Before we had kids, my wife and I always looked down on those parents who marched around with their kids on a leash.

That was before Zach came into the picture.

Once Zach became mobile, keeping track of him became one of the most demanded duties of our lives. He is not one of those dear, sweet, timid children that hover around the feet of mom and dad.

He likes to bolt through crowds like a running back; run with foolhardy wanderlust down any old trail; and scramble down any escarpment to escape the ever vigilant eyes of his parents.

He especially likes to slip into the backrooms of department stores. If a door reads “Employees Only” Zach is all the more fascinated and determined to enter. Other favorites include: “Emergency Exit Only” and the all time favorite: “Alarm Will Sound When Opened.”

What truly amazed me as a parent was how unconcerned he was when disconnected to his parents. He would run to the other end of the store, where he would find himself alone and surrounded by strangers, and instead of expressing concern, he would seem truly at peace with himself.

Of course I would be most nonplussed and would pursue him like a hound dog.

So while I have never actually bought one of those so-called “Safety Harnesses” and leashed my toddler, I not only understand why a parent would do such a thing, but I now consider it to be a perfectly reasonable and responsible thing to do. It certainly seems preferable to chasing your child down screaming “Stop! You’d better stop before I get to three or you’ll be in time out.”

Once, Robin and I thought we would teach Zach a lesson. Under rather controlled circumstances, we hid from Zach, hoping that once he realized that he was alone—all alone—and that mom and dad were no longer behind him running to catch him, he’d have the fear of God put into him and stop all this nonsense. So we hid from him behind some columns while at the Memphis Zoo. At first he was unconcerned, but eventually when he called out for his mother and received no reply, then panic took hold, and he bolted around in a circle looking for and calling out for his mommy. He tripped and fell and skinned himself up a bit and we felt a tad responsible. However, while the
experiment seemed to work, it sadly had no long term effect. Even to this day the boy runs away the first opportunity he finds.

In our text this morning, we encounter one of the most profound mysteries of the Bible: the gradual disappearance of God. It seems as though, through the course of the Old Testament, God disappears or, at the very least, hides from man and womankind. We are the Lord’s wayward, errant children, all too eager to run as far as we can from the loving, motherly arms of our Creator. God’s response to this ubiquitous recalcitrance is to withdraw from the scene. Richard Elliot Freidman writes:

God disappears in the Bible. Both religious and nonreligious readers should find this impressive and intriguing, each for his or her own reasons. Speaking for myself, I find it astounding. The Bible begins, as nearly everybody knows, with a world in which God is actively and visibly involved, but it does not end that way. Gradually through the course of the Hebrew Bible, the deity appears less and less to humans, speaks less and less. Miracles, angels, and all other signs of divine presence become rarer and finally cease. In the last portions of the Hebrew Bible, God is not present in the well-known apparent ways of earlier books. Among God’s last words to Moses, the deity says, “I shall hide my face from them. I shall see what their end will be.” By the end of the story God does just that.

One explanation is that God’s hiddenness is both a punishment and a pedagogical tool. Just as Robin and I hid from Zach, so God hides from Israel in hopes of teaching Israel that she cannot live without her God. God chooses to withdraw. No longer is the Lord’s voice heard booming from the heavens. No longer does God display divine power before the nations of the world. God’s voice and mighty acts dry up and become nothing but bittersweet memories for the nation, reminders of a bygone age.

Both the Psalmist and the writer of Isaiah, however, press even further. Isaiah cries, “But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself, we transgressed.” The Psalmist writes, “O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers. You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.”

These are remarkable verses. Here, God’s absence is not simply a response to human sin, but also the cause of sin and misery. The biblical writers launch an indictment against the deity: “Lord, you have gone too far! You have abandoned us for too long! How can you continue to turn your face from us and ignore our cries for help? Lord, you must act now! Don’t let your servants die, ACT!”

This indictment of God, however, is not work of a skeptic seeking to dismiss the deity; it is a cry for help from the heart of a believer hoping to invoke the deity to response.
These laments are essentially intercessory prayers in which the people beg for salvation, restoration, response.

In our own lives, we too may experience this sense of God-forsakenness. We hear the stories of God’s wondrous and mighty acts, and we wonder why God seems so silent in our lives. Where is miracle and wonder in our world? Even the saintly among us may ponder such thoughts. Mother Teresa wrote: "Where I try to raise my thoughts to heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. Love -- the word -- it brings nothing." Her “dark night of the soul” was no brief sojourn in the wilderness of doubt, but a fifty year stretch of spiritual pain.

Some, however, have learned not only to accept the apparent absence of God, but to embrace it, learn from it, and even find something of hope in the hiddenness of God. This was particularly true for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote:

> God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us. The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us.

So, what does all this have to do with Advent and the coming of our Lord’s birth? For centuries before the birth of Christ, there was in the heart of the Jewish nation a deep longing, a weeping wound of hopeless hope. Where was God? Where is the day of the Lord? Where is deliverance and salvation and renewal and restoration?

God’s surprising answer to that cry for help stunned the world: “Here I am! Here I am, a little child without a crib. Here I am, a tiny, fragile, helpless infant swaddled in rags and laid to sleep in a feed trough. Here I am, a little child who would be rejected and pushed out to the margins, a little child who would become a man who would die the death of a criminal on a cross and become the spiritual food for the entire world.”

God’s answer is even surprising to us. It seems that the omnipotent Creator of the cosmos has chosen to become weak and powerless in the world. God has chosen to be rejected by the world and pushed to the very margins of society. God has chosen to be a helpless baby, a victim, and a criminal. God has chosen to become God-forsaken.

Why? Why has God allowed the world to push God to the margins? Because God has something to teach us. God has something to show us: In powerlessness, in sacrifice, in selflessness, God reveals all-power, all-love, and all-perfection. In becoming God-forsaken, God rescues us from our own God-forsakenness, and restores and establishes with us a deep and profound intimacy. God remakes creation anew in Christ Jesus.
But, we realize this only when we stop long enough to marvel at the miracle of Christmas. Sadly, most of us are too busy shopping. We hear the news of the Christ Child and shrug our shoulders. The big football game is more interesting, and honestly, more important. Right?