

Sermon—November 18, 2007

The Very Reverend Dr. Philip C. Linder

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The God that I Believe In

Several weeks ago we witnessed the terrible and devastating fires in the San Diego area over a long number of days, fires that were fueled by the Santa Anna winds. Thousands of people were evacuated from their communities and hundreds of homes, businesses, and institutions were completely destroyed. And as we watched the news each day there was a pervasive sense of our vulnerability as human beings to such natural disasters.

In the middle of these days, I literally stopped my morning routine to watch and listen to a pastor in San Diego as he was interviewed on CNN about the complete loss of the physical structure of their church. But what really gave me great pause was his faith statement that the fire was God's way, God's plan, for getting the attention of this community of faith and leading them to a new place. This was clearly a strong statement of faith; I prayed for him and his congregation. And I said to myself, "Wow—same God, same Jesus, and yet a theology, a belief system, that I could never believe, preach, use as pastoral counsel, or derive from the study of Holy Scripture.

Most recently there has again been this understanding of God espoused by some with relation to the seven students from USC and Clemson that lost their lives in the tragic North Carolina beach house fire. Several have either written me or called, some wanting to engage in discussion, and some just wanting to get me straight about God; and, several believing that this was a part of God's plan for these young students, their parents, their families, their friends, and their universities. So what is it that you believe about God's relationship to such tragedies, natural disasters, illnesses, famine, and even the death of a child?

There is no question about the providence of God with respect to God's created universe. We gather together each Sunday to declare in Word and prayer that God is divine and omnipotent. Yes stated simply God is ever-present and in control. As the psalmist declares: *O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth... When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? (Psalm 8)* And we also gather together each Sunday to proclaim through the celebration of the holy Eucharist that God sent his only Son, Jesus the Christ to come among us, to live and die as one of us, so that we might receive forgiveness of our sins and receive the gift of eternal life. And it is Jesus that actually sheds light upon our beliefs and understanding about the eternal question of "Why" awful things like a child dying, a diagnosis of cancer, or a church burning to the ground can occur? However, first we must begin with Genesis.

The story of first humanity, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, is one that when we examine from our point of reference in Christ Jesus, is an explanation of why God's creation is not perfect. It is not that the universe was not created perfectly, but rather it is that out of the great love for the creation and especially for humanity, God gave us free will, or freedom to choose. And when Adam and Eve freely chose against the will of God, sin, death, and evil entered the world. Paradise was lost. We call this the "fall of creation," and because of this event there is disease...there is disaster...there is tragedy...there is death...there is sin. The world is not a Garden of Eden. And it is for this that in the fullness of time God sent his only Son, Jesus, into the world to restore our relationship with God through the possibility of forgiveness of our sins and eternal life when we die.

I have not had any conversation with the parents of the students that died. And if one of those parents came to me and told me that they believed their child's death was part of God's plan for them, I pastorally would never challenge them, but assure them instead of God's love, mercy, and our compassion. Yet that would not change my faith that it is not God who causes such things, but rather the fact that this world is one that because of evil such events can occur. Could God stop it? Absolutely! Why does God sometimes intervene when someone is terribly ill and miraculously heals and at other times a loved one despite our faith and intense prayers dies is indeed a mystery? Yes there is mystery in our faith—St. Paul told us in his Letter to the Corinthians that now we see in a mirror dimly and someday—in eternity and the end times that Jesus speaks of in today's gospel—we shall see face to face.

As Episcopalians in the great tradition of Anglicanism we believe that Jesus came into the world to live and die as one of us, so that God feeling the human suffering of evil could die once for all and for all time. The gift of free will from God continued—and human sin did not end, but now there was a path through the cross back to a right relationship with God. This is forgiveness and redemption...this is grace.

So no, I cannot believe in a God that takes young lives as part of a plan, burns a church to the ground to strengthen a congregation, or gives us cancer to test us. We can use the bible, especially the Old Testament, to attempt to proof-test a God that would do such things. However, the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ established a new relationship with God. And it is only when I look to the cross of Jesus and his resurrection that I find understanding, comfort, healing, and hope in the most difficult of times that we experience.

The great German theologian of the 20th century, Karl Barth, wrote extensively about the "suffering God." He believed, as do I, that because God became man in Jesus, God knows what it is to suffer so that when evil befalls us God is intimate with our pain and is compassionate. God literally suffers with us and is merciful. Our hope as Christians is in a God that is compassion and walks right alongside us when we suffer and mourn. And we believe that God can take the most awful of events in our lives and turn them into opportunities for growth, grace, and new life in Him through His Son Jesus Christ. That is the God that I believe in. +Amen.

