

“In Times of Darkness”

Allen Wyly, September 21, 2014

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When was it, Friday or Saturday that it began? Can't remember for sure now; sort of all a blur. Well, we heard there was a fire down by Forebay. Not to worry, they'll hit it fast. And they did, but it grew. And it grew. And then it exploded to the inferno we all know. And still growing, and still threatening, with thousands out of their homes, worried, not knowing. For us, every time conditions seemed to get better, they got worse. Tuesday evening for example – news had been positive all day, but before we went to bed we did see that schools were to be closed next day (a change) and shelter moving from the Middle School behind us down the hill to the Adventist Church. Hmmm...? Well, to bed and let's not worry. And then – the reverse 911 calls, evacuations urged. Packed up what we could, loaded the car with our stuff, then the dog and headed to ReeAnn's sister's place in Camino Heights. And then the limbo of not knowing; not knowing what to expect, until the evacuations (for us anyway) were lifted next morning after a superhuman effort by Cal Fire to keep the fire from jumping the freeway, making a stand less than a mile from our home. This is the context from which Rev. Deb asked me to speak today, and yes I agreed.

So what message do I share from all this as I think of so many others, thousands, caught in this limbo- not just for one night, but days, perhaps to return to find no home? Those who have lost so much? Those who are living in fear of this unprecedented inferno? The correlation to our Exodus reading is what first comes to mind; a people wandering in what could be a similar limbo of wondering, questioning, bickering, “Why me?” “Why God have you done this to us? How have we deserved this?” And we question a God who lets these things (and so much worse) happen here on our little planet. How do we come out of this funk? My personal view is that no, God doesn't simply “let” evil happen. Suffering can never be a part of a loving God's plan. Tragedy, as we all know and experience from time to time, is simply part of life. Stuff happens.

Again, I am personally convinced that these things are not God's plan for us, things such as wars, murder, indiscriminate killing or saving of whom we deem good people and bad people alike. The saving news (for me anyhow) is that yes, despite all – yes, God does care. And He suffers when we suffer, and He understands and reaches out to help us to make it all better – if only we listen. And isn't this really the message of Jesus on the cross? God who created us, as we are, taking ultimate responsibility for what we do, suffering for us? I was telling the guy at the Vet Center yesterday about a reaction I've had as I've read recent Facebook postings. It relates to having returned from Vietnam, actually. Upon employment within the civilian world, I found no one particularly concerned or caring about any experiences I may have had over there; seemingly oblivious of the broken lives, deaths of friends, life-changing injuries and forever

changed world views. Some cared; others couldn't or wouldn't relate- living in their own sphere of having escaped this for themselves, while "dumbos" like me carried out that onerous burden. And now, so many encouraging words and messages from far and wide, from people who cared, were and are concerned with our current situation, even offering us their homes for the interim if needed. And yet so many, who've said nothing, just posted their photos of what they're eating today or whatever, as if nothing was going on in these woods of ours! Like returning from Vietnam, sort of. And I realized it's thanks to the first group that we get through these situations. The others are caring, praying, and helping to make things all right, perhaps even better, once more.

And I realized that "no," these things are never God's plan. But when they occur, God cares and is with us, and will work with us to make things all right, even better, once more, as we listen and work with the Spirit to make them so. Can we ever say tragedy, war, massacres, happen for the best as part of God's plan? Absolutely not! But listening to the Spirit, and with the help of others who understand and who turn their prayers to action, as we heard earlier from our reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians: "...standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind..." it can be made so – working together with God. As was the case with the Israelites in Exodus, and as exemplified in the Psalm we read, wherein they too had been "afraid." "So he led forth his people with gladness, his chosen with shouts of joy...That they might keep his statutes and observe his laws."

Here's a quote from the Dalai Lama from yesterday: "If your mental attitude is positive, even when threats abound, you can't lose your inner peace." OK, but with so many threats abounding these days, just how do we get that positive attitude, this inner peace? During our crisis, I got it from the encouraging messages of support, concern and offers of help we received. And I got it from figuring out that God too was concerned, cared, and offered help, if I only listen.

And regarding the question of where the bad comes from: No, not from God who is defined as love. Rather, it may come from ourselves when we forget to love thy neighbor, and those tricky beatitude parts. I mean, God (as we see in our scripture, as well as that of most major religions of the world) has given very specific instructions regarding how to treat one another, that we are all a human family, all in this thing together, to take care of one another, support one another and all that Great Commandment stuff, not to mention the call for stewardship of this world we live in, which must include our ecological systems and balance. When we disobey these rules is it God that punishes us? Or we ourselves, in terms of the consequences we bring? Destruction of our ecosystems, flora and fauna, via destroying their life sustaining balance, deforestation, abetting destructive climate change, seeking profit over life... God's gift and blessing of freedom of thought and action that enables us to share in His ongoing creation via medicine, science, engineering marvels, and etc. seem all turned upside down!

What's the solution? God provides the example: Empathizing with one another; loving, grieving, encouraging, forgiving, and sustaining one another, as human beings created in His very image, honoring and providing for all. That's what God does, as exemplified in our Matthew reading, with the laborers in the vineyard, today. And it's what the brave firefighters, police, helicopter; fixed wing and jet-close air support have done, and continue to do. And why such as DC-10 Mary Very become heroes – saints really.

We can't do it without God; neither can we do it without each other. Share the pain, share the joy. When we work together with understanding, we build a better world- hasten the Kingdom on Earth- coming that much closer to what God's will is for us. We pray, we listen for and share the voice of the Spirit, and together with God, yes we can turn it all for the best! It's what is known as love, and it's how God works. It's what sustained me through Vietnam, and what sustains me now, knowing that others care and will always be there acting in the image of God, working together and honoring one another, towards a better world where love replaces hate and collective good trumps ego.