

Finding Hope In The Midst Of Tragedy

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I won't forget where I was when I heard about the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. Some events, like the Challenger explosion and the attacks on 9/11, are so big that they etch details of the moment onto our minds. Otherwise minute details about time and place are forever branded on our memory. While those details will vary, certainly Sandy Hook affected all of us deeply.

I've spent over twenty years studying and investigating homicides - many of them in schools around the world. While death is always tragic, this is a part of the work I do and normally these events don't create a visceral reaction in me, but when I heard what happened at Sandy Hook, I just wanted to close my eyes and pretend it didn't happen.

I had been on a camping trip and the first thing to greet me when I started my truck and turned the radio on was news of this shooting. I couldn't bear to hear about any more children whose lives were taken by a gunman whose selfish, demented logic made his behavior seem reasonable to him. I turned the radio off and drove home in silence.

Even though the radio was off and I was alone for the next two hours, I could hear predictable conversations in my head. I've heard them hundreds of times. News commentators and pundits would be droning on about how video games, violent movies, or music must have caused it. Others predictably would be screaming for gun control, despite the obvious fact that this person already broke a whole host of ineffective laws.

I felt certain that religious leaders, pastors, and Sunday school teachers would use the occasion in coming days to describe how this was a clear indication of sin in the world and how perhaps this was a sign of the end times.

We all would struggle to find an answer to the question, "How could this have happened again?"

As I was preparing this article, I just happened to come across a newspaper article I wrote following the attacks on our country on September 11, 2001. As I read that article, I found my words to be a sobering reminder that tragedies have come before, none of our current reactions are novel, and I suspect many other tragedies lie ahead.

At times like these, I sometimes try to imagine what it was like to be a Christian in the first few centuries after the resurrection of Jesus - a time when horrifying persecutions were routine. Christians were flayed, hanged, beheaded, crucified, and used for sport in the Coliseum. Imagine if Twitter had been around in those days:

Hashtag persecutions# - "Brother Dominic was just taken to the Coliseum. Destined to be eaten by animals. Others to follow. Where is Jesus? He said he would return for us. Surely these are the end times. God save us."

What was it like for men and women during the Black Death, a plague that no one really understood? The disease claimed one third of the population of Europe. Headaches, nausea, and fever were followed by the rapid onset of buboes and eventually by gruesome bleeding and painful death. Nearly every home on the continent was touched in some way by this unforgiving disease that haunted Europe like a specter. Many must have thought that the wrath of God had surely come upon them.

Maybe "these are the end times" was uttered by the early Puritans who came to the New World for freedom of religion only to starve to death, die of exposure and disease, or to be killed by warring factions in the strange new lands they inhabited. Maybe women burying their fathers, husbands, and sons who were killed on the battlefields of Gettysburg, Antietam, or Bull Run held their hands up to God, being sure times could not be

any worse.

We've lived through two major world wars, numerous conflicts, massacres, assassinations, threats of annihilation, storms, earthquakes, and other acts of God that have always been a part of our history and, sadly, they will be a very real part of our future.

Seeing the bodies of children, their lives torn from them in their most vulnerable and innocent years, almost seems like more than we can bear, but the truth is we have been there before. The tragedy of Sandy Hook was not something new. Instead it was a reminder of what has always been. We live in an imperfect world. When things are going well, it is easy to pretend tragedy happens to other people in other places, and yet when death comes knocking on our own doors, it seems so unfair, unexpected, and shocking.

When I'm faced with a painful tragedy -- when I find myself thinking, "Why me?" -- I have to remind myself, "Why not me?" Being a Christian does not guarantee that my life will be free from pain or loss.

Think of the fate of the apostles. According to church tradition, at least five of them were stoned, beheaded, crucified, or impaled. What about Paul? He was determined and committed to Christ. Yet he was thrice beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, and eventually executed. Rather than being freed from pain, it almost seems as though being a Christian increases the odds that we will experience pain.

Instead of believing we should avoid tragedy, something we could never do, I suggest that managing tragedy is our challenge. Disasters have an uncanny ability to fog the clarity of the truth that God is with us, despite our pain and loss. Our painful experiences can, instead, serve to strengthen us by reminding us that this world is not our home.

Could it be that it is for this reason that Paul reminds us in Philippians 3:13-14 "this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

The Psalmist (56:8) reminds us that we are never alone, no matter what we feel like. "You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle," he says. The imagery of God collecting my tears in a bottle reminds me that I can face events like Sandy Hook without losing hope. My God is bigger than man, stronger than loss, and more enduring than pain. With these truths in my heart, I can face a new day.