

We Have This Hope

Another day, another mass shooting.

Another day, another senseless act of violence and unspeakable evil.

How do we respond when the world around us feels like it is collapsing in front of our eyes? How do react when evil seems to triumph every day? Every hour? Every minute?

We are confronted with an almost unrelenting surge of evil – a tidal wave of horror stories and despicable acts. Acts that pierce our hearts with a bone-wearying sadness. Acts that just keep coming, over and over. We feel so overwhelmed, so broken, and so alone, that we feel nothing at all.

Or maybe that is just my response. I hesitate to speak for anyone else because we all process things differently, but based on conversations I have had, most of us fall somewhere within that range of emotions. We are horrified, sad, angry, and confused. We feel the onslaught of evil and we grieve. We grieve for those suffering the fullest effects of these profound demonstrations of depravity. We grieve because we feel helpless in all of it. We grieve because we know this level of wickedness is not something that can be contained by laws, regulations, or rhetoric. We grieve because our ability to grieve is slowly dying.

Where does this leave us? As the church, what should our answer be to the question of this great evil? From what I can see, we feel so very small in all of this. We feel alone and isolated. We are islands surrounded by darkness and death. To paraphrase one of my favorite films, *The Two Towers*, “What can we do against such reckless hate?”

I have many more questions than I have answers. I have no perfectly crafted words that will allow any of this to make

sense, to hurt less, or to move us more. What I have is likely insufficient, but as I have thought about all this over the past few days, and at various times prior to the most recent tragedy, I keep coming back to a few truths that have helped me. Perhaps they can help others as well.

I should seek the heart of God and respond as He responds.

I never want to tell someone how they should react to anything and I hope I am not doing that now. That said, when the next random act of wanton violence occurs, even if I am numb from all the previous atrocities, I know I should be moved in some manner. Now, that will likely look different for me than it does for anyone else, but as a child of the King, it is my call to be like my Father and my Father is deeply moved when evil seems to rule the day. God grieves for the broken, the hurting, and the neglected. He champions the orphan and the widow (Psalm 147:3, Psalm 34:18). His example should move me to care, to respond, and to grieve, even when I don't feel like it. Even when I have been desensitized to the evil in our midst. I should seek the heart of God and respond as He responds.

Perhaps you are like many I have spoken to who feel so battered by the constant stream that you cannot seem to really care anymore. I've been there and in some ways, I am still there. One thing that I have noticed with my response, is that it is much more spiritually rewarding to avoid finger-pointing in the wake of a tragedy. I feel less and internalize less when I spend all of my energy blaming this person or that, this group or that, this worldview or that. I'm not saying there are no people, groups, or worldviews responsible for many of the most heinous acts we are witnessing. I'm simply stating that when I only point fingers at the monsters outside of my gate, I cloak myself in self-delusion and self-

righteousness. For each of us, “there but for the grace of God go I” should be a constant refrain. We are all capable of great evil. We are all susceptible to giving in to our fallen nature. That knowledge should spur us to repentance, thanksgiving, and grace. We shouldn’t hate those that do evil. We should mourn that sin has disfigured the image of God in their lives almost beyond recognition. We should long for renewal – of those that do this great evil but also of the world itself. These tragedies are stark reminders how far from the Kingdom the fallen world truly is and it should be our ever-present mission to bridge that gap.

Prayer should be our first response.

Secondly, we need to pray. In today’s culture, that sounds so weak and inadequate and there are many who have responded with animosity and derision to calls for prayer. To the world at large, prayer is synonymous with naïveté and inaction, when the opposite is actually true. To a believer, prayer should be our first response. Our first defense. Our greatest and most powerful weapon. (I Chronicles 16:11, 2 Chronicles 7:14, Jeremiah 29:12, Matthew 5:44)

Prayer does not always come easily to me. Or better said, my prayer life is too self-focused and too limited. If you are like me and are active in your local church, you hear prayer requests often. I commit to pray for these requests and I almost always follow through. But my prayers are usually quick, little, one-and-done affairs. I fail, time and again, to go boldly to the throne of God with those requests. These times of tragedy remind me how flawed and undisciplined my prayer life usually is. I am convinced that if the body of Christ would commit to seeking the face of the Lord in an intense and focused manner, we would see God move in ways we cannot imagine. I am also convinced that we don’t pray that

way. If anything good can come from a tragedy like a mass shooting (and if you believe in an Omniscient and Omnipotent God you have to believe that He can use it for good) then perhaps believers falling on their knees in committed and fervent supplication will be the first step towards that.

We are never alone.

Finally, we are never alone. A few paragraphs back, I mentioned how isolated these events can make us feel. We see example after example of humanity hurting, killing, and destroying and it convinces us that we are alone. That there is no remnant in the land to stem the tide. That is a lie from hell itself. A dangerous and powerful lie. Do not believe it. Regardless how you feel, how things appear, you are never alone.

I Kings 19 tells us the aftermath of the Mount Carmel story. The prophet Elijah has just experienced one of the most amazing and powerful displays of God's power. Elijah challenged the false prophets of Baal and the LORD answered by sending fire from heaven to show the land who the true King of Israel was. A short time later, Elijah is by himself, hiding in a cave, and he prays to God, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." He was convinced that he was the only faithful person left. Without reading too much into the passage, I've always wondered why Elijah felt this way. The Lord responds to him and tells him that there are 7,000 others that never bowed the knee to Baal. 7,000! I don't want to sound flippant, but it sounds like Elijah needed to find himself a good church home! He felt isolated in part because he had isolated himself. There are too many in our

society that do this as well. They do not connect with a local body of believers. They do not feel the need or importance of putting roots down in a local faith community. So when tragedy strikes, of course they feel alone.

But even bigger than that, when we are disconnected from the worldwide church, we do not see how God is moving outside of our small sphere of living. We might be plugged into our local body, but we still feel cut off from the larger body of Christ. In some ways we are islands, but each of our small islands are joined together by the life-stream of the blood of Christ. These horrific acts should spur us to stronger connections, clearer focus, and more passionate action. Our light should shine brighter. Our prayers should be bolder. The importance of building the Kingdom should stand in stark contrast to the darkness surrounding us. Our lives should be a constant and unified declaration of grace, hope, and love to a broken and fallen world.

That's all I have so far. I wish I could write something that would help make sense of things. I can't. I'm still trying to figure out how to respond to the constant barrage myself. But these few things have helped me, so hopefully, they can help you. I'll leave you with the words from the writer of Hebrews. It's a powerful reassurance of our position and value to God. When life is chaos we have hope – a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. Let that be a comfort to you.

So God has given both his promise and his oath. These two things are unchangeable because it is impossible for God to lie. Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us. This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. Hebrews 6:18 -19