

“God and 9/11”

Psalm 13

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Recently, I discovered an article entitled “How Natural Disasters Test the Faithful” which discussed how people’s faith are often challenged during times of tragedy and suffering- some to the point they feel they’ve been abandoned by God. As we think back twenty years ago yesterday and the attack on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, Americans found themselves in the throes of just such a deep emotional and spiritual crisis. Our country no longer seemed quite as invincible as it once had, causing many to wonder how a handful of amateur terrorists could successfully bring down the world’s most important financial center and paralyze the richest, most powerful nation in history.

How tragedy and suffering tests one’s spiritual mettle was the subject of an article about a couple whose faith was forever altered as a result of that attack. In her book, *Out Of the Shadow of 9-11: An Inspiring Tale of Escape and Transformation*, Christina Stanton related how after surviving the horrible events of that week, it dawned upon her how very little control she had over life and that it offers one very few guarantees. Where she had once believed that if you just “worked hard, then God will bless and prosper you,” after 9/11, her entire worldview was thrown into chaos.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Christina could see the smoke billowing from the World Trade Center after the first plane hit. As she watched the black soot flow from out of the side of the building, the second plane flew within 500 feet of her 24th-floor balcony. The sound of the roaring engines knocked her down and out, rendering her temporarily deaf. She and her husband Brian, a finance executive, grabbed what they could- his wallet, the dog, and the dog’s leash. Still in her nightgown and with no shoes, they joined the throngs on the streets below running for their lives. As the towers fell and with yellow debris covering everything, she stopped and asked him: “Are we going to die?” He responded by reciting the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father, who art in heaven...” Thus, in a few short minutes, she went from being an upscale New Yorker to suddenly a homeless refugee, not even knowing if she and Brian would survive the day. She says, “I really had to start over from the very beginning. I not only found myself asking, ‘Who am I?’ but especially ‘Who am I IN CHRIST?’ I certainly thought of myself as a Christian, as one who went to church on Sundays, but I really hadn’t internalized the Bible, internalized who Jesus said he was, or who I am in him.”

It took Christina at least fifteen years to come to terms with the events of that day, realizing that she--along with probably thousands of other survivors—had developed a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome as a consequence. This anxiety was FURTHER exacerbated by a heavy dose of “survivor’s guilt” after 3,000 persons died that day and more AFTERWARDS from the health problems later developed by first responders and clean-up workers. What’s compelling about her narrative is that she never once condemns the terrorists or blames Islam but simply saw how their own lives took on a whole new meaning and sense of urgency that day. She couldn’t live for success and material accomplishments anymore- NEITHER of them could. She soon became the director of missions for her church, while her husband left the world of Wall Street to become the Chief Financial Officer of the church. It resulted in a steep drop in

salary, but that was MORE than offset by a rise in personal satisfaction doing the only thing they said really matters- serving their God.

I also have my OWN connection to those buildings and that horrifying day. During the late sixties and early seventies, I observed from a distance as the twin towers rose over the Manhattan skyline from our home in New Jersey. Less than thirty years later, I watched with my own two eyes as those same two buildings burned and collapsed in only a matter of hours. In fact, only two weeks earlier, I had taken my great nephew and great niece up to see the Windows On the World Restaurant situated atop the North Tower. On the second day following the attack, we held a special prayer service for the victims in my church where people had an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings. Several members of my congregation expressed how they were at work in those buildings at the moment of impact and just managed to get out in time. Interestingly, the one question that interested them the most was, "But where is God in all of this? What can God say to comfort us amidst such a great and terrible tragedy?"

The question "Where was God?" is one many serious Christians have asked THEMSELVES at one time or another which is why we look at the author of Psalm 13, our Old Testament lesson, this morning. It seems he is near death although we are not given any information regarding the nature of his suffering. It begins with a fourfold lament, a series of questions in which he asks why he has been forsaken by God. It's not death or illness that he laments as his SENSE OF COMMUNION with God- "Where is God when I cry out to him? Why won't he respond? Does God even CARE about the trials and sufferings of his creation? Is God capable of hearing such cries?"- all THESE are implied in the psalm's opening verses. He does not want to feel separated from his God.

It is to also identify with JOB, a man who once railed against God for all the travail in his life, questioning why one as faithful as himself had been forced to suffer beyond all endurance. It is the same question many a parent has asked him or herself at the news that his or her child has suddenly developed cancer or a spouse is fatally struck by a drunk driver. In light of the destruction last week wrought by Hurricane Ida, it has no doubt been a question many people from Louisiana to New York and my home state of New Jersey have had to ask THEMSELVES. Forced to flee their own homes, many had to leave behind their personal and most precious possessions, most of which were either lost or destroyed by the winds and rising seawaters. Yet it DOES happen ALL THE TIME, causing us to ask aloud, "Why God did you let this tragedy occur? We're supposed to be your children whom you say you love. Where WERE you when we needed you most?"

It is inevitable that ALL sincere persons of faith are going to confront at one time or another great and often intractable questions about God- questions of WHO God is, WHERE God is, and possibly IF God is. Even JESUS in the garden of Gethsemane, with the lengthening shadow of that cross looming ever higher and closer, had his OWN questions and fears to contend with. In light of this question, I wish to provide you with three essential truths which have remained central to my OWN faith and have afforded ME tremendous comfort amidst moments of great spiritual crisis. The FIRST truth is this, that OUR FAITH IS ALWAYS DEEPER THAN OUR DOUBTS.

In my first pastorate here in Pennsylvania, I had to break the news to a family who lived a few houses down from me how an hour before, their only son Sam was tragically killed when he fell into a sawdust bin at the local mill and smothered to death. It was an agonizing and

unfortunate accident and I can still hear Jane--his mother--imploring over and over again, "WHY, God? WHY did you let this happen? WHY did you allow my beloved son Sam to die!" The PROBLEM with blaming God for all of life's ills is that it assumes everything that occurs in the world IS the will of God, and that includes terrorist attacks and natural disasters. Some will even assert that such events represent God's wrath against a particular group of persons or a particular set of behaviors as Jerry Falwell once did when he attributed AIDS as God's wrath against all gay persons.

Well not for a MOMENT do I believe that God willed Sam's death in that sawdust bin any more than God willed the attacks on the World Trade Center or brought about the recent destruction wrought by Hurricane Ida. Rather, scripture teaches us that the world is "broken," meaning that it doesn't work the way God originally intended it to. When the Bible says the whole of creation suffers from the effects of "sin," it's merely stating that suffering and tragedy are an ESSENTIAL PART OF THE HUMAN CONDITION and that it not only manifests itself DEEP INSIDE each one of us, that is, through our neuroses and psychoses, our loneliness and broken relationships, but it even extends throughout the natural world around us with its floods and droughts, its earthquakes and hurricanes AS WELL.

However, when such misfortune is viewed through the prism of CHRISTIAN FAITH, we become strangely aware of a presence that helps bring healing to all those broken places in our lives, amidst all its woundedness and pain. We sense a divine presence supporting us with his hands and clasping us closely to his heart. We subsequently learn how even during the WORST of times, these moments can be transformed by God's grace into something redemptive so that we can learn and even GROW STRONGER through them. Such faith was evidenced by the author of Psalm 13, how in spite of the mystery and questions he has regarding his plight, he refuses to give in to cynicism or despair. He CONTINUES to trust in God's love and rejoices in his salvation REGARDLESS of how dire his situation becomes, ultimately confessing how "God has dealt bountifully with me."

Following their son's death, Jane and her husband--like MOST people who endure a horrible tragedy--DID eventually come to terms with it and make peace with God. The following Sunday and then the next and every Sunday AFTERWARD, they could be found in church, thanking their Lord for the life of Sam and the opportunity they'd been given to raise him as their own. It wasn't any different with Henry and Mary Davis, members of my congregation in Waterloo, Iowa when they received word that their son had been killed in what had taken place a half-century ago and half a world away, in Vietnam. Early one Sunday morning in 1969, two men from the U.S. military showed up at their front door to deliver the news no parent ever wants to hear, that their son David had lost his life in battle. After the soldiers left, they didn't spend the rest of the morning (or THE REST OF THEIR LIVES for that matter) WALLOWING IN GRIEF as so many have done upon the reception of such news. Instead, they at once put on their shoes, slipped on their coats, and then headed off for the only place they felt they had to be in that hour- at the First Presbyterian Church surrounded by their church family for Sunday worship. But then, that's the way it is with persons of faith, that once you've experienced God, God gets IN you and takes HOLD of you so that it becomes IMPOSSIBLE to rid yourself of him, EVER. As one of my seminary professors used to put it, "I could never NOT be a Christian. I've got God too much in my CELLS." I repeat, "Our faith is ALWAYS deeper than our doubts."

The SECOND point I want to leave you with is that if faith is always stronger than our doubts, then in those times when we no longer think we have such faith, when it seems our

confidence and ability to trust Christ's words has become weak or depleted, we can always take heart in the fact that **GOD'S FAITH IN US IS ALWAYS GREATER THAN OUR OWN FAITH IN GOD**. There is nothing more self-defeating than to think the Christian life must be spent trying to find and hold onto God's hand with all our might lest we let go and lose God **ALTOGETHER** when the truth is just the **OPPOSITE**- God's finds **US** and holds **OUR** hands and promises he will never let **US** go. We can be assured that even in our periods of greatest doubt, God promises to be there for us, to bear us up in the face of those doubts, and to carry us through to a living faith once again.

And the **THIRD** point I would leave you with is this, that **GOD IS AS PRESENT AND ACTIVE IN THE WORLD TODAY AS HE WAS YESTERDAY AND WILL BE TOMORROW, ENDLESSLY OFFERING US HIS PERSONAL PRESENCE**. God is present in and through the hearts and hands of his Church--the Body of Christ--who are **PARTICULAR** agents of his love during times of crisis. Fr. Michael Judge was a Catholic chaplain who was also well known throughout NYC for ministering to the homeless, the hungry, recovering alcoholics, people with AIDS, the sick, injured, and grieving, immigrants, gays and lesbians and those alienated by the Church and society. He once gave the winter coat off his back to a homeless woman in the street, later saying, "She needed it more than me." When he anointed a man who was dying of AIDS, the man asked him, "Do you think God hates me?" Judge just picked him up, kissed him, and silently rocked him in his arms. What I did **NOT** mention was that Judge **HIMSELF** was gay.

Upon learning that the World Trade Center had been hit by the first of two jetliners, Father Judge rushed to the site. There, he was met by Mayor Guiliani who asked him to pray for the city and its victims. Judge prayed over some bodies lying on the streets, then entered the lobby of the World Trade Center North Tower, where an emergency command post had been set up. There he continued offering aid and prayers for the rescuers, the injured, and the dead. When the South Tower collapsed at 9:59 am, debris went flying through the North Tower lobby, killing many inside, including Judge. At the moment he was struck in the head and killed, Judge was repeatedly praying aloud, "Jesus, please end this right now! God, please end this!" To those firefighters and policemen who knew him, he was the living incarnation of Jesus Christ to them.

But God was **ALSO** present through those cops and fire fighters, those first-responders and volunteers who were more concerned about the health and safety of **OTHERS** than their **OWN**. God is present today through agencies like FEMA, the Red Cross, and the Salvation Army which will be busy offering disaster relief for years to come, and in those many volunteers who helped to rescue persons trapped in homes and on rooftops throughout other weather emergencies. There's a story about a religious man on top of his roof during a great flood. A man comes by in a boat and says "Get in, get in!" The religious man replies, "No I have faith in God, he will grant me a miracle." Later the water is up to his waist and another boat comes by. The guy steering it tells him to get in but he responds that he has faith in God and God will give him a miracle. With the water now at about chest high, another boat comes to rescue him, but he turns down that offer again because "God will grant him a miracle." With the water at chin high, a helicopter throws down a ladder and they tell him to get on. Mumbling with the water in his mouth, he again turns down the request for help because he's convinced that ultimately **GOD** will save him. Eventually the man drowns after which he arrives at the gates of heaven. There, with broken faith, he says to Peter, "I thought God would grant me a miracle and I have been let down." St. Peter chuckles and responds, "I don't know what you're complaining about, we sent

you three boats and a helicopter." The fact is that God works through humble, selfless, faith-filled people who become his hands and feet and voice in a terribly fragmented world, and God even works through VACCINES when people insist they'd rather trust GOD to keep them safe than science.

My friends, I repeat that when tragedy and intense suffering strike, despite all the mystery and lack of clear answers, scripture exhorts us to remain faithful- AND WE CAN. We are encouraged to trust in God's presence and goodness IN SPITE OF his perceived absence for in the moment of our greatest need he is there all the same, holding us tightly with those invisible arms of support. God understands the pain we feel, even when we have to deal with the loss of a loved one because AS A FATHER HIMSELF, he witnessed his OWN SON die. He had a front-row seat to the greatest injustice ever committed by his own creation when the whole world placed Jesus, the Son of God, on trial. And there he was falsely judged and then brutally beaten and painfully nailed to a cross where he would eventually perish between two criminals.

Thus, God can relate to the deepest depths of human loss. He was present with each of those victims on 9/11 and he grieved with their families in the days that followed. Likewise, God feels the pain of every family that has ever lost a mother or father, a son or daughter to the coronavirus. He mourns with the families of those who perished in the waters of Hurricane Ida as well as the millions who are now trying to recover their lives in the storm's aftermath. And he stands alongside the great tide of those who are now homeless due to the great fires currently ravaging parts of California and the Southwest. In times such as these, there will doubtless be some frustration, anger, and resentment and much of it will be directed towards God. And though we may think that God has ABANDONED us or perhaps that our own faith has LEFT us, I can assure you that God HAS NOT and NEVER WILL abandon us- EVER, ESPECIALLY in those moments we need him most, and of THAT, he promises us! Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, may we never fail to draw close to you when life becomes hard or even takes a tragic turn. May we always be confident in knowing that your faith and love in us far exceeds our faith and love in you, and that not even our anger or fear or extreme doubt can possibly separate us from your abiding care. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*