

Though the Mountains Tremble

Isaiah 43:1–21, Psalm 46, Acts 9:19b–31

September 16, 2001

On Tuesday, September 11, in the year of our Lord 2001, the mountains shook in the heart of the sea, and the twin man-made mountains in the heart of New York City trembled as they fell back into the earth, as did the Pentagon as it was ripped open. Some of our own church members, family members, and friends were there, in both places. Those we know of so far are alive, but thousands are dead. It is horrible beyond imagining, awful beyond comprehension, staggering beyond our ability to absorb. How could this attack happen? What does this mean? Where do we go from here? These are some of the hard questions put before us.

How could this attack happen? There is an easy answer to this question, and there is a hard answer, and they are both true. The easy answer is that this attack could happen because of the depth and magnitude of human evil and depravity. Human beings have an indeterminate capacity for good and a concomitant indeterminate capacity for evil. The same capabilities of intellect, will, strength, and spirit can be used in either direction. Box cutters can be used to open boxes or to high-jack planes. The ability to fly a plane can be used to crash a plane. Jet fuel can be used to power jet engines or to burn down sky scrapers.

How could this attack happen? The easy answer is that this could happen because devious, resourceful, and committed human beings, following the evil inclination of their hearts, can make it happen. The power and the extent of human evil can shock us, disappoint us, dismay us, and make us weep, but it should never surprise us. As Christians, we know the reality of human sin. We know how deep it runs. We know how far it goes. We know the cost it exacts. So we should never be surprised by it. We, of all people, should not be naive. We should not be caught off guard. We should expect human evil. That is the easy answer, if you will. It is not a pleasant one, but it is true.

How could this attack happen? This question has a hard answer, too. It has a hard answer when it is asked as a hard question, not just, How could this happen?, but, How could God allow this attack to happen? That is the hard question, and the hard answer to it is that we do not know. How could God allow this attack to happen? We simply do not know. It is not enough for us, in our suffering, loss, and grief, to say glibly that God allows human freedom and thus human evil to run its course. There is more to it than that. And we want to know what that more is. But God does not tell us more. The reason or reasons that God has allowed this in all his wisdom and providence are not revealed to us. They are not ours to know. We want to know them, but they are beyond us. That is a hard answer to a hard question.

But if it is not ours to know how or why, at least from the divine perspective, we are led to another question: What does this mean? We are, among other things, creatures who seek meaning. We are children of God, and we are creatures of dust, and we are tool makers and thinkers. We are, also, creatures who seek meaning. It is significant that we are capable of seeking and perceiving meaning. That, by itself, tells us much about the structure of the world and the nature of reality. At the same time, it is also significant that we live in a world where meaning is often partial, fragmentary, and fleeting. So this, too, is a hard question. For an answer to this, we turn to the revealed word of God in the scripture, seeking reassurance. Psalm 46, which inspired Martin Luther to write the hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” says:

God is our refuge and strength,
 a very present help in trouble.
 Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change,
 though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
 though its waters roar and foam,
 though the mountains tremble with its tumult. . . .
 The LORD of hosts is with us;
 the God of Jacob is our refuge. (Psalm 46:1–3, 7)

This language of the world of nature soon yields to the language of cities and nations, of history, politics, and war:

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
 the holy habitation of the Most High.
 God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved;
 God will help her right early.
 The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
 he utters his voice, the earth melts.
 The LORD of hosts is with us;
 the God of Jacob is our refuge. (Psalm 46:4–7)

One group of possible meanings this Psalm rules out is that there is no God, or that God is not with us, or that God has abandoned us. At a superficial level, these would be very attractive answers, because they are easy. What does this mean? These answers would say that it means nothing because there is no God and we live in a meaningless world. That would be an easy answer, but we would soon learn that it is a horrible answer, a desperate answer, and I am glad that it is a false answer. Whatever the trembling of the mountains and the raging of the nations mean, they do not mean that God is not with us.

Conversely, it is our faith that God is with us. We do not believe this simply because of the world. We believe this even despite the world. We believe this even on terrible days, in the face of incomprehensible events, and thus this is a hard answer to a hard question, but it is a true one. “The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge” (Psalm 46:7). We do not know how this attack could happen, or why God would let this happen, but we do know that God has not abandoned us and that God will carry us through.

What more do we know? When we turn to the book of The Acts of the Apostles, we find the Apostle Paul proclaiming that Jesus is “the Son of God” and that Jesus is “the Christ.” Paul “preached boldly in the name of Jesus” and “in the name of the Lord” (Acts 9:20, 22, 27, 29). Not all who heard him liked what they heard, but this is what he said, and it is true. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is God’s Christ. Indeed, Jesus is the Lord.

There are two immediate consequences to this identification. The first is an addition or extension to Psalm 46. That says, “The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge” (Psalm 46:7). We now know that this is not only the God of Jacob but also the God and Father of Jesus Christ. We can now say, “The LORD of hosts is with us; the God and Father of Jesus Christ is our refuge.” The Lord and God who has come to us to live with us as one of us in Jesus Christ

is our refuge. He knows our weakness. “For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14). And he does not abandon us.

The second consequence of this identification is that God is not absent from our suffering. As hard as it is for us to admit and say, we are all sinners, all of us in this room, all listening by way of radio, everyone in the world. Not only were the terrorists sinners, but also all the people who were injured and all the people who died in the attack on America were sinners. Now, the attack was not about the punishment of sin, or else we all would have died. That is not to say that sin does not have consequences, but that is another matter.

What I am saying here is that while we are all sinners, there was one among us who was not a sinner: Jesus the Son of God, Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Lord. And yet, he suffered. He suffered for us. He took on the sin of the world. He voluntarily died a slow and horrible death on the cross for your sake and for mine. Jesus the Son of God, the Christ, and the Lord, was “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). Whatever we suffer, we do not suffer alone. He has been there before us, and he goes there with us. God does not abandon us. He goes through it with us. This, too, is a hard answer. And it is true.

This answer is included in Isaiah 43, which forms the basis of the hymn “How Firm a Foundation,” which reads in part:

When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
For I will be near thee, thy troubles to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

We are in the deep waters now. And God has not abandoned us.

Moreover, not only does God accompany us through evil, but also God is not defeated by evil, and can even bring good out of it. The greatest example of this is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ which led to the forgiveness of our sin, the resurrection, and the promise of eternal life. So it is that Jesus promises to be with us and not to leave us orphaned. There are other meanings, and hard lessons to be learned, but they must wait for another day.

Where do we go from here? We are at war. That is where we go. That is a horrible thing to say. We certainly do not want it. But one of the first marks of maturity is the facing up to reality. And the present reality of our lives in the United States of America is that we are at war. This, too, is a hard answer. How can it possibly be justified? The Apostle Paul writes:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:14–21)

These are the implications of the faith for individual Christians. So, revenge cannot be a motive for us. That is not a justification. We must refrain from it.

At the same time, the Apostle Paul writes:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer. (Romans 13:1–4)

The Christian church has understood this to mean that the nations of the world exist at the pleasure and will of God and that the nations of the world have the God-given authority to protect themselves from crime within and from attack from the outside. The governing authorities, the rulers of the nation, have the authority to use the sword, the instruments of death, in a way that individuals do not. Revenge is not an appropriate motive. National self-defense is a legitimate motive. That is not to say that our efforts will necessarily succeed. It is certainly not to say that we will be without sin. But it is to say that it would not be appropriate for the nation not to respond.

Where do we go from here? We are at war. That is where we go from here. That is a horrible thing to say. We do not want it. But the present reality of our lives in the United States of America is that we are at war. So we must face that. Now is not a time to be afraid. Already we have heard voices full of fear, voices in this country warning against going too far before we have even started. But it is unlikely that we will go too far. It is far more likely that we will not go far enough or that we will go in the wrong direction. It is our duty as Christians and as the Christian church to pray for the leaders of our nation that they will be guided in wisdom, righteousness, and courage. They have a hard task before them. Perhaps restraint will be a part of that task. But the fulfillment of their duty will also be a part of that task. We look forward to the day of peace, to the end of all war, and to the establishment of God's kingdom:

Come, behold the works of the LORD,
 how he has wrought desolations in the earth.
 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
 he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear,
 he burns the chariots with fire!
 "Be still, and know that I am God.
 I am exalted among the nations,
 I am exalted in the earth!" (Psalm 46:8–10)

Someday war will end. But it is clear that that day of the Lord has not yet come. Now is a different day, "and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentations" (Isaiah 43:14).

On Tuesday, September 11, the twin man-made mountains in the heart of New York City trembled as they fell back into the earth, as did the Pentagon as it was ripped open. How could

this attack happen? What does this mean? Where do we go from here? These are some of the hard questions put before us. The gospel of Jesus Christ gives us some answers. And the word of God gives us this assurance: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult” (Psalm 46:1–3). The LORD of hosts is with us; the God and Father of Jesus Christ is our refuge.

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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