

Looking for God in All the Wrong Places

I Kings 19:1-4, 9-13

Last Sunday morning, long before our Children and Youth Sunday celebration, the early headlines I noticed posted overnight to my phone were alarming, but not accurately revealing: “Several patrons shot in an Orlando nightclub, Gunman holding hostages.” I took note of the brief report, but didn’t grasp the gravity of the news.

As the morning unfolded and preparations were being made prior to the service, more notifications came to my phone and iPad, and I briefly glanced at the horrifying updates: “At least twenty people killed in an Orlando gay bar by lone gunman claiming ties to ISIS.” The numbers now reported were along the lines of Newtown and no longer the run-of-the-mill gun violence we’ve grown accustomed to in this country. I mentioned what I was hearing to a few others who were then arriving at church, and nearly all were unaware of the unfolding tragedy.

I debated making reference to it at the “Welcome and Announcements” time, since we often pause for prayer in times of national crisis. But I refrained, in large part because of the situation in Florida was still quite fluid and accurate information was still unconfirmed. I also declined to mention it because the spirit of the morning was clearly upbeat and lighthearted, with our children and youth leading us in a marvelous time of worship. Why should I dampen the spirit; why introduce more tragedy into our children’s world, which is already overwhelmed with violence? Why ruin a God-inspired moment such as this?

After the service, I like many felt inspired and delighted with what we had experienced. The Spirit of God was apparent in Noank Baptist, clearly evident in the beautiful lives of our children, the extraordinary music, and

the remarkable sense of goodness and oneness in our shared community. Even some of our visitors remarked how special this congregation seems to be. God is indeed in this place.

But as the day passed into the afternoon, I turned to the continuing news coverage of what occurred at the Pulse nightclub during Sunday's earliest hours. The number of dead was climbing, eventually topping out at 49 innocent victims, with dozens more being treated in area hospitals. This was a tragedy of incredible magnitude targeting the LGBTQ community, but one also impacting the Latino community (since the dance club was featuring Latin night and many of the dead were young Hispanics) and the Muslim community (since the gunman claimed ties to ISIS, adding to the insipid Islamophobia in our society). The entire region around Orlando was already reeling from the previous night's senseless shooting of singer, Christina Grimmie, murdered immediately following her concert. Predictably before the day was out, the horrific slaughter at the Pulse nightclub unleashed a Pandora's Box of political scapegoating and social media ugliness, reflective of our most violent and shameful elements.

In the ensuing days, the American public has continued a collective march through this valley of the shadow of death. We've learned about the shooter himself, a deeply troubled and violent man who appears to have had more of a toxic mix of homophobia and mental illness than ideological convictions behind his crime. We've come to know about the victims—a mournful chorus for those who, in their youth, had so much potential in life and now in death bring such sadness to our souls. We've heard from survivors, many of whom suffer from "survivor's guilt" as much as relief from living through this nightmare. With tears streaming down faces, they individually recount the horror of seeing their friends and lovers die in the

darkness, many choosing religious words to express their heart's anguish. It is a place of spiritual darkness. How does one thank God for protection when it was not granted to someone else? Where was divine mercy for those left lying in pools of their own blood?

There are no easy, pat answers for why some are saved from death, while others aren't. Of course, some rudely offered them anyway over the past week, such as the Baptist preacher in Sacramento who rejoiced that this terrible slaughter occurred, proclaiming that God's wish is to eliminate "sodomites" from the earth. He illustrates why so many within the LGBTQ community already have felt targeted by religious people and despised by God, sometimes cruelly rejected by their own families when they came out, or callously condemned by religious beliefs and traditions and spiritual leaders who are quick to judge millions of people because they don't meet their criteria for love. I can only imagine how horrifying it must have been for club patrons to have this rare sanctuary of safety suddenly violated by a crazed killer, and then slowly dying in the darkness, fearfully losing a life they had been told for so many years to morally hate. Where is the divine justice in such a desolate moment?

One of the many things I've pondered this week is just how unknowable God can be at times. Most of us have little trouble identifying the ways that God is present here in our church, much like we did last Sunday morning. But what about in places like the Pulse nightclub? Why do so many around this country—people who are kind and decent otherwise—assume God wasn't there? How is anyone to know?

