

WHAT TO DO WITH OUR QUESTIONS

We have questions about the shooting in Las Vegas. I would seriously worry if we didn't have questions. Fifty-nine dead and over five hundred wounded. Innocent victims who had attended a country music festival to have a good time. Law enforcement officers trying to save lives, who knew the risks they faced every time they put on their uniforms. First responders and bystanders who did what they could to assist those who were being cut down by automatic weapon fire.

I'm sure none of them could have imagined what the day of October 2nd would bring. The horror. The pain. The destruction. The screams. The killing and wounding and bleeding. The callous disregard for human life.

How could something like this happen?

Why would a loving, all powerful God allow the evil that occurred in Las Vegas to happen? Why didn't God prevent it? God surely could have, but God didn't. Jesus' disciples asked the same kinds of questions we're asking now. They thought the same thoughts some of us may be thinking today: that bad things didn't just happen. God must have had a hand in it, in some way.

As the disciples were walking along, they saw a man who had been blind from birth. He had never seen a sunrise or sunset; never knew what a color-laden field of flowers looked like; never observed another person looking back at him in love. But why was he blind his entire life? Did the man do something wrong to offend God and make God mad? Or was it the man's parents who sinned?

No, said Jesus. His blindness wasn't the result of divine punishment. Nobody sinned. It happened so that God's works might be revealed in him. But let's make sure we fully understand. God didn't make the man blind so that later on in life the man could be healed and God would get the credit and praise for performing a miracle. That would be like firefighters igniting a blaze, showing up in their fire engines to put out the fire, and patting themselves on the back for being heroes.

No, God didn't make the man blind. The man was simply born blind.

Period. There was no logical reason for it. But the important thing Jesus was trying to get across to his disciples was that God is present and at work in the midst of the random misfortune and tragedies that happen in our broken world. God promises to uphold us in times of trouble. God is always acting in the midst of pain and evil to comfort and reassure us. God wants to help us heal.

The shooting spree in Las Vegas was the random, terrorist act of a deranged man who committed an evil, heinous crime. Did someone sin and anger God, causing God to set the man off and be an instrument of some retaliatory divine punishment?

No, I don't believe that's the way our God operates. But what I do believe is that, even though our "why" questions about the Vegas shooting will probably never be answered to our satisfaction, somehow, in some way, God's good works and God's steadfast love will be revealed in the terrible tragedy that happened. Indeed, we've already caught a glimpse of God's good works in the many people who risked their own lives to save others, and in the compassion and care that's been shown to the shooting victims and their families by hospital workers and total strangers. And I have faith that God's works will continue to be revealed in the days and weeks to come.

Romans 12:9-21

WHAT TO DO WITH OUR ANGER

For us Christians, this is where the rubber meets the road and we have to put our faith into practice. Not very long ago I preached on Jesus' teaching that we're to forgive others "seventy seven times;" or "seventy times seven times," depending on the Bible translation you use. But with what happened in Las Vegas, forgiveness is the last thing we want to think about. We're extremely angry, and it's impossible to forgive such a heinous crime, especially when we're consumed by so much anger.

So, what do we do with all this rage we feel?

Well, first of all, according to the Apostle Paul, we don't have to like or accept what happened. "Hate what is evil." That's easy enough to do. The murder and mayhem that happened in Las Vegas was evil. Truly and deeply evil. What the shooter did was genuinely demonic, and it's all right, it's perfectly

acceptable, even for followers of Jesus like us, to abhor and rail against that evil act. Paul follows up by encouraging us to “hold fast to what is good.” In the midst of evil, we must do everything we can to grasp and never let go of the good that also exists in the world. And good does still exist, even if it’s not very easy to detect at times. Especially at times like these.

The second thing to not lose sight of is that justice will ultimately be served—even if it doesn’t happen in this earthly life. The murderer whose deeds we despise will ultimately stand before God, the Eternal Judge, and God will to decide his fate. So, even though payback for what the shooter did is beyond our grasp, it’s not beyond God’s grasp. As the Lord said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.”

And a third thing we can do with our anger is to channel it constructively, and use it to push back and not allow evil to have the final word. If we don’t push back against evil, if we just sit back in grief or rage or hopelessness, then evil has won. As Edmund Burke wrote in a letter to Thomas Mercer, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

So, we cannot “do nothing” in response to the terrible evil that took place in Nevada. Edmund Burke doesn’t want that. And God doesn’t want that, either. Instead, may we heed the advice Paul gave in his letter to the Roman church, and do everything in our power not to be overcome by the evil that happened in Las Vegas, but to overcome that evil with good.

