

Matthew 26:14-27:66—April 9, 2017
(Palm/Passion Sunday)

WHERE IS GOD?

The words never fail to take my breath away. Not just because of the words themselves, as powerful as they are, but because of who spoke them and where they were spoken from. Jesus, hanging on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

This story of Jesus’ time of tragedy and despair isn’t easy to hear. In fact, a lot of Christians are repulsed by it. They back away. Turn their heads in disgust. They ask, “Why do we need to witness Jesus’ passion? Why should we go with Jesus to Golgotha? Do we really have to stand around the cross and watch him die in agony? Why can’t we pass over the bloody, gruesome crucifixion and instead just skip ahead to stand before the empty tomb? In effect, what most Christians want is to experience the joy of Easter without the agony of the cross.

I would argue that, while the story about Jesus and his tragic death on a trash heap called Golgotha might appear irrelevant, or simply seems too horrific to listen to, it has important implications for our times of tragedy. You see, if there’s one thing we can bet the farm on, it’s that every person here—you and I, and indeed, every single person who has ever been born and ever will be born—will at some time or another experience our own times of tragedy, grief, suffering and despair.

When we do undergo tragic circumstances; when we’re given what we could call our own personal crosses to bear, we’re likely going to feel, as Jesus himself must have felt, very sad and very much alone. And when we’re beset by great tragedy and sorrow and loneliness, it can cause us to question our most fundamental beliefs, even to the point of asking, “Where is God?”

Last week we read the story of the raising of Lazarus, and how his two sisters, Martha and Mary, were distraught that Jesus didn’t arrive in time to prevent Lazarus from dying. And they said to Jesus, “If you had been here, this wouldn’t have happened. Lazarus would still be alive.”

But Jesus wasn’t there, and Lazarus did die. Now the shoe was on the other foot, and it was Jesus who faced death and seemed to be asking God,

“Why aren’t you here? Why are you allowing this suffering to happen?”

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus cried in agony. Where have you gone? Why have you left me alone here, hanging on this cross? Why aren’t you with me in my time of greatest need? Those questions are only asked by us when our pain and grief seem too great, too overwhelming to bear.

We expect God to be with us when we gather for worship and prayer in church, like we’re doing now. But we need God to be with us during our moments of heartbreak and despair, in those times of trouble and distress we all go through in our lives. And that’s the good news behind the sad story that we’re confronted with this Palm/ Passion Sunday.

Jesus’ passion and death answers our burning question, “Where is God?” And where is God during times of misfortune, when we’re filled with pain and our tears flow?

God is on the cross.

What I mean by God is on the cross is that God is there, right in the midst of our human suffering, betrayal, disappointment, and trouble. God on the cross means there is no tragedy we will ever enter into that the Lord hasn’t already entered into and experienced before us; therefore, God can be fully present with us and knows just what we’re going through in the darkest moments of our lives.

Where is God when we suffer and despair?

God is with us in the darkness, in the pain, even on the crosses we suffer—especially there. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann said our God is a crucified God. That’s a very radical definition of who God is, a definition that only the Christian faith embraces. And that belief and understanding is our great comfort in times of tragedy, because if God will go even to the cross for us, then we will never be anywhere that is too sad, too dark or too painful for God to also be there with us.

God doesn’t always give us an explanation for the tragedies that befall us, even when we beg for one; and God doesn’t always rescue us from those tragedies, no matter how fervently we pray. But God does give us something that may be even better: and that is, God’s very presence with us in the tragic and painful events that befall us. What a comfort it is to know that, in our times of greatest hardship, suffering and sorrow, God has already gone there before us, and God will also be right there with us.

After his son died in a car that plummeted into Boston Harbor, minister and author William Sloane Coffin preached a now very famous sermon that, over time, became a definitive statement on the relationship of the Christian faith to tragedy. He said, “When a person dies, there are many things that

can be said, and at least one thing that should never be said.

“The night after Alex died, a woman came by carrying quiches. She shook her head and said sadly, “I just don’t understand the will of God.” Instantly I swarmed all over her. “I’ll say you don’t, lady! Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper, that he was probably driving too fast in a storm? Do you think it’s God’s will that there are no streetlights on that stretch of road?”

Coffin went on to say, “Nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn’t go around with his finger on triggers, his fist around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths. The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, ‘It’s the will of God.’ My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex died; that when the waves closed over his sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all hearts to break.”

As Christians, we know how God feels about our tragedy and pain and grief because we know Jesus. Again, last Sunday, we read in John’s Gospel that when Jesus went to Bethany after the death of his friend Lazarus, he looked around and saw all the grief and pain that death had caused, and what did Jesus do? “Jesus wept.”

