



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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THE TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## Can We Trust God? Psalm 121; Matthew 25:14-30

It is difficult to comprehend that two weeks ago, in a rural church in Texas, people like you and me were attacked while worshipping God. Twenty-six of those good folks were killed and twenty more were wounded.

It is also hard to understand the attack in Las Vegas a month earlier when a man with multiple assault rifles fired hundreds of rounds from a nearby hotel into a crowd of thousands of country music fans, killing fifty-eight people and wounding more than 540 others.

We are still perplexed over the pedestrians, cyclists, runners, and tourists, mothers, fathers, children and friends who were mowed down when a man in a rental truck drove onto the Hudson River Greenway in New York City, intending to do as much harm as possible.

It is difficult to wrap our minds around the twenty-two concert-goers, some of them young girls, who were killed at an arena in Manchester, England and the 137 people who were killed and 368 others who were injured in three coordinated attacks in Paris two years ago last week. We think about the 84 people who were killed and more than 200 who were injured by a truck in the streets of Nice, France, the 49 people who were killed at a nightclub in Orlando, and the nine people who were killed during Bible study at the AME Church in Charleston. We have not forgotten about the twelve moviegoers who were killed a few years ago in Aurora, Colorado or those twenty precious children and seven adults who were killed at school in Newtown, Connecticut or our friend who was killed here ten years ago.

I don't know that we ask ourselves anymore *why* these things happen. We know that mental illness or drugs or political ideology or pure hatred are the driving forces behind many acts of violence. Eventually, we usually discover the motivations behind such tragedies. What I want to know, and what I think you want to know, is *HOW* such horrible things happen—especially to good God-fearing folk like you and me and our precious children.

We have been taught, have we not, that God will protect us from evil acts like the ones I have mentioned. You heard the psalm which was read earlier: "I lift my eyes to the hills. Whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth." Psalm 121 is one of my favorite psalms and one that I often read at funerals of the faithful. It is comforting and encouraging. I will probably have it read at my funeral some day. But did you listen to the entire psalm? Did you hear these words:

He will not let your foot be moved,  
he who keeps you will not slumber.  
Behold, he who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.  
The Lord is your keeper;  
the Lord is your shade on your right hand.  
The sun shall not smite you by day,  
nor the moon by night.  
The Lord will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.  
The Lord will keep your going out  
and your coming in  
from this time forth and forevermore.

The skeptic would ask, "Was God asleep during the sermon two weeks ago in Sutherland, