

Light In Darkness
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For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. - John 3:16-21, NIV

Washington, D.C. is one of my favorite places to visit and I visited there many times. The pictures on the TV news this past week related to the events at the Capitol in Washington, D.C. reminded me of many places I have visited. A few years ago, Pam and I spent a week in Washington, D.C. to visit our daughter Maggie, who was working there as an intern for the summer. Pam and I like history, so we always try to visit historical sites and museums if we can. When we went to Washington, D.C., we visited the Newseum – a relatively new museum dedicated to how news happens. It was amazing how much of the news was focused on war and its effects. We toured the Holocaust Museum and saw disturbing videos of Hitler and how that led to a world war and the killing of millions of people. We toured the almost-completed Museum of the American Indian. The most disturbing part for me was about all the peace treaties our nation had made with the Indians and later broke because of the desire for more and more land. Finally, we toured the Vietnam and World War II memorials. We were once again reminded of the devastation of war, as well as those who sacrificed their lives on behalf of our nation. Anyone who has been in battle can tell you how awful war is for everyone. So, what are we to think and do as Christians about an event like what happened this past week in Washington, D.C.?

As Christians, we should approach these kinds of questions with humility, knowing that there is some degree of mystery at work here, at least from a human perspective. In the Bible, when Job asks God why there is suffering, God goes on a diatribe that lasts for a number of chapters. But the basic idea is that trying to explain the ways of God to a human is like trying to explain the theory of relativity to an ant. (Job 38-41, NIV) And while Job doesn't end up with an answer to the problem of suffering, he does end up with God. And for Job, that seems to be enough -- at least for now.

So, what can we say as Christians about how we should respond to events like these? Is there anything to say? I believe there is, and it is found in scripture. It is by no means all that we can say, but there are a few things I believe we should say that can frame how we think about these kinds of things. They come out of some of the most familiar words in the Bible – John 3:16 and the verses that follow.

John 3:16 begins with the words, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son . . .” (John 3:16a, NIV) Whatever we say, we must begin where the Bible begins – with God and God’s love for the world. To put it another way, *God loves the world and everyone in it*. God created this world and God created each one of us out of love. God’s plan was for the world to be a place where all of creation reflects the glory of God, and where people would love God and each other. God loves the world and God made it good. God even loves us when we don’t love God or each other. God never stops loving each one of us because, as the Bible reminds us, “God is love.” (1 John 4:8, NIV) It is who God is and how God acts. God loves the world and everyone in it . . . and so should we.

Now, before I lose some of you, let me add that “love” is not the same as “like.” For example, we as parents may *love* our kids, but we don’t always *like* or approve of what they choose to do. The same is true with how God views all of us. As followers of Christ, we are called to act, not feel, but *act* with love toward others. That means acting with the best interest of the other person in mind. And sometimes that means we have to stop them from hurting themselves or others. Some have called this “tough love.” It means that sometimes, out of love, we keep someone from hurting themselves or others.

This leads us to the next thing we can say. *Not only does God love the world and everyone in it, but God also hates evil*. God does not turn a blind eye to the evil in the world. Evil is not God’s will, nor is it part of God’s plan for the world. God’s plan for the world is that we would live together, honoring God, and working with one another. But, from the very beginning of time, human beings chose not to do this, and that is when sin and evil entered the world. So, because of love, God began to deal with the problem of evil, sin, and brokenness in our world. So, how does God do that?

The hymn that we sing that most of us associate with Thanksgiving – “Come, Ye Thankful People Come” -- talks about the “harvest” before the “winter storms begin” and how God “provides” for us. But, if you pay attention to the words starting with the second verse, something else is going on. It talks about “wheat and tares together sown.” Wheat represents the good plants, and “tares” are the weeds mixed in with the wheat. While we may assume that this is just some farming metaphor, it is really much more than that. The hymn is pointing back to the Bible and Matthew 13 which is the parable of the wheat and tares told by Jesus. (Matthew 13:24-30, NIV)

In that parable, Jesus tells the story of a man who owns a field and plants good seed in the fields. But when the wheat comes up, the fields are filled with weeds or tares. Those who work the fields ask the landowner if he sowed only good seed, and where the weeds came from. The landowner, who represents God in this story, says that “an enemy” has done this. (Matthew 13:28, NIV) The workers then ask if the landowner wants them to pull up all the budding weeds. Surprisingly, the landowner says “no” -- because the workers may end up pulling up the budding wheat along with the weeds. So, he says to wait until the harvest, and at that point the wheat will be harvested, and the weeds will be burned.

The parable can be seen as one way Jesus responded to the evil in the world. First of all, evil (the weeds) does not come from God – it comes from “an enemy.” God did *not* do this. It is not a part of God’s will. But when the workers ask if they should jump in and try to sort out the young wheat plants from the weeds, the landowner says to wait. However, he assures them that there will be a harvest in the end when the two will be separated. In other words, the workers may not be able to get out the weeds now without getting rid of the good wheat – so let the experts in harvesting do it at the end. But don’t worry because there will be a harvest – or a final judgment. God will take care of it in the end. (Adapted from *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith* by Thomas G. Long, 2011)

Now some suggest this could be seen as saying we should ignore all evil for now, but other places in the Bible correct that misinterpretation. (1 Thessalonians 5:22, Romans 12:21, NIV) We are to work to constrain evil in our world so that we can all live in peace. And those in authority who work to do that in our world have an important task. That is why we should follow the words of Paul in his first letter to Timothy when Paul says, “I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people — for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior.” (1 Timothy 2:1-3, NIV)

God desires peace and order in our world. We should pray daily for all of those in authority who try to keep the peace. That is why we should pray for all of the leaders in our world to do the right thing in response to tragic events like these. And we should maintain the tension between God’s love for the world and everyone in it and God’s hatred of evil. Also, notice God does not hate people – God hates the evil that people choose to do. There is a difference.

And since we are talking about a time of judgment, we need to remember the scene of the final judgment in Matthew 25 when Jesus says that God’s final judgment will be based on how we treated those who are hungry, thirsty, without a home, naked, and have been imprisoned. (Matthew 25:31-46, NIV) That will be the criteria for how all of us will be judged. That will be the indicator for whether we really live out our faith in Christ. However we end up responding, we need to follow these words of Jesus about the right thing to do.

God loves the world and everyone in it, and God hates evil. So, what is God doing about this? When things like this happen, one of the first responses of people of faith (and sometimes those without faith) is often this: Why doesn’t God do something about this? So, what is God’s answer to the evil in the world? Well, *God’s answer to the evil, sin, and brokenness in the world is Jesus*. As John’s gospel tells us, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” (John 3:16-17, NIV)

God did something – God sent Jesus! The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is God’s answer to the evil and suffering in our world. Jesus comes not only to forgive us of our sins and the sins of the whole world -- but Jesus is also coming as the new king – God’s king – who began a reformation project to set things right. That reformation project began two thousand years ago and has continued throughout history. And it will continue until Christ comes again and all will finally be made right – which is what judgment is really about. Judgment is not normally about

punishment and God beating up on “the bad guys.” God's judgment is about justice, which means setting things right – the way things should be. And that will not be completed until Christ’s second coming when the new earth and the new heaven become one. But until then, we are to work at bringing about God's order and justice in our world here and now as best we can.

People work in different ways to bring order and justice in our world. Have you ever noticed that when events such as the events in Washington take place, one of the responses is often that people light candles? In Paris after the 2015 shootings, people began placing flowers where the shootings took place and they lit candles. I wonder why we do things like that. People who don’t believe in any kind of God still feel moved to light candles. Maybe it is the need for some kind of ritual in our ritual-deprived world – something that goes deeper than words.

Mark Galli, former editor of *Christianity Today* magazine, suggested in response to the Paris shootings that there is more to candle lighting than that. He quoted a Facebook post from Paris that said, “As night falls, let us light a candle at our windows. We are not afraid, we are together.” (Mark Galli, “The Mystery of Hope in Paris”, *Christianity Today*, November 16, 2015) For some, lighting a candle was a sign that we are not alone in this.

But Galli went beyond that to say that this candle lighting echoes the Christian belief that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it. As we read earlier, John’s gospel says, “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.” (John 3:19, NIV) But earlier, John begins his gospel talking about Jesus saying, “In him was life, and that life was the light of all [hu]mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:4-5, NIV)

Jesus is the light that pushes back the darkness – not completely, not yet, but one day it will all be light. For now, we live in hope for what is to come, and we light candles. Anne Frank said of the Nazi horrors, “Look how a single candle can both defy and define the darkness.” The light of Jesus reveals the darkness for what it is, and it gives hope.

So, what do we say and do? Well, today we proclaim in faith and hope that God’s kingdom – the reign of King Jesus – has come into this world. It is at work now, even when it seems otherwise. And one day God’s kingdom will come completely “on earth as it is in heaven.” Until then, we shine the light of Christ into the dark places – believing and knowing that in the end, the darkness will not overcome the light!

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.