That two word verse, the shortest verse in the Bible, is the most pregnant with the love and compassion of God: “Jesus wept.” Jesus wept over Jerusalem and the way its citizens had mistreated God’s prophets so many times; and our Lord had pity and shed tears of compassion for the blind, the lame, the sick, lepers, Samaritans, prostitutes and sinners. And after his disciple Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus took pity on him and forgave him, just as he forgave the soldiers who were crucifying him. That’s why William Sloane Coffin, in the midst of grief over his son’s tragic death, could truthfully say, “God’s heart was the first to break.”

Where is God when we’re experiencing pain and despair?

Some people, for various reasons, believe that’s an unanswerable question. Still other people are so perturbed by that question that they end up with a damaged faith, or even worse, they lose their faith completely. For those individuals, the existence of suffering, heartbreak and misfortune is confirmation that God is distant; that God is apathetic and uncaring; or that there is no God at all. They’re unable to reconcile the existence of God with the existence of tragedy. To them, God and terrible misfortune can’t and don’t go together. But, my friends, that’s simply not the case.

This morning—on Palm/Passion Sunday—we remember how Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But notice in

Jesus' words that he still calls God "my God." God hasn't really abandoned him at all.

And there's something else about those words Jesus cried out from the cross that's important to know. The statement, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is from the 22nd Psalm. Jesus was quoting that psalm from the cross. But listen to what the Psalmist said just a few short sentences after his cry of despair. "All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! For [the Lord] did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him."

Jesus knew those words of the 22nd Psalm and its victorious conclusion; therefore he knew without a doubt, even as he hung on the cross, that God wasn't remote or uncaring or nonexistent. No, God was there, very close by. And that means, whenever and wherever we experience pain, suffering and sorrow, God is right there in the midst of it with us, and feels it as much as we do.

I want to end my message this morning with a story, you could call it a modern day parable or fable that I recently came across.

An old man sat in his rocking chair out on his front porch, day after day. Fixed in the chair, he promised himself that he would not move from that spot until he saw God.

One beautiful spring afternoon the old man was rocking in his chair, still relentlessly continuing his search for God, when he saw a young girl playing across the street. The little girl's ball went astray and ended up rolling into the old man's yard. She ran to pick it up, and as she reached down to retrieve the ball she looked up at the old man and said, "Mr., I see you every day rocking in your chair and staring off into the distance. Are you looking for something?"

"Yes," the man replied, "but you're too young to understand."

"Maybe," replied the young girl, "but my momma told me that when I have something in my head I should talk about it to help me get a better understanding. Momma said, 'Lizzie, don't be afraid to share your thoughts.'"

"Thank you, dear," the old man responded, "but I really don't think you can help me."

"How do you know, mister?" Lizzie said. "Maybe I can help just by listening."

"All right, Miss Lizzie, what I'm doing is looking for God."

"You rock back in forth in that chair all day searching for God?" the young girl responded, puzzled.

"That's right," the old man said. "Sometimes, when I look at all the terrible things going on in the world, and when I think about the pain and

misfortune I've experienced in my life, I have doubts that God really exists. And I ask myself, if there really is a God, where is He? Before I die, I need to believe God is here with me. I need a sign from God that He's present, but after many years of looking I haven't seen one yet."

"A sign from God?" said Lizzie, now even more confused. "Mister, don't you know that God's signs are all around you? God gives you a sign when you breathe your next breath. When you can smell fresh flowers. When you can hear the birds sing. When babies are born.

"Mr., God gives you a sign when you laugh and when you cry, and when you feel the tears roll from your eyes. That's God's sign in your heart to hug and to love someone around you. God gives you a sign in the wind blowing through the trees, and in the rainbows, and when the seasons change. Mr. the signs of God's presence are everywhere. Can't you see them? God is with you and God is with me. You don't have to search for God, because God is just here all the time."

With one hand on her hip and the other hand flailing around in the air, young Lizzie went on. "Momma told me, 'Lizzy, if a person has to search for something big and special like God, they must have their eyes closed because God is right there with them, all through life and in everything. That's what my momma says."

"Lizzie dear, you're a very intelligent young girl on the subject of God. But what you said still isn't quite enough."

Lizzie walked up to the old man, placed a hand over his heart and spoke softly into his ear. "Mister, believing in God comes from in here, not out there," she said, as she pointed up at the sky. Believe in God in your heart first, then you will see the signs."

The young girl picked up her ball and walked back across the street. Before getting back to her friends she bent down to smell some flowers. "Hi God," she said. "It's Lizzie again. I just wanted to tell you thanks for the flowers."

Maybe that story is a little simplistic and sentimental, but here's the thing. If we can start to see God in small things, like a patch of flowers; and if we get in the daily habit of discovering God near us and in us when things are fine, it makes it easier to find God near us and in us when we're experiencing pain and misfortune.

So, where is God?

Quite simply, whenever and wherever there's tragedy, suffering and sorrow, there is God, right in the midst of it. That's one of the great and astounding truths of our faith that we're reminded of in this holiest week of the

church year, as we stand before the cross of Jesus in humble awe. So thanks and praise be to God, who has not forsaken us, and never will. Amen.