



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

JUNE 19, 2016
THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

He Remembers . . . Psalm 103:1-18; Luke 8:26-39

Like most grandparents these days, Deborah and I have hundreds, if not thousands, of pictures and videos of our granddaughter. One image that I think about over and over is from a video that was made two years ago last Friday, the day Savannah was born. Robert is holding that little bundle of joy for her debut to her other grandparents. Robert passes Savannah to Lenka's mother and she, instinctively, begins to bounce the baby gently up and down. For whatever reason, Savannah did not take kindly to this new motion and began to cry. I remember times when Robert cried as an infant and I was happy to hand him off to one of his grandmothers, someone with a lot more baby experience. In this case, however, Robert, a father for only two hours, quietly took Savannah back in his arms and gently began to rub her tiny hand with his thumb, all the while speaking softly to his new daughter. Within moments she quieted in the embrace of those comforting arms and the melody of his familiar voice.

He knew that this new arrival in a strange world needed comfort and assurance. Not that his mother-in-law could not provide the same things, but Robert instinctively knew that, at that moment, Savannah needed to hear her father's voice and be in his arms.

The psalmist recognized the same sensitivity in God when he declared, "As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we are made; he remembers that we are dust" (103:13-14). Instantly, there is a flashback, as if the psalmist is flipping through the family photo album and comes upon that picture of God on his knees beside the river, a clay figure prone on the ground before him, as he bends over and breathes life into the human. We are dust, after all, made alive by the life-giving breath of God. God never forgets. God always remembers and does not expect us to be anything but human—of the earth. He remembers that despite our many gifts and attributes, we are not invincible, we are not immortal. Uppermost in his mind is that, at points, we are quite vulnerable and frail, as fragile as the late summer grass when the winds blow relentlessly over it. When needed, God wraps us in his comforting arms and speaks softly to us. He remembers.

Thankfully, this past week God remembered. It was one of those times we needed a cosmic hug.

It was a week of stark contrasts for most of us gathered here today. Each morning, our children joined dozens of other children for Vacation Bible School. It was a week of song and play and study. It was fun and exciting and enriching. There were no accidents, no unfortunate incidents, no danger. For the most part, the majority of us went about our business in routine ways.

Three states south of us, however, in what is often thought of as the most fun city in the world, one tragedy after another exposed our vulnerability and brought what is certain to be lasting pain. On Saturday evening, a gunman shot and killed a young woman, a talented singer, as she signed autographs for fans. A few hours later, a young man intent on mayhem, killed forty-nine people and wounded dozens more before being killed himself. And then on Tuesday evening, a toddler on vacation with his family at Disney World, was wading in the water at the edge of a lagoon when an alligator dragged him into the water where he drowned. There might as well have been a madman named "Legion" camped out in the heart of Orlando, wreaking havoc at every turn, shaking up an otherwise peaceful and happy place.

As far as I know, there is no Father's Day celebration in heaven. There is no time when God takes the day off, sleeps in, is served breakfast in bed, and presented with homemade cards scribbled in crayon along with another loud tie to wear to the office. It doesn't matter because I think that God, like most earthly fathers and mothers, wants little more than for his children to be healthy and happy. Fortunately for us, most days are like that. For God, however, a day never passes that all of his children are healthy and happy. There is always some crisis involving a child of God somewhere in the world. The psalmist continues his song from where I stopped earlier:

For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.
As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.
But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting
on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children,
to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments. Psalm 103:14-18

God remembers our finitude and frailty and is never unaware of our need for divine comfort and care. But what does God do about it? When all those terrible things happened in Orlando last week, where was God and what was God doing?

Rabbi Harold Kushner has written that the existence of God is proved for him not by sophisticated theological arguments or even by the simple beauty and power of nature. Instead, a painting by American artist Winslow Homer called *The Fog Warning* proves for him the existence of God. "The work," he writes, "shows a lone fisherman in a rowboat with a large fish he has caught, struggling to return to his ship before a gathering fog envelops him."¹

The rabbi points to the experience of the prophet Elijah when he fled the incompetence of King Ahab and the wrath of Queen Jezebel. Having a pity party in the desert, God orders him to go into a cave on Mount Sinai. As the prophet huddled in the cave, a wind came by, so mighty that it split the mountain and shattered the rock. But God was not in the wind. An earthquake shook the mountain, but God was not in the earthquake. A fire roared through the mountain, but God was not in the fire. After all of the fury of nature, in the silence that followed, the prophet heard a still, small voice which told "Elijah to go back to Israel and work to make things better."²

The small voice that spoke to Elijah continues to speak to us. It is the soothing voice of God reminding us that he remembers us. It is the comforting and reassuring voice that tells us to go and make things better.

Most people were amazed at the response of the citizens of Orlando throughout the week. Instead of gatherings that emphasized their differences, citizens came together to grieve, to remember, and to work for a better city. We saw the same reaction a year ago following the killing of nine people in a church in Charleston, South Carolina. That kind of unity inspired other people to react in similar fashion. As we did last Wednesday evening, communities all over the nation and around the world held prayer vigils remembering the victims of the nightclub attack. Financial gifts poured in. Words of support were abundant. People acted in compassion wherever they were.

¹Harold S. Kushner, *Nine Essential Things I've Learned about Life*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 35-36.

²Kushner, 36-37; I Kings 19:11-12.

I heard that in Washington, D.C., the rabbi of the National Synagogue and a group of his parishioners visited a gay bar to "sit Shiva" with them, which means they simply went to be with the patrons of the bar and grieve with them. There they discovered a man whose cousin had been killed in Orlando. They went inside the bar, spoke with other patrons, and prayed together. In Raleigh, a vigil was held at a bar very much like the one that was attacked in Orlando. All over the country, people looked for ways to comfort others who were grieving.

There is a little Hebrew word imbedded in the psalm we heard earlier, a word which is used over and over throughout scripture to tell a story. The word is *hesed* and is translated as "steadfast love" or "loving-kindness." It is the love of a parent who takes their child in their arms and soothes their hurts and fears. It is the love of a parent who waits up late at night, not because she is angry about a broken curfew, but because she is desperate to know that her child is safe. It is the love of a parent who refuses to bail a child out of jail, knowing that once he is back on the street he will resume his addiction until he hurts someone else or dies of an overdose. It is the love of a parent who is always on the other end of the phone, always ready to jump in the car, always eager to share the life of her children no matter what. It is the love of a parent who desires nothing but the best for his children and gives himself to their well-being. It is the love of friends who rush to the aid of their buddies. It is the love of strangers who reach out to offer encouragement and hope. It is the love of a community which forgives and vows to never let it happen again.

Steadfast love is steady and constant, unflinching and unailing. It is untiring, intuitive, and compassionate. It is the love that showed Adam and Eve the door out of paradise and then provided them with clothes and taught them how to live off the earth. It is the love that endured all of Israel's repetitive unfaithfulness, constantly called the people back, and gladly received them when they turned around and headed home. Steadfast love is the love that left behind the glories of heaven to enter the world in a cow barn. It is the love that chose to live our life, to experience our joys, and to feel firsthand our deepest sorrows. Steadfast love is the love that willingly experienced crucifixion and death and chose to come back and offer us eternal life. Steadfast love is the love that does not abandon us when tragedy strikes or when times are good. Steadfast love is the strength and courage to find our way through whatever tragedy befalls us and to stay the course no matter what happens. Steadfast love is the love that urges us to become open to one another, to discover what unites us, and to overcome the things

that divide us. Steadfast love is the love that is crafty enough to send the demons of our lives rushing to their own demise. Steadfast love is the surprising strength that comes to the tired fisherman as he rows desperately to make his ship before the fog swallows him in a deep mist.

I have to believe that God has spent a lot of time this past week (and every other week) wrapping arms of comfort around grieving children of all ages, caressing and calming them, assuring them that they are not alone. God spent the week whispering to the rest of us to go and make things better for someone else. God remembers how fragile we are no matter what our circumstances and moves to meet our needs. He doesn't cause our misfortune. God does, however, provide us with what we need to handle whatever life throws our way. And God walks the entire way with us. In a sense, every day is a Father's Day for God who spends his time caring for his children. Feel his comforting touch. Hear his soothing whispers. Experience God's steadfast love. Amen.

June 19, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

In times like these, Holy God, we scarcely know how to pray. Like the man Jesus encountered, we are afraid, confused, and vulnerable. Our hearts are heavy and our thoughts jumbled from the events of the week, and we gather to worship with a myriad of questions and emotions, seeking solace in our pain. We have watched in horror as Orlando experienced unspeakable violence, as an entire community was rocked by fear, as angry accusations were shouted, as a family suffered the tragic loss of their little boy, and we have confronted our own fears and uncertainties in light of our neighbors' suffering.

But still we come to worship, O God. We come because in this place and among these, our brothers and sisters, we find strength and comfort. We come because you bless our doubts and call us to trust in spite of them. We come because we seek to put aside our desire for vengeance and to follow your way of peace. We come because we are an Easter people, filled with resurrection hope because Christ has conquered sin and death for us and for all of creation. Every need we have we entrust to you, and for every gift we receive we offer to you our thanks, most Gracious and Holy God.

Were it not for our faith, the images we see on our television screens and the challenges by which we are confronted in our own community might be enough to lead us to despair, O God. Instead you have called us to respond with generous hearts, with creative minds, and with diligent hands, believing that what we do in this place and what we carry with us from this place will make a difference in our lives and in our world. Teach us to reach beyond ourselves and our comfortable places to ease the suffering that engulfs so many lives. Grant us wisdom and courage to face the complexities of our world and to seek solutions with creativity and mercy. Give us grace as we struggle with our often competing responsibilities of seeking change where it is needed and peace where it is possible. Help us to be a people of compassion and to respond to those in need out of the abundance we have received from you. Teach us to be merciful even as we have been shown great mercy. Because we trust that you guide the future just as you have the past, and that a day awaits when disappointment, grief and fear will end. Merciful God, grant us the grace to still our restless souls and let nothing shake our confidence in you. Hear now, O Lord, these prayers of our hearts and those offered by your children of every language and nation. Amen.

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