well, it's almost sunup. The day has begun.
 33 I guess we'll find out what is going to happen sooner
 34 than we want to, won't we? *(She goes over to PETER and*
 35 *puts her hand on his arm.)* I know you feel I would be



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