

Psalm 19:1-4 The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork. One day tells its tale to another, and one night imparts knowledge to another. Although they have no words or language, and their voices are not heard, their sound has gone out into all lands, and their message to the ends of the world. (57)

Introduction¹

“For waywardness kills the simple,
and the complacency of fools destroys them;
but those who listen to me will be secure
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”
(Proverbs 1:32-33)

On September 11th, 2001, at around 7:30 in the morning, I walked from the PATH station on 33rd street and headed over to my office, located 20 street blocks (about a mile) from the station in midtown, Manhattan. I walked through Times Square, weaving and wending by the command of traffic lights; walked by St. Pats, by the windows of Saks 5th Avenue, Rock Plaza, and arrived at 53rd and 5th Avenue. The walk was brilliant; the air was crisp, early fall was settling in; the sky was a bright blue, not a cloud in the sky; and the sun was bright and warm. This Tuesday seemed to promise perfection. Nothing could have prepared me for the next few hours.

What felt like moments later and just settling into the glorious banality of office life, a coworker showed up, wide eyed at my desk. A massive passenger plane flew into the North tower of the World Trade Center, just a little over a mile away from where I sat. “Like ‘hit’ one of the towers?” I asked. “No, like...*into*,” was my colleague’s response. Disbelief. *What?! How is that even possible? Was it an accident?*

I worked on the analyst floor with the guru of gaming and leisure stocks; we didn’t have TVs enough to manage the crowd, so we headed downstairs to the “Floor” (the Trading Floor). We crowded around every TV we could find and watched the billowing smoke of one of our iconic buildings comprising our skyline take the foreground, rendering that bright blue sky as a frame for destruction. As we watched, along with the world, another plane hit the South Tower. It was official: our world was under attack. We were immediately dismissed from work and released into the streets of New York City ... But to where? To safety? Somewhere? The city went on lockdown and no one could enter or leave.

Proverbs 1:20-33

¹ The following is adapted and expanded from this: <https://laurenrelarkin.com/2018/09/14/god-is-in-the-gallows-god-is-in-the-rubble-homily-on-luke-28-20-in-honor-of-9-11/>

““Wisdom cries out in the street;
 in the squares she raises her voice.
 At the busiest corner she cries out;
 at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
 “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
 How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
 and fools hate knowledge?
 Give heed to my reproof;
 I will pour out my thoughts to you;
 I will make my words known to you.”
 (Proverbs 1:20-23)

After getting to the entrances of Morgan Stanley (47th and Broadway), where my father worked, I was told, “We sent everyone home a while ago,” said the officer holding guard. Thinking fast, I pulled out my PalmPilot to check his address and doubled back heading over to my big brother’s apartment near Grand Central Station. The crowd of people was thick. Yet there was a calm about everything. Cellphones didn’t work, because the towers were down... We just moved as we could and as kind as we could. You’d think it would be crazy, like movie crazy but it wasn’t; fear like that manifests in disbelief; disbelief mixed with fear is very quiet.

I entered the apartment building and before I could say anything, the door man took one look at me and said, “Go; he’s looking for you. Go!” 7 floors later and I was embraced by the biggest hug I’ve ever received and given.

By a little after noon, Manhattan was quiet. It was so quiet. Eerie quiet. Big cities **never** get quiet. But this very big city was very silent. Nothing seemed to move apart from the lone pedestrian or the occasional fire truck, police car, or ambulance that zoomed down large avenues, sirens blaring, lights flashing, headed to Ground Zero. I could (and did) walk down the center of 5th avenue; it was the first and last time I’d do such a thing.

Manhattan and the surrounding areas would never be the same. We couldn’t go back to “normal” because that didn’t exist anymore. “Back to” isn’t the trajectory for “normal” when you’re constantly reminded of the horror and tragedy when walking by walls, bus-stands, and bulletin boards, plastered with pictures of loved ones who were *never* found, *never* recovered, *never* buried. Months and months, well into 2002; images of the once living haunting and following us until we were numb to their frozen smiles and twinkling eyes.

I was a new Christian, like baby new. Not even a year into walking with the Lord and here I was faced with evil, with tragedy, with suffering, and sorrow, grief and mourning. Where was God? Where was this God that I had just given my life to? There were no words being spoken, no waters parting, no rainbows filling the air. God was silent. And for many, and maybe even for me, God was dead or at least appeared to be.

“Because I have called and you refused,
 have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,
 and because you have ignored all my counsel
 and would have none of my reproof,
 I also will laugh at your calamity;
 I will mock when panic strikes you,
 when panic strikes you like a storm,
 and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
 when distress and anguish come upon you.”
 (Proverbs 1:24-27)

All the tragedy and all the sorrow and suffering we experience individually and collectively draw up from the depths of our being and our soul and our mind desperate questions. *Why?* Where *were* you? Where are *you* God? Why didn't God stop the tragedy? Divine silence even more than divine judgment causes dis-ease, anxiety, and substantial pain in our very being. Where is God when we are in pain? Where is the Divine Comforter when our hearts are torn asunder through loss? *Where* was God on 9/11? And as fast as the questions arise so do the answers die.

I've spent most of my academic life in the pursuit of the question: where is God when we suffer? Where is comfort in divine silence? And there are times—like 9/11—where I come up wordless. The only I answer I have is the tears I shed because suffering is real; and I hate it. And I cry because I can, for there are those who can no longer cry. Where is God in moments of suffering, pain, grief, sorrow? How is God for us when some of us are now widows and orphans, left destitute and grieving? Is this suffering divine judgment?

“Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;
 they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.
 Because they hated knowledge
 and did not choose the fear of the LORD,
 would have none of my counsel,
 and despised all my reproof,
 therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way
 and be sated with their own devices.”
 (Proverbs 1:28-31)

But there are times when I see clearly where God is: right there *in* the suffering. There among those who have breathed their last; there with those who are not even close to shedding their last tear. With the child who will never know their parent; the lover who will never hold their

beloved again; the parent who has only that last email from their adult child. God is in the gallows²; God is in the rubble.

Conclusion

Woman Wisdom in our Proverbs passage speaks not to us—those caught in earthly calamity and suffering—but to death and his foolish lackeys: pain, suffering, grief, sorrow, violence, evil, horror, disaster, etc., and anyone who follows death's lead. Fear of the Lord will not protect me from earthly pain and suffering, sorrow and grief; but it is my life amid them. The cosmic battle is lopsided, leaning in the favor of the God of life.³ God of Life, Love, comes for God's people and raises them into God's self, into life; and therein death, pain, suffering, grief, sorrow, violence, evil, horror is condemned while Wisdom watches and laughs.

God is in our suffering, breathing for us when we can't, holding us upright when our knees shake and quake. And the only reason I can say this is because Jesus the Christ, hung on a cross in solidarity with those who suffer in this world. Jesus was raised on the third day to be the fulfillment of the promise of life to those with whom he is in solidarity. Our God knows suffering; our God is the suffering God, our God dwells amongst suffering. This is one of the most radical things about the Church's gospel proclamation: Jesus the Christ, God of very God, suffered in solidarity with the suffering and brings life to them.

God does dwell with those who are suffering. The dead do not suffer for they are in the fullness of God; it's those who have been left behind who suffer, and God is in their midst. When tragedy hits, when suffering lands, when catastrophe wreaks havoc, there God is amid God's people as we gather, come close, push towards each other in our suffering and pain and grief. God was at Ground zero every time a new search and rescue team stepped up to help; God was there in every emergency room as doctors and surgeons and nurses pulled together to mend the broken and resuscitate those they could; God was there in the massive lines of people eager to do whatever they could even if it meant waiting hours to offer a pint or two of blood; God was there in that quiet whispered hello from your neighbor and in the brief moment of eye-contact in passing; God was there in the meals that were brought, the arms that embraced, and the many services performed. And God continued to be present on that Manhattan Island, the surrounding state of New York, New England, the nation, and the world as people pulled together and prayed, but more: when they showed up.

God is only as silent and dead if I stay silent and dead. But that silence is broken and that death turned to new life when I, a suffering grieving human being, reach out to you a fellow suffering and grieving human being; that silence is broken and that death turned to new life when I use

² Inspired by Jurgen Moltmann and Elie Wiesel; Moltmann in *The Crucified God* articulates a powerful story from Wiesel about the hanging of three Jews in a concentration camp. 273-4

³ Bruce K. Waltke *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15* TNICOT Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004. 204

my words and my deeds to be in solidarity with you as you suffer and grieve. God is present in suffering because we are present with each other in suffering.