This past Monday we watched in horror as a great evil unfolded before our eyes. At around 8 a.m., a government contractor by the name of Aaron Alexis accessed the Washington Navy Yard, pulled a concealed weapon, and began firing on defenseless workers in and around building 197, headquarters for the Naval Sea Systems Command.

By the time the police shot and killed Alexis, twelve innocent people lay dead or dying to include one graduate of this institution. The victims ranged in age from 46 to 73. They were mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, sons and daughters, friends and shipmates. All were loved. All are lost. And our great Navy is diminished by their passing.

The next morning, Tuesday morning, I began my day as I always do with a time of prayer and devotion. As you can imagine, my heart was heavy as I thought of what had transpired the day before at the Navy Yard. As it happened that morning, I opened my Bible to the readings assigned to this Sunday of the Church calendar – the 18th Sunday after Pentecost. For those of you who may not know it, there is a list of readings assigned to every Sunday of the Church year. This list is called the lectionary. It assigns a different Old Testament, New Testament, Psalm, and Gospel reading to each Sunday on a three year cycle.

Imagine my surprise on Tuesday morning when I read the words of the assigned Psalm – Psalm 79: “O God, the nations have come into your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins. They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the air for food, the flesh of your faithful to the wild animals of the earth. They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them...let your compassion come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low. Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name...” (Psalm 79:1-3, 8-9) This Psalm, as the Psalms so often do, gave voice to my own prayer on that terrible day after the senselessness of Monday’s massacre.

I turned next in my reading to the Old Testament lesson – Jeremiah 8:18-9:1. Jeremiah wrote these words during a terrible time in the history of his people. You see, Israel and Judah were caught between Egypt and Babylon and those two behemoths were vying for world domination. And because Israel and Judah lay on the land bridge between those two ancient empires, they were constantly being trampled on by the armies of both.

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 was probably written as the armies of Babylon were invading Judah and threatening Jerusalem with capture and conquest. The verse immediately preceding this passage describes the scene: “The snorting of their horses is heard from Dan; at the sound of the neighing of their stallions the whole land quakes. They come and devour the land and all that fills it, the city and those who live in it.” (Jeremiah 8:16)
Seeing the slaughter of his kinsmen, Jeremiah gave voice to his lament: “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: ‘Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not in her?’... ‘The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.’ For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!” (Jeremiah 8:18-9:1)

These words, ancient though they are, give vent to the vast variety of emotion that fills us even now whenever calamity befalls us. There is grief in them. There is shock. There is depression, despair, and dismay. But more than anything else, there are hard questions that demand honest answers. Did you hear them? As the Babylonian armies overran Judah the people cried out and asked, “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?” And Jeremiah himself asked, “Is there no (healing) balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?”

Have you ever asked those kinds of questions in the midst of some terrible tragedy? Perhaps you asked them this week as you watched events unfold at the Washington Navy Yard. Perhaps you wondered where God was when the gunner opened fire. Why didn’t God act to stop the slaughter? Perhaps you echoed the people’s question in Jeremiah 8:19, as it’s translated in the New Living Translation: “Is (the) King no longer there?”

These are the kinds of hard questions that often arise when we are caught in the grip of adversity. And they are the kinds of hard questions that can create unbelief if in asking them we conclude that the King of Kings really is no longer there to help us or to bless us.

Yes, when confronted by the seemingly senseless suffering that often befalls us or others in our world, many people conclude that God is no longer there or, if he is there, he is not as good or as powerful as we imagined him to be. We see illustration of this in a scene from Catch 22, Joseph Heller’s classic novel set during the horrors of World War 2. The protagonist, Captain John Yossarian, is sharing Thanksgiving with the wife of Lieutenant Scheisskopf. And this is how the scene unfolds:

“Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife...henpecked Yossarian sententiously for being cynical and callous about Thanksgiving, even though she didn't believe in God just as much as he didn't. 'I'm probably just as good an atheist as you are,' she speculated boastfully. 'But even I feel that we all have a great deal to be thankful for and that we shouldn't be ashamed to show it.'...(Yossarian responded), 'I'll bet I can name two things to be miserable about for every one you can name to be thankful for.'

'Be thankful you're healthy.'

'Be bitter you're not going to stay that way.'

'Be glad you're even alive.'
'Be furious you're going to die.'
'Things could be much worse,' she cried.
'They could be one hell of a lot better,' he answered heatedly.
'You're naming only one thing,' she protested. 'You said you could name two.'
'And don't tell me God works in mysterious ways,' Yossarian continued, hurtling on over her objection. 'There's nothing so mysterious about it. He's not working at all. He's playing. Or else He's forgotten all about us. That's the kind of God you people talk about - a country bumpkin, a clumsy, bungling, brainless, conceited, uncouth hayseed. Good God, how much reverence can you have for a Supreme Being who finds it necessary to include such phenomena as phlegm and tooth decay in His divine system of creation? What in the world was running through that warped, evil, scatological mind of His when He robbed old people of the power to control their bowel movements? Why in the world did He ever create pain?'

'Pain?' Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife pounced upon the word victoriously. 'Pain is a useful symptom. Pain is a warning to us of bodily dangers.'

'And who created the dangers?' Yossarian demanded. He laughed caustically. 'Oh, He was really being charitable to us when He gave us pain! Why couldn't He have used a doorbell instead to notify us, or one of His celestial choirs? Or a system of blue-and-red neon tubes right in the middle of each person's forehead. Any jukebox manufacturer worth his salt could have done that. Why couldn't He?'

'People would certainly look silly walking around with red neon tubes in the middle of their foreheads.'

'They certainly look beautiful now writhing in agony or stupefied with morphine, don't they? What a colossal, immortal blunderer! When you consider the opportunity and power He had to really do a job, and then look at the stupid, ugly little mess He made of it instead, His sheer incompetence is almost staggering. It's obvious He never met a payroll. Why, no self-respecting businessman would hire a bungler like Him as even a shipping clerk!'

Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife had turned ashen in disbelief and was ogling him with alarm. 'You'd better not talk that way about Him, honey,' she warned him reprovingly in a low and hostile voice. 'He might punish you.'

'Isn't He punishing me enough?' Yossarian snorted resentfully. 'You know, we mustn't let Him get away with it. Oh, no, we certainly mustn't let Him get away scot free for all the sorrow He's caused us. Someday I'm going to make Him pay. I know when. On the Judgment Day. Yes, That's the day I'll be close enough to reach out and grab that little yokel by His neck and -'

'Stop it! Stop it!' Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife screamed suddenly, and began beating him ineffectually about the head with both fists. 'Stop it!' Yossarian ducked behind his arm for protection while she slammed away at him in feminine fury for a few seconds,
and then he caught her determinedly by the wrists and forced her gently back down on
the bed. 'What the hell are you getting so upset about?' he asked her bewilderedly in a
tone of contrite amusement. 'I thought you didn't believe in God.'

'I don't,' she sobbed, bursting violently into tears. 'But the God I don't believe in is a
good God, a just God, a merciful God. He's not the mean and stupid God you make Him
out to be.'

So ends the scene. And from it we learn that hard questions are asked when tragedy
strikes. And in answering them, some conclude that God is gone and the King of Kings
is no longer there. But others come to a different conclusion. Having met Jesus, a man
of sorrows acquainted with grief; having met Jesus, the Son of God who immersed
himself in the sufferings of our world and shared them with us; having met Jesus, God in
flesh, who allowed himself to become the willing victim of our evil and our sin; having
met Jesus, who suffered, and bled, and died on our behalf; having met Jesus who rose
again from the dead and who continues to share our suffering in and through his body –
the church; having met Jesus, others ask the same set of questions and arrive at
different set of answers.

"Is the Lord not in Zion?" they ask.

"Yes, he is!" they answer.

"Is her King not in her?" they wonder.

"Yes, he is!" they reply.

"Is there no (healing) balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?"

"Yes," they answer in the words of that old Negro spiritual, "There is a balm in Gilead, to
make the wounded whole; there is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin sick soul. The Great
Physician, Jesus Christ, has anointed my head with healing oil. My cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the
house of the Lord where suffering and sorrow shall cease forever!"

Yes, in the midst of calamity, some people ask the same hard questions and come to
different conclusions. Rather than denying God, they find themselves closer to him than
they ever were before.

I saw this for myself recently while visiting a woman named Jaime. Jaime, as you may
recall, is one of our chapel organists. Four weeks ago, Jaime suffered a severe stroke
while rehearsing for Sunday services. She was found here in the chancel by our
Sacristan and rushed to the hospital where it was touch and go for several days until her
condition finally stabilized. About two weeks ago she was moved to a rehabilitation
facility where she still resides.

In my last visit with Jaime, I spent about an hour with her. Her face was badly bruised
where she had fallen and her right side remained partially paralyzed but her speech
showed considerable improvement over the previous weeks. Nevertheless, though she
could pronounce her words more clearly than in the days immediately following her
stroke, she still had difficulty communicating her thoughts. Her sentences often didn’t make much sense. It was frustrating for her and frustrating for me. I sensed that she knew exactly what she wanted to say but simply couldn’t say it.

During the course of our conversation, I asked Jaime if she felt abandoned by God. I was worried that she might be feeling so given her condition; and truth be told, maybe I was transferring to her what I thought I might be feeling if I were in her place. Be that as it may, she shook her head and said, “No.” Shortly afterwards, as I prepared to leave, I asked her if I could read scriptures to her and pray for her. She nodded eagerly in agreement and listened as I read some old familiar promises from God’s holy word. Then I gently took her hand and prayed with her and for her. After I finished, Jaime looked up at me and said in a voice as clear as crystal, “God has been so kind to me.”

God has been so kind to me! That was the only sentence she said that made any real sense, from first to last, in the hour we spent together. But it said everything that needed to be said. It was the testimony of one who has known the the goodness of God for a lifetime and the help of God in these bad times.

I suspect, like the citizens of Judah, and like Yossarian, the fictional protagonist in Catch 22, Jaime has asked the same series of hard questions about God’s presence, her own suffering, and the meaning of it all. But unlike Yossarian, she’s come to a different conclusion. Instead of cursing God as Yossarian did, she praises him instead. It’s a wonder to behold.

I suppose we will always ask hard questions about senseless suffering. I suppose we will always wonder how a good, loving, omnipotent, and omniscient God can allow such suffering and evil as happened this week at the Washington Navy Yard. But as we wonder that, I hope we will also wonder in amazement at how an omnipotent God would enter our suffering and share it with us through his Son Jesus Christ. And if we will wonder at that then I think we will conclude with Jaime that the Lord really has been kind to us. Amen.

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1 Joseph Heller, Catch 22, Chapter 18, pp. 136-138 online version at: