

“When Life Falls to Pieces”

a sermon by

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**Text: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mounts shake in the heart of the sea...”
(Psalm 46:1-2)**

On Tuesday of this past week a massive earthquake, measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale, struck the island nation of Haiti, bringing an incredible amount of loss of life, property damage, and inflicting an already suffering people with even more poverty, hunger, lack of water and medical supplies. For some the earthquake in Haiti seemed especially cruel – an act of God on a nation already reeling under human misery.

But as David Brooks pointed out in this week’s *New York Times*, the story in Haiti is not so much the story of a natural disaster as it is a story about abject poverty. It is a story about poorly constructed buildings, bad infrastructure and terrible public services. Brooks pointed out that in 1989 a major earthquake with the same magnitude of 7.0 struck the Bay area in Northern California. Sixty-three people were killed. In Haiti the Red Cross estimates that between 45,000 and 50,000 people have died and the number could be higher.

One of the haunting questions with which Christians struggle is the question of natural evil. Four years ago a tsunami struck in the Philippines. Over 230,000 people died in its wake. In the face of tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters, the question is raised in terms of why a good God allows these things to happen.

It is particularly painful in places like Haiti where so much suffering and poverty already exist. Haiti was in crisis before the earthquake.

I.

Psalm 46 is one of the Psalms of Zion that invites Israel to put its trust in God. It is one of the most familiar of the Psalms and begins with the phrase: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in the time of trouble.” (vs. 1)

This Psalm inspired Martin Luther to write his great hymn “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” and Christians through the ages have seen in this Psalm a call to trust God even in the most difficult circumstances.

The Psalm has three distinct parts. The first three verses are a reminder that God’s sovereignty extends to the world of the created order. The Psalm speaks of the “mountains shaking in the heart of the sea, of waters roaring and foaming, of mountains trembling with tumult.” All of these are images of natural disasters and are consistent with the reports of those who were in Port-au-Prince on Tuesday.

The second and third sections of the Psalm 9 (verses 4-7 and verses 8-11) speak of the threat, not of natural disasters, but of historical disasters. These sections remind the people of Israel that God is not only in charge of the natural order, but that God is the Lord of all the nations of the earth. God has the power to break the bow and to shatter the spear. (vs. 9)

The Psalm is directed against two very distinct forms of evil: destruction and death that is a part of the natural order; as well as the destruction and death that comes from wars, oppression, and exploitation.

As such, it raises for us the question of how a person responds when life goes to pieces.

II.

To be sure, there is something horrible about events that occur such as the earthquake in Haiti. Paul Tillich once observed that the painting by Matthias Grunewald, “The Crucifixion,” was the greatest portrayal of the incarnation in visual art. The basis for this judgment is the sheer horror of the dead body of Jesus on the cross and the obvious anguish of those who stood at the foot of the cross. The painting depicts in visual form the theological question of the incarnation. How can this man be the Son of God?

Physical evil is devastating in events such as the earthquake in Haiti. Last week as we watched the news reports, it was difficult not to be overwhelmed by the sheer power of death and dead bodies in almost every place one looked.

There was also the terrible perplexity of why it seemed so difficult to distribute the food and water and medicine that was sitting at the airport. When faced with this type of suffering, it is difficult not to ask the question of why God allows this kind of suffering to exist.

Oftentimes, we refer to events like earthquakes and hurricanes as “acts of God.” In fact, many of these occurrences are manifestations of the world that God has created. Scientists have known for some time that certain tectonic plates exist under the earth’s surface. From time to time these plates shift and can cause things like earthquakes and even the giant tsunami waves.

To be sure, there are times in which the created order seems wild and out of control. But for the most part the created order is known for its reliability and consistency. There are certain natural laws that cannot be broken. Things always fall down rather than up. Fire is always hot; ice is always cold. Sunshine, rain and snow, seedtime and harvest come in ways that are predictable.

These laws of nature can sometimes wreak great havoc. A car traveling at a certain speed that hits a tree or wall will have a devastating effect. In human affairs the consistency of the universe has both its benign and terrifying qualities.

All of us have the responsibility of living our lives in the context of a world which we can only partly understand. We can conclude from this that the world is cold and impersonal or we can relate it to the words in the Sermon on the Mount, “But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, o you of little faith?”(Matthew 6: 30, 32)

Thus, we can accept the reliability and consistency of the created order as God’s gracious gift.

III.

Sometimes, we experience the devastation of life not in terms of natural disasters like earthquakes and hurricanes but in accidents of human experience.

Some years ago someone shared with me a book by Nicholas Wolterstorff, a Christian philosopher who teaches at Yale University. The book is entitled *Lament for a Son* and was written by Wolterstorff after the death of his son Eric.

Eric was adventuresome young man who loved mountain hiking. He was hiking with some friends in Austria when he was involved in an accident that cost him his life.

His father remembers the phone call that came at 3:30 PM on a bright sunny day in June.

“Mr. Wolterstorff?”

“Yes.”

“Is this Eric’s father?”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Wolterstorff, I must give you some bad news.”

“Yes.”

“Eric has been climbing in the mountains and has had an accident.”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Wolterstorff, I must tell you, Eric is dead. Mr. Wolterstorff, are you there? You must come at once! Mr. Wolterstorff, Eric is dead.”

“For three seconds,” the father writes, “I felt the peace of resignation: arms extended, limp son in hand, peacefully offering him to someone – Someone. Then the pain – cold burning pain.”

Sometimes tragedy comes that suddenly and out of the blue: a phone call on a Sunday afternoon, a knock on the door at night, and suddenly we are face to face with a tragedy beyond our ability to comprehend.

The Christian witness is that the last word in every human situation is the grace of God. The Apostle Paul writes of God’s word to him that said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (II Corinthians 12:9)

These types of personal tragedies are overwhelming and many people struggle to understand how these things happen. John Calvin was insistent that all things that happen are part of God's will. But at the same time there are things which happen that are against his will.

It is clear that God has created the world in such a fashion that there is a great deal of human freedom. Sometime accidents do happen. There are some things over which we have no control.

But, it is also important to hold fast to our confidence of God's love and God's ability to provide for us even in circumstances in which we cannot understand.

IV.

This leads us then to a remarkable fact of faith and that is that often we find God not in the peaceful and beautiful aspects of our lives, but sometimes in those places of wilderness where God seems most remote – not in moments of calm and serenity, but in the brutal times when life goes to pieces.

The Book of Exodus tells us that Moses found God in, of all places, the middle of the Sinai desert.

Some years ago there was a physician by the name of Wilfred Grenfell who was struggling in his medical practice. The demands of his practice had produced a terrible case of burnout in him and so he decided that he was going to have to go somewhere to get away from the pressures that were squeezing the very life out of him. So he went on a trip to Labrador on a gala vacation cruise, visiting the strange coast of that desolate country. He found there something he had never expected. There were hundreds of people who had never seen or been treated by a doctor.

Listen to his words: "I attended nine hundred people who never would have seen a doctor if I had not been there." That got to him. He came back to the Chicago determined he would be a missionary to Labrador and he became one of the most famous missionaries of his generation.

The Bible is replete with this kind of experience: Moses in the wilderness finding God in a burning bush; the great prophet of the Exile with his people in Babylon; Job, in the midst of terrible suffering, yet crying out to God, "I have heard of you through the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you." The Old Testament is filled with this kind of experience.

As for the New Testament, there is Calvary. Can any of us imagine a less likely place to find God than being placed on a cross?

Soft occasions do bring out the best in people – never. Rather in those formidable hours when life is falling apart for us – that is the place we are most likely to find grace.

I do not know why this is so but I do know it is so. Where did Jesus say, "Not my will, but thy will be done" – in Gethsemane. When did Martin Luther write his hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"? When he was risking his life.

I do not know about you but I bear you this witness. My deepest faith in God came not so much from those Galilean times in my life where God clothed the lilies so that “Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these,” but from those times when the rain descended and the floods came and the winds blew and beat, and God was there so that the house did not fall.

One last word. If a person is to find God at time of life falling to pieces, it is very likely that this person had found God in those times when life was not falling apart.

Two weeks ago I reminded all of us that one thing that each of us can resolve in a New Year is the regular attendance of worship. Surely, that is one of the most likely places to find God and if we can find God there, how much more likely it will be to find God in the unlikely places as well.

Amen.