

LEAVING LAS VEGAS

Where was God during the 11 minutes of mass murder in Las Vegas on Sunday the 1st of October in the 2017th year of the Lord? Is 2017 even still the “year of the Lord”?

It is often our first response when tragedy comes to ask “Why?” But it is amazing to me how often we also ask, usually in the same breath, “Where is God?” in response to tragedy. If we are believers professing our allegiance to Jesus, who has revealed and continues to reveal the nature of God, we might frame the question more personally, asking “Where were *you*, God?” The nonbeliever might ask that question more cynically and from a distance, keeping God personally out of the equation just by saying “Where *was* God” ... as if, if we were able to somehow answer that question well enough, they might come to understand and believe in God. But we will never be able to answer that question fully enough to convince anyone of anything about the nature of God or the presence of God in the midst of the tragedy.

Psalm 10 stands as a text bemoaning God’s absence and hiding. Our opening verse is: “*Why do you stand so far away, LORD, hiding yourself in troubling times?*” That’s a very human response.

On Sunday evening, October 1st, 22,000 people attended a country music concert closing out the three-day Route 91 Harvest Festival. Shortly after 10pm, Stephen Paddock, aged 64, opened fire on unsuspecting concertgoers for about 11 minutes before police prepared to storm his hotel room. Paddock took his own life before police could enter his room, and the immediate carnage stopped.

Psalm 10 may have been written about 3,000 years ago. The cry and the lament and the wail of the psalmist ring as true and real today as they did 3,000 years ago. This prophetic psalm is “prophetic” in the sense of the word meaning “truth-telling,” not “future-telling.” Verses 8 and 9 say: “*They wait in a place perfect for ambush; from their hiding places they kill innocent people; their eyes spot those who are helpless. They lie in ambush in secret places, like a lion in its lair. They lie in ambush so they can seize those who suffer! They seize the poor, all right, dragging them off in their nets.*”

The day after the massacre, some of the youth of our church were texting and calling Kathy Kipp to ask the kind of questions our human longings want to ask. We wondered together if we would know any of

the victims as more information became available, and based on the concept of “six degrees of separation” I commented I would be surprised if we did NOT know some of the victims or families affected. And sure enough, we now know several of the victims were in our extended circle of families, friends and acquaintances, which makes this tragedy all the more personal and real and not just an exercise in spiritual theorizing.

Several of us held a prayer vigil on Monday, October 2nd, the afternoon after the tragedy, with very little said or spoken except reading Scripture, listening to music and just being together as God’s people ... the *ecclesia* ... the called and gathered people of God. The Psalms were our centerpiece, where we allowed Scripture to speak for itself and come into our hearts as we felt the pain of loss that accompanies every tragedy. Kathy told the story about a young boy of about 8 who came home late for dinner one night. His mother asked “Where have you been, Jason? I was expecting you 30 minutes ago.” Jason explained, “Jimmy and I were playing, and his new Tonka truck broke.” “Oh, so you stayed to help him fix his truck?” she asked, to which Jason replied: “No, I stayed to help him feel sad.”

This is what we do in moments of tragedy. We stay with each other if we need to feel sad.

The following is an excerpt from an NPR story about one of the 58 fatalities, a 23-year-old named Jordan McIldoon from Maple Ridge, Canada:

McIldoon was a heavy-duty mechanic and “self-described, cowboy-boot, tattoo-covered redneck who loved the outdoors,” according to a statement given to the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. by McIldoon’s parents, Al and Angela.

He was attending the concert with his girlfriend, but he died holding the hand of a stranger: Heather Gooze, who was working as a bartender at the concert. She told CNN that several men carried a gravely injured McIldoon to the bar area, then ran out to help others who were wounded. Gooze said she kneeled down to take McIldoon’s hand and could feel his fingers wrap around hers. “I felt, like, a squeeze on my fingers and then I just felt the fingers go loose,” she recalled.

Soon after, McIldoon's cell phone rang – a friend calling to see if he was okay. Gooze told the broadcaster that she answered the call and learned McIldoon's name from the friend. Soon she was also in phone contact with McIldoon's girlfriend, who was in lockdown at a nearby hotel, and his mother back in Canada.

Gooze said she promised them she would stay with his body until authorities came to take him away so that they would know what had happened to him. It took several hours. "I just sat with him," Gooze told CNN. "I would like to think, if it was me, somebody wouldn't let me sit there alone."

What do *we* do when evil strikes? The psalmist says the wicked who lie in ambush think God has forgotten. God has hidden his face and God never sees anything. But what is the response of the faithful? Is it what verse 12 says? "*Get up, LORD! Get your fist ready, God! Don't forget the ones who suffer!*"

These three exclamatory imperatives are directed at God *because* the psalmist knows ... KNOWS ... that God can do something about it. There is no sense in admonishing someone to take action if you think they cannot do anything to change things, and the psalmist *knows* three things: God has *not* forgotten. God has *not* hidden his face. God *does* see *everything*. This is the redemption on the other side of evil. God's goodness can always rise out of evil, and that is what we need to remember ... and I think it is what is hardest to remember in the midst of evil.

My son Stephen is almost 24 years old. He is a loving, caring and empathic soul. When I went to visit him in college at the University of Colorado at Boulder a few years ago, I was astounded that just about every homeless person we encountered all over town would call out "Hey Stevie!" when he would walk by. Stephen explained that he visited with the homeless regularly and brought them food and organized others to do that as well. I tell you this to reflect his "heart." He has a heart for justice for the oppressed, and often the oppressed are those who are vulnerable in some way. During his first year of college, Stephen found himself defending others and getting into trouble himself for coming to their defense. After the third such

occurrence, I tried to give him some “fatherly” advice. I said the following:

“You need to have a plan in your head of what your course of action is going to be when the a**holes of life show up ... because they are *always* going to show up. The key is knowing what your response is going to be when they show up.”

Stephen worked out a plan to exit the situation whenever possible when things felt like they were heating up, and to take the object of the heat-receiving treatment with him if he could. That often meant getting a young lady out of a situation along with himself, and from that time forward he never had another problem in the same vein.

In terms of pure evil, like Stephen Paddock preying on the unsuspecting concertgoers, what is the faithful response?

“We need to have a plan in our heads of what our course of action is going to be when *evil* shows up ... because it is *always* going to show up. The key is knowing what our response is going to be when it shows up.”

There are powerful and amazing stories already coming out of the massacre that are incredible testaments to the goodness of humanity ... a goodness that should rightly be attributed to God and God’s mercy, forgiveness, compassion and sustenance. The psalmist knows that we do not come to this realization very easily on our own, and especially not when things are going along just fine. Verse 14 says of God: *“But you do see! You do see troublemaking and grief, and you do something about it! The helpless leave it all to you. You are the orphan’s helper.”*

But how does God act? What is it that God is doing? We are reminded in Isaiah: *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.”* (Isaiah 55:8 NRS) Yet how quickly do we revert back to wanting God to act the way WE want God to act? *“Get your fist ready, God!”* cries the psalmist. And we make that same cry today. Only that’s not the way God works, as Jesus came to reveal some 1,000 years after the psalmist’s cry. And yet, 2,000 years after Jesus, we still want to cry that same cry. That’s why we need ALL of Scripture and all of our insights over the years and all of the meditations and reflections and revelations of all the saints and people of God ... so that we might see a picture more full and more clearly than looking

at any one part of the puzzle of human life separated and apart from our spiritual life.

Verses 16 and 17 say: *“The LORD rules forever and always! The nations will vanish from his land. LORD, you listen to the desires of those who suffer. You steady their hearts; you listen closely to them”*

How does God act? He does not raise his fist, even though the psalmist wants that; that is not the response that comes from God. God’s response is to listen to the desires of those who suffer. And God steadies their hearts and listens to them ... closely. That is what God does ... and that is what we are to do. Listen closely, and like the little 8-year-old boy Jason, we stay with them and help them feel sad when that is what they need to do.

It is God’s rule and power that will provide justice where justice is needed. It will not come from the ways we think as humans that justice should come. Our hope for eternal justice is demonstrated when we align more fully with God’s plans and God’s ways, and part of that is our response to others when they are in pain and suffering.

Verse 18 finishes: *“... to establish justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that people of the land will never again be terrified.”*

We are becoming numb to “acts of terrorism.” I find it interesting that there is an unwillingness by law enforcement to call the Las Vegas situation “terrorism,” in part because the definition, from the world perspective, is that it would have to “appear that the act was intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, or to try to influence political change,” and none of that can be discerned at this time. But it is clear that people are intimidated, coerced and influenced, even politically, by this event.

What is God’s response, and what will our response be? We step out in faith ... faith translated as TRUST ... and we continue to live lives knowing that God will establish justice for the orphan and the oppressed. And make no mistake about it: I am the orphan and the oppressed ... and you are too. God’s justice is for each one of us, and it is for each of us collectively. It may not come in our lifetime, but we trust that it *will* come. If we truly know that it is possible, then possible is enough. And with that in mind, we live faithfully and fully present *“so that people of the land will never again be terrified.”*

That is God’s response. May it be our response as well. Amen.