Psalm 23

WHAT TO DO WITH OUR GRIEF AND SORROW

I can’t remember where I heard this quote—and maybe more than one person said it—but the words came to my mind while I watched the news accounts of what was going on in Las Vegas. They say something to the effect of, “If I allow myself to cry, the tears may never stop.” There’s enough sorrow in our hearts over in the shootings that happened that maybe if we cried the tears would go on and on and on.

What do we do with all our grief and sorrow? How can we possibly carry it around with us without being so burdened by it that we collapse under its excessive weight?

The only thing we can really do is allow God to help us carry it. The Lord who is our shepherd promises to never leave us desolate and on our own. Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death itself, we don't walk through it alone. For God is with us. All of us love the 23rd Psalm and its soothing, heartening words. But I have wondered over the years about the relevance—or lack thereof—of the shepherd imagery it invokes. Let's face it, very few of us are shepherds, know a shepherd or are that familiar with the work a shepherd does in caring for his or her flock of sheep.

But I believe the images in the 23rd Psalm transcend mere shepherding and touch us on a much more accessible level. Because whatever we do or don't know about shepherding, we can relate to the comforting words that, in our grief and sorrow, no matter how great it is, God will always be near to comfort us. And when we're lost and afraid, not sure which way to turn, the Lord promises to lead us and reassure us of God's loving presence, so that we don't need to fear the evil around us.

When we walk through the deepest, darkest valley—and 58 people shot to death and over 500 wounded is a very deep and dark valley—God is with us. And in the presence of the enemy who meticulously plotted to murder as many people as possible before taking the coward's way out and killing himself, God prepares a banquet feast for us and for those that died because of him. And God's lasting promise for the victims who died in Las Vegas, and for us in the end, is that we shall all dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Thanks be to God.

John 11:17-27

WHAT TO DO WITH OUR HOPELESSNESS

When death touches us, it can rob us of many things. Things like joy. Peace. Faith in humankind and optimism for the future of our planet. And something else death can rob us of is hope.

I admit that it has been a real challenge for me to hold on to hope after the killing and wounding of almost six hundred people by a psychopathic murderer with deadly automatic weapons that never should have been available to him. I don't have a lot of hope that our political leaders will find the courage or wisdom to put aside their partisan differences,

and pass common sense gun laws that will keep automatic weapons out of the hands of those who have no qualms using them against innocent people. No, I'm sorry to say that I don't have a whole lot of hope about that.

So, sadly, I have no doubt in my mind that more senseless, tragic and preventable shootings and killings will occur in the future. We as a nation seem to have set ourselves up for that ultimate outcome. And that makes me feel sad, angry, and frustrated.

Yeah, it all seems pretty hopeless. So, what can be done about that? I turn to the story of Lazarus for help in answering that question.

When Martha ran up to Jesus after her brother died and asked him where he had been because if he'd been around Lazarus would still be alive, Jesus said something in response that we need to hear this morning.

"Your brother will rise again," he said.

Martha thought she understood. Yes, she responded to Jesus, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Let's focus for a moment, not on the dramatic raising of Lazarus because when all was said and done, Lazarus didn't escape death; he merely postponed it, thanks to Jesus; but instead let's focus our attention on "the resurrection on the last day" that Martha mentioned. Because that's the important resurrection, the resurrection that will last for all eternity.

I believe that the fifty-nine victims who died in the Las Vegas shooting will "rise again in the resurrection on the last day." That may not be much consolation to the family members who are mourning their deaths, but at least it's something to cling to and remind ourselves of.

The bottom line for all of us is that life is fatal. Whether it's a bullet or cancer or a heart attack or natural causes that gets us in the end, the end is coming. For all of us. That's the simple and sobering reality of our human existence.

That's why I want to hold up to you these words that Jesus spoke to Martha when death was still a painful reality for her, and I hope you listen carefully and allow them to permeate your soul.

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live; and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

In the midst of any deadly tragedy, or any death at all for that matter, those words are our lifeline. That's the promise we Christians would do well to cling tenaciously to, with every ounce of faith we can muster.

In the midst of our questions about what happened in Las Vegas: why it happened and how God could allow it to happen, Jesus tells us, "I am the resurrection and the life."

In the midst of our anger and despair that such evil could be let loose on the world and so many innocent people could be killed and wounded in only a matter of a few minutes, Jesus says to us, "I am the resurrection and the life."

When grief and sorrow overwhelm us and we wonder what the world is coming to and we don't feel very hopeful about the future, Jesus proclaims to us, "I am the resurrection and the life."

Hold tightly to those words, sisters and brothers. Right now, while the pain and shock of the Las Vegas shootings is still fresh, they may not seem like much to hold on to; but I believe they can be enough to help see us through the valley of the shadow of death we're walking through. Amen.