

"Where Is God In the Midst of This Pandemic?"

Hosea 11:8-9; Mark 15:33,34

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I don't know if you've ever noticed but when we recite the Lord's Prayer together each week at the conclusion of my pastoral prayer, we find ourselves immediately struck with what seems like a logical paradox in the very first line. By taking "Our Father" and then linking it together with "who is in heaven," it's not hard to see that we have two assertions that seem to contradict each other. After all, here we begin the prayer by expressing our reliance on a God who seems so close, so intimate, and so personal to us that we address this God as "our Father." But then, when we get to the SECOND part of the opening sentence, we find that instead of this "Father" being WITH us--just when we need him MOST--God is someplace ELSE, that God is residing far off in the heavenlies, light years from our own situation. It makes us want to cry out, "God, what are you doing in HEAVEN when you should be ON EARTH, RIGHT HERE AND RIGHT NOW in OUR situation to help us when we really need you!"

It was the same paradox our Lord had to struggle with while suspended from his cross. In the first few hours, Jesus is confident enough in his relationship to God to address him as "Father," a term that speaks to the personal and intimate bond that had developed between them. He appeals on behalf of his persecutors, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." But then we see as his sufferings drag on, that fervent faith and unshakable confidence slowly gives way to uncertainty and confusion. He no longer uses the address "Father" but the cooler and more detached, "My God." He cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? My God, my God, where are you when you promised you would never leave me? What good is being in HEAVEN when I need your help RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW and I need you MOST!"

But the question "Where is God?" is one not just reserved for Jesus or even for Christians, for that matter- it is a UNIVERSAL cry seeking to make sense of all the tragedy and injustice one experiences or sees everywhere in our world. The question was undoubtedly asked on January 26th, 2001 when an earthquake in Gujarat, India killed more than 20,000 people, left 50,000 injured, and destroyed a million homes. It was asked on December 26th, 2004—the day after Christmas, no less--when a fierce tidal wave claimed the lives of 230,000 people across Southeast Asia. And it was asked on January 12th, 2010, when an earthquake struck Port-au-Prince, Haiti leaving over 200,000 men, women and children dead just within the first few minutes. It's a question being asked by mothers and fathers, husbands and wives when they learn the tragic news that their child or spouse has just died from an opiate overdose, and it is being asked TODAY by Christians, Jews, Muslims, and others all over the world as we collectively face this terrifying plague, this invisible contagion which has left so many sick and taken so many lives with the WORST YET TO COME! "How can a God who we claim is so LOVING and so COMPASSIONATE, someone we address as 'our Heavenly Father' allow such

death and destruction to affect so many? Why does God seem to be ‘missing-in-action’ just when we need God most?” These are the kinds of questions people ask and often don’t find satisfactory answers to.

Several years ago, PBS aired a special two-hour documentary on *Frontline* entitled “Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero.” It explored how the religious belief—and unbelief—of Americans were challenged after the events of September 11, 2001. Through interviews with priests, rabbis, and Islamic scholars; victims’ families and World Trade Center survivors; writers and thinkers, atheists and agnostics, it tried to answer or at least frame the question “Where was God?” Almost immediately, some people began questioning the idea of GOD. Recalled Dr. Michael Brescia, a physician, “I saw the pictures of the people at the windows knowing what was happening—that there was no ladder long enough to reach anyone, no helicopter on the roof that was going to come. I wonder how many of them thought if there was a God. And if there was a God, why me? Why this? And where am I going to go?”

Some people, even those who lost loved ones in the attacks, indicated how the tragedy **ONLY AFFIRMED THEIR BELIEF IN A HIGHER POWER.** Said Bernie Heeran, a retired firefighter whose son Charlie was killed on that day: “At this stage, I have not questioned God. God had nothing to do with this. There were a lot more people who could have been killed. God was fighting evil that day like God does every day.” Others were **NEITHER SO CERTAIN NOR FORGIVING,** like Marian Fontana, whose husband David was one of the 343 firefighters killed that day: “I can’t bring myself to speak to God anymore because I feel so abandoned. I guess deep down inside I know that God stills exists, and that I have to forgive and move on. But I’m not ready to do that yet.”

Still others, including religious leaders, reported that while they continued to believe in God, **THEIR IMAGE OF GOD HAD BEEN ALTERED** in the wake of the tragedy.” The Rev. Joseph Griesedieck, an Episcopal priest who volunteered at Ground Zero, had **THIS** to say: “After September 11, the face of God was a blank slate for me. God couldn’t be counted on in the way that I thought God **COULD** be counted on. God seemed absent. I was left with nothing but that thing we call faith. But faith in what? I wasn’t so sure. The face of God after September 11 is much more of a mystery than it ever was. A face that often eludes us, and frustrates us.”

On that crisp and clear September morning nineteen years ago, many Americans found themselves shoved into a place of spiritual crisis. We found ourselves asking such questions as “What kind of God is this? Is this the God I believe in? Can I still believe in this God?” Perhaps the most important question to be asked, at least for those of us who believe in God, is “Does God suffer **TOO**? Can God feel our pain?” for the answer to that question will also tell us whether or not our God can **LOVE.** Curiously, the early Church Fathers and theologians did not think so. They believed that God **COULDN’T** suffer, that God stood outside the realm of human pain and sorrow. They denied God any emotions because they might interrupt God’s tranquility and the unity of God’s nature. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. went so far as to declare the idea that the divine nature could suffer as “vain babblings” and it condemned all those who believe it. Even John Calvin whose theology laid the foundation for our own

denomination denied God any feelings. The Westminster Confession of Faith, a founding Presbyterian document, explicitly asserted that God is “without body, parts, or passions, immutable,” “immutable” meaning that God cannot change.

However, a theology that embraces the idea that God cannot suffer then has to come to terms with the question, “Can God LOVE?” The great Jewish thinker Abraham Heschel has said that God takes the people of his covenantal love so seriously that he suffers for their actions. God “indwells” the Israelites so that God even goes with them into Babylonian exile and feels their sorrowful plight. This capacity to feel for the other in vulnerable love is part of what it means to be God.

The Bible eloquently affirms that God CAN be wounded. In Hosea, for instance, God cries out about wayward Israel:

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?...My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath (11:8-9).

If love implies vulnerability, the traditional notion that God is unmovable would then make it IMPOSSIBLE for us to affirm that “God is love.” An almighty God who cannot suffer is poverty stricken because he cannot love and be involved with his creation. If friendship means allowing oneself to be affected by another, then this unmoved, unfeeling deity could have no friends or be our friend.

N. T. Wright is the Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Oxford University and the author of over 80 books; he is generally regarded to be the finest biblical scholar of our generation. This past week, he made the point in an article for *Time* magazine in which he describes God’s role in this pandemic, that though not the CAUSE of this contagion, God has a VERY DEFINITE RESPONSE to it. He says some Christians like to think of God as being dispassionately removed from all the chaos in the world, that he remains above all that, knowing everything, in charge of everything, calm and unaffected by the troubles therein- but that’s not the picture the Bible gives us. He writes:

God was grieved to his heart, Genesis declares, over the violent wickedness of his human creatures. He was devastated when his own bride, the people of Israel, turned away from him. And when God came back to his people in person—the story of Jesus is meaningless unless that’s what it’s about—he wept at the tomb of his friend. St. Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit “groaning” within us, as we ourselves groan within the pain of the whole creation. The ancient doctrine of the Trinity teaches us to recognize the One God in the tears of Jesus and the anguish of the Spirit.

Elie Wiesel, the late Nobel Prize winning author and survivor of the Holocaust, frequently stated that the opposite of love is never hatred, but apathy or indifference. If God were indifferent, God could not love. This is made plain in his story about the hanging of two Jewish men and a youth in a Nazi concentration camp. All the prisoners, Wiesel included, were

paraded before the gallows to witness this horrifying spectacle. He writes:

The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. "Where is God? Where is he?" someone asked me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, "Where is God?" and I heard a voice in myself answer: "Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows."

Of course, carried to its logical end, if God cannot suffer and feel for creation, then there can be no real INCARNATION of God in Jesus Christ. If God is denied suffering, then the Crib at Bethlehem and the Cross at Golgotha can no longer serve as the ultimate symbols of God's complete identification with humankind. Jesus can no longer be "Emanuel," or "God with us" as the Angel had pronounced at his birth, nor can his death on the cross represent God's atonement for our sins.

On the contrary, our Lord's birth WAS the story of God taking upon himself the form and substance of his own creation, the "Creator" becoming ONE with the "creature." At that moment in history, God came among us in the person of his Son- an act borne completely out of love. Through Jesus's life and death, God bore forsakenness, anguish, hunger and thirst in all its ultimacy so that when our Lord drank from that cup and its bitter mixture of guilt and suffering and death, GOD tasted of its contents as well.

But many refuse to accept that as an answer, that God experiences the fullness of human sorrow and suffering and that God even knows the fear and pain associated with death- the proof of it being Jesus Christ. They will tell you that they need greater proof than some kind of theological assertion or church creed- they want to see some TANGIBLE EVIDENCE that God understands such things before they believe. Well, we just may be able to provide them the proof they're looking for! I am convinced that the GREATEST evidence there is as to the presence of God in the midst of human pain and suffering is the CHURCH HERSELF- God's representatives in the world. Instead of the question "Where was God on September 11?" perhaps we REALLY need to ask "Where was the CHURCH on September 11?" If the church was doing its job- binding up wounds, comforting the grieving, offering food to the hungry, I don't think people will wonder so much where God was when the rest of America was hurting. They'll KNOW where God was- IN THE PRESENCE OF HIS PEOPLE ON EARTH!

Where there was extraordinary love and courage demonstrated, THERE God was present- in the trapped workers who took time to comfort and assist each other when each other was all they had; in the policemen and firefighters who charged up those stairwells even as they were collapsing down upon them. God was among the workers and caregivers at Ground Zero who so carefully and devotedly combed the debris for body parts, transforming southern Manhattan into a sacred space. God was expressed in the generosity of the many thousands who donated time and money to the victims' families; he was present in those persons and services which dispensed meals and refreshments, and through the chaplains who were so quick to comfort grieving loved ones.

Similarly, when people ask "Where is God amidst this dreadful pandemic?", it can be said that GOD IS PRESENT, all right. God is present in and through OUR FEDERAL AND

STATE GOVERNMENTS when they mobilize and coordinate the allocation of important resources--ventilators, gowns, respirator masks, and the like--and see that food and medicine are dispensed to those communities where needed. God is present in OUR CONGRESS when both political parties come together to pass a stimulus package that directs money straight into the hands of working people and small businesses who have been hardest hit by the spread of the coronavirus. This legislation encourages them to keep them on their payrolls even if their businesses have been shuttered temporarily while also increasing aid to those workers who've been laid off or have had their hours and wages cut back. God is present in and through THE RED CROSS, THE SAMARITAN'S PURSE, AND OTHER DISASTER RELIEF ORGANIZATIONS as they offer free meals and shelter to persons in emergency areas. And God is present in and through THE COUNTLESS NUMBER OF HEALTH CARE WORKERS who at great risk to their own physical condition are working overtime and under the most austere conditions to save as many lives as possible. These include the doctors, nurses, technicians, medical staff, administrators, food service workers, pharmacists, security guards, as well as our military who are currently being deployed to set up hospitals and to deliver aid. They labor selflessly often beyond the bounds of human endurance, endangering themselves and their loved ones- all for OUR benefit.

But let's not stop THERE. By extension, this means that when WE respond in love to the hurts and needs of others around us, WE no less become a witness to God in our midst. Whenever WE offer a meal to stranger, or take a neighbor to the doctor, a drug store, or a supermarket because they can no longer do such things for themselves; whenever WE patiently listen to another person's problems or offer a kind word of encouragement to someone in despair, OUR actions ALSO testify to a loving, caring God in whose name we serve. Our deeds don't need to be great or extraordinary for God is never MORE evident than in those simple acts of kindness and generosity that come when we least expect it.

The fact remains WE become the greatest proof as to the reality of a "Father God," of One who rejoices when WE rejoice and grieves when WE grieve. No, God does NOT reside far off in the heavenlies, light years removed from our personal situation, dispassionately observing the chaos and destruction that continuously afflicts his creation. Rather, God IS present to us ALL THE TIME. Because of OUR caring, we CAN know--believer and unbeliever--precisely where God is when it hurts- God was with his son while he lay dying on that cross, and he is WITH us and IN us amidst all our fears and tears as we contend with this plague. THAT is where God IS and where he will ALWAYS be! Let us pray...

Gracious God, thank you for not just taking a passing interest in us your creation but for willing to become actively involved in all our affairs. You see our needs and understand our fears and feel our pain because you are love and love demands such involvement. Just as Jesus, your Son, becomes the proof of that for US, may WE, your Church, become that same proof to the rest of the world. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.