It angers me how often sacred traditions and religious communities (particularly conservative ones) feel the need to impose their beliefs on how God's presence can be with people and places apart from their own

sanctuaries or safety. Doesn't it follow, if God's love is limitless, how can anyone impose limits on who God loves? If God's mercy knows no bounds, why are so many people certain there are moral gatekeepers for access to divine grace?

It's no wonder people are giving up on organized religion, especially when it continues to perpetuate and embody the tribal sins of the past! If we cannot allow our understanding of ancient texts to evolve with human experience and knowledge, if we can't see that the world today is much different than it was thousands of years ago, if we can't recognize that sexual orientation is a whole lot more complex than making simple moral choices, then are we any better than the Pharisees, who cherished their sacred traditions more than the people around them? Didn't Jesus make it clear time and time again that Pharisees were simply wrong and were looking for God in all the wrong places?

In all candor, as much as I love reading and preaching from biblical texts, as much as I value them, I don't worship them, nor do I find them very reliable for universally valuing and understanding people. There are tribal biases, communal interests, and bitter rivalries inherent to the stories of ancient Israel. You and I cannot easily apply in our present context a literal reading drawn from an ancient worldview without ending up with someone's blood on our hands. There are many commandments and stories that have lost their usefulness if they are interpreted literally and if we're hoping to reduce the amount of prejudice, hostility, and violence current to our times. The point of having a brain and a conscience is to think things through, gain a broader perspective, discern what seems true, and disregard what seems to run against the better wisdom for the moment.

Why? Because human life and civilization are very complex and divine influence is very dynamic. Ancient texts usually dramatize stories with wide-sweeping, oversimplifying generalizations, portraying entire populations in a binary manner, as either good or evil, right or wrong, allies or enemies of God. That's fine if we can recognize the rhetorical nature of many biblical texts.

However, either/or judgments about people are impossible to maintain without distorting some measure of truth and reality. Human beings are not two-dimensional binary creatures; every one of us is a mix of good and evil, of right and wrong, of being in synch or in conflict with God. For that reason, we are not in a position to ever presume we know where God will always be found, or in whom God will be known, or through whom God will be revealed. God is not beholden to tribal needs, interests, or prejudices—no matter how sacred and orthodox our traditions and beliefs appear to be.

Our story for today expresses a bit of this in the complexity of character we find in the person of Elijah. This great prophet—perhaps second only to Moses in the Hebrew tradition—was a mix of good and evil, of right and wrong, of being in synch or in conflict with God. We see the same with all the great figures of the Bible, i.e., Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Rebekah, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, Saul, David, Esther, and the like. Everyone was a hero, but received mixed reviews on their character or wisdom.

Certainly, most lionize Elijah's greatness as the only remaining prophet in Israel during the reign of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Some will note his amazing feat of conjuring up divine power to defeat the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel in the theatrics of burning up the

waterlogged altar. Some will proclaim his righteousness because of Elijah's remarkable miracles of raising the dead or feeding the crowds or ascending up to heaven, stories that appear to Christians as if Jesus took a page out of Elijah's playbook. This is the legend, but only part of the man Elijah was.

The less-than-stellar side is evidenced in his ruthless zeal which accounted for the slaughter of the prophets of Baal. Was he right to do this—to kill on behalf of God? To ancient Israel, that may have been a noble, heroic, even righteous act; but I doubt you and I would approve of such religious zeal in our more contemporary context. It's not one of those, "Now go and do likewise" moments.

It's also quite interesting that, in spite of his heroic faith and confidence in God, much of it dissipated once Elijah's life was on the line and Queen Jezebel was hunting him down for his bloody deeds. Elijah, instead, was frightened and ran for the hills. That's where we pick up the story, with Elijah hiding out in a cave.

Now it's fair to put ourselves in Elijah's place. In a time of uncertainty and distress, fearing for his life, what kind of God would you want on your side? I would imagine we'd all like the Almighty One to come out—we'd want an overwhelming display of divine power to fight for our side, to stand up with us, to defend us from all harm, whether justified or not. That's to be expected. It's the "my bully is bigger than your bully" strategy for self-preservation. The bigger gun wins the battle, as combat mythology claims. It's possible the shooter in Orlando purchased an assault rifle to make certain his gun was bigger—literally and figuratively—than anyone else's in that nightclub. Bigger seems better.

So as the story unfolds, that seems to be what Elijah expected when he went to the entrance of the cave looking for the presence of the Lord.

First, he looked for God in a mighty and fierce wind, “so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces...”. Overwhelming, yes; frightening, indeed. God should be present in a display of power and might. From the beginning, God’s Spirit was portrayed as a mighty wind. It was a perfect demonstration of divine power. But for some reason, the presence of God was not found there.

Then, there came an earthquake that rattled the entire landscape, enough to destroy everything that existed. Elijah looked for God to really shake things up on his behalf. But the presence of God was not found there.

So, then Elijah looked for God in a raging fire! Surely, God must be found there—that’s where Moses discovered the presence of God in the burning bush and in the pillar of fire in the wilderness—that’s how the power of God was experienced on Mt. Carmel! Surely, a terrific fire would demonstrate once more that the Lord was present and on Elijah’s side.

But, once again, instead of an almighty deliverer, in spite of all the religious and mythical concepts of divine power, regardless that a human expectation is that it takes the big guns coming out to muster up an effective and intimidating defense, there was nothing of the like. Instead, there was complete and utter silence. “Sheer silence” to quote the text. Not a sound; not a word; not a breath; not an action.

Yet, silence didn’t seem right, especially in such a threatening, frightening time. What good is silence? Silence from God is what we fear most! No apparent response! There was no divine retaliation; no rallying cry; no scapegoating; no violence—all the ways we humans like to deal with threats. This silence is disarming!

Yes, it is. And in that silence, that was where God was found. God was found in the manner we least expect or want—with no evidence of power or presence. God was found in the place that seemed least likely.

However, for Elijah, silence was also the place where he could calm his fears, quiet his anxiousness, reduce his defensiveness, disarm his self-righteousness, and hush his hatred and anger. That is why meditation and prayer are preferably done in silence. Silence puts us in our rightful place, because God will not speak to us until we silence ourselves. Silence is a great equalizer and a form of deliverance from our inner demons, more than we often realize.

Survivors of the Orlando massacre report that in the three hours between the time the shooter arrived at the Pulse nightclub and the police were able to take him down, there were many moments of utter silence, in between the lethal spray of shots being fired in his killing spree. People hid in places as silently as they could, hoping to avoid his merciless assault. Some were able to eventually escape, while others, sadly, did not. The threatening silence of those hours escaped no one.

As horrific as it must have been, I do believe that God was present with each and every person in that nightclub. The presence of God was found in the overwhelming care and compassion that everyone had for each other, in shielding some from gunfire, in holding others close to love them into the silence of eternity. The silence was a nightmare, yes, but in that silence was a grace bestowed upon all that love would ultimately matter more than some crazed man's heartless judgment, hatred, and violence. Love was something everyone experienced in the hours before and after this deadly scene. For those who died, in the arms of someone's love is how

they left this life. We have no idea what they would tell us from the other side, but we know they know love did not abandon them in the end.

Collectively, if we have any heart, we walk through this dark place with the living, this spiritually somber valley; there is no need to express rage through politically-charged demagoguery, nor with the rhetoric of religious extremism that callously scapegoats victims in their distorted view of God. Instead, we are to mourn the dead and still the anger within us, especially that which compels anyone toward hatred and vengeance. We are called to embrace the pain of those who are suffering beyond belief; we must feel the deepest sorrow of the moment and digest the immortal truth for why hatred and violence of any type is never redemptive or restorative for the human soul.

Last Tuesday night, several of us were part of the vigil in New London that remembered the victims of this terrible tragedy. Most of those present were gay along with straight allies, many were Hispanic, several Christian, Jewish, Unitarian, and Muslim congregations were represented; some folks came with no affiliation and only a heart full of sorrow. But we all joined together to read the names of those who were killed and to pray for their families and those who survived the shooting.

Though some who were not there might claim that the Great Redeemer of Life is not represented in the traditions or beliefs of some of those gathered there, or in the lives and loves of those who mourn this day, I would disagree with all of my heart, soul, mind, and strength. The God we worship is always found in all the “wrong” places—always among the marginalized, always among the targets of religious zealotry, always among the least of these. And our God of mercy will never be prevented from expressing love or grace to anyone.

Should anyone utter a condemning word of judgment, let them first be silent—truly silent—for in that silence they may discover the true God who has come to save their souls as well.

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