

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
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“Where Was God?”

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“What then shall we say to these things? (Romans 8:31).

“Where was God?” Everyone of us will, sooner or later, ask that question, and questions like it: “Why, God?” “Why me?” “Why her?” “Why did you let it happen?” We ask it as individuals. On 9/11 we started asking it as a nation. “Where was God?” If he loves the whole world as he says he does, and if he is all-powerful as he says he is . . . and all knowing . . . why then didn’t he prevent this? Why didn’t he strike down these terrorists?

In answer there is the danger of saying too much. Remember how some preachers rushed in where angels fear to tread, wagging their tongues, saying ‘thus saith the Lord!’? Remember how they announced it was God’s righteous wrath on a nation tolerant of homosexuality? How did those preachers know that with such certainty? Who told them? Are they able to read the mind of God?

There is also the danger of saying too little. For many, 9/11 is just a tragedy, a meaningless tragedy. They have nothing to say about the sinful nature of all mankind. They have nothing to offer in terms of the hope we have in God, the comfort, the salvation. They are reluctant to speak of evil, because that’s too black and white. They would rather live in a world of grays. And so they have very little to say. It is tragic. It is meaningless. Period.

“Where was God?” There is the danger of saying too much and there is the danger of saying too little. “What then shall we say to these things?” Paul asks. As Christians, we say what God’s Word has given us to say: no more, no less. The church navigates between those safe buoys, because straying outside of them will put us in uncharted, dangerous, speculative waters. We do not and cannot know God’s thoughts and ways. We can only know with a certainty what he himself has promised and proclaimed in Scripture.

So the first thing that needs to be said is God is a good God. Ps. 118, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is *good*” (v.1). We must begin here. We don’t blame God for the evil of men. Our Father in heaven is no terrorist. The motivation for 9/11 will not be found in heaven but in hell, and the hellish plots and plans that find safe harbor in the hearts of men. God did not plan 9/11 nor did he carry it out. Yet for some it’s as if God *threw* those planes into the towers.

Wednesday night on Frontline, they covered the role of religion on 9/11. One person said, “I now look at God as a barbarian.” But if memory serves it was men like Mohamed Atta and Marwan al-Shehhi and Waleed al-Shehri who were flying those planes, not Father Son or Holy Spirit. God is good. 9/11 was the work of evil. How else could anyone, against all instincts, fly a plane full of people into a building full of people. This is the work of the evil one using evil men. Yes, sometimes it is that simple.

Was God aware that this would happen? Yes. He is omniscient. John 21:17, “Lord, you know all things.” Could God have stopped 9/11? Of course. He is omnipotent. “With God all

things are possible” (Mt. 19:26). And I’m sure he has frustrated the plans of many terrorists over the years, and for those unknown blessings, we also owe him thanks.

Can we say God allowed 9/11? I think we have to, don’t we? Just as he gives you and me the freedom to rebel against his commands, so he also gives that freedom to all man. Often we use that freedom for evil. However, that God allows evil is not the same as God causing evil. That God allowed Al Qaida to do this does not make him responsible for this anymore than he is to be blamed for you lashing out at your spouse with sharp words. He allows you, yes. He doesn’t pin your tongue to the roof of your mouth. You are responsible for your own words.

It’s clear, when we start asking questions of God, we must tread carefully, because the sinful mind is hostile to God (Rom. 8:7). It’s going to want to pin the blame on God whenever it can. Remember how Adam accused God? “The woman *you* gave me, she gave me fruit and I did eat.” Likewise, our questions: “Why? Why me? Why did you it happen?” . . . often when we ask such questions we’re not really looking for answers. We’re wanting to press charges. We’re demanding God justify himself before us. So far we’ve fallen that we actually set ourselves up as judge over God. On Frontline, someone said, “If there is a God, he is a very indifferent God.” Another said, “The horror I saw that day confirmed my atheism.” Puny mortals telling Almighty God, telling merciful Father how he should be.

In 1985 there was a terrible earthquake in Mexico City, 8.1 on the Richter. At least 10,000 people died. I was student in Madison at the time and talking about it with another student. I’ll never forget what he said: “I’ll never believe in a God who would permit such a thing to happen.” So a new rule for God, from a sophomore at UW. “Thou shalt allow no earthquakes, tsunami, tornados, hurricanes, droughts, floods, or fires.” Then, provided God continues to behave himself, this one might consent to acknowledge God’s existence. All of us, at some point in our lives, probably set ourselves up in judgment over almighty God.

What else can we say of 9/11? Ultimately, we can find the roots of that evil in Genesis 3. The attacks of 9/11 are just another example of mankind’s rebellion against God and fall into sin, another example of the forces of evil at work in this world. We ought not be too shocked by such events. There have been many acts of human cruelty over the centuries, some of them on an even larger scale. And yes, the earth has been cursed by sin. It’s not working like it should. It’s sputtering. The curse of sin is not just about thorns and thistles. It’s about earthquakes and tsunami. It’s about fire and flood. It’s about disease and sudden death.

We might be tempted to think of specific disasters as aimed at certain people. When the AIDS epidemic first made the news in the 80’s you probably wondered if this wasn’t God’s righteous wrath on those who are homosexual. In 2005 when Hurricane Katrina caused devastation to New Orleans you probably considered the possibility that God was disciplining that city for its lusty Mardis Gras celebrations and its pagan Voodoo traditions. When earlier this year the tsunami swept away Japanese communities you probably entertained the idea it was God’s attempt to get the attention of all those Buddhists. Did these groups have it coming to them? Yes. We all do. We’re all sinners, deserving his temporal and eternal punishment.

Once, some people asked Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. We know little about that event, but it sounds with Pilate and the Romans, a calculated mix of intimidation and terrorism. In any event, Jesus answered them, “Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this

way? I tell you no; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen” Jesus continued, “on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them [an apparent random tragedy]. Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? I tell you no; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” When disasters befall. That is not the time to speculate. It’s the time to repent.

What else? Did God work good things even through 9/11? I think so. He promises he does. It united our country for a time. It gave us new heroes who taught us something about duty and sacrifice. It prompted some to pray for the first time in a long while. Attendance even shot up at Good Shepherd . . . for a month or two. Who knows? Perhaps God used it to prevent an even greater act of terrorism from happening down the line. It reminded us that evil is it’s own force. It’s not just something that is caused by the usual suspects of poverty, abuse and lack of opportunity. Our struggle is against principalities and powers. When Jesus spoke to the man possessed by a demon, he said, “Come out of him.” He was speaking to someone other than just the man.

So where was God on 9/11? Maybe we can see him at work in the sacrifices of those brave men and women who ran toward the towers, and not from them. Maybe we can see him in those choosing to fight evil on Flight 93 as it flew over Pennsylvania towards Washington D.C. Maybe he was in the compassion of those who surrounded the grieving families, in the hospitality of those who opened their doors to stranded travelers, and in those who prayed with and for the clean-up crews afterwards.

Where was God? This is no indifferent god. This is the One who, since before the foundations of the earth, was planning, scheming, plotting and conspiring, not an act of terrorism, but the redemption of the world through his Son. This is the One who confronted evil head on and did not flinch, withstood the devil’s temptations, expelled his demons, put limits on his powers. This is the one who on the cross defeated the devil and died for the sins of the world and robbed death of its victory. Yet this is also the one who, because of his compassion, wept at the grave of Lazarus. Maybe this is the One who, because of that same compassion, was the first one to weep on 9/11. He is no indifferent God. That’s not what the cross tells me. It’s not even what the lilies of the field tell me. They tell me he loves us.

So where is God? He is in his Word, assuring us of that love and presence, especially when we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death. He is in his Sacraments, forgiving us, giving us life and salvation. He is in his people who are not ranting about God but are rolling up their sleeves to make the world a better place, people who “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God.”

What particularly troubles us about 9/11 is that life was cut short for so many that day. Maybe it’s because we’ve come to think a long life as a right.

Maybe there’s another way we can think of the length of our days. When a young person dies we speak of a life cut short. But compared to eternity, who has a long life? A young man’s days on earth may appear as a drop in the ocean. An old man’s days on earth may seem like a thimbleful. Either way, they are nothing compared to immeasurable ocean. James wrote, “What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes”(Jms 4:14). You know, he was not just speaking of children when he wrote that.

In God's plan every life is long enough and every death is timely. And though you and I might wish for a longer life, God knows better and so we give him the benefit of the doubt. His thoughts and ways are high above our thoughts and ways. And – this is important – though you and I may wish a longer life for our loved ones, often they don't. Often the first to accept God's decision of death is the one who is dying. While we are shaking our fists at God they are lifting hands in worship. While we are shedding hot tears on earth, they are rejoicing in heaven. While we are questioning God's wisdom, they are praising God and thanking him for his grace.

There is a danger of saying too much, and a danger of saying too little this day. We do best this day and every day to cling to what we know with a certainty. So I end with Romans 8: "What then shall *we* say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers [principalities], nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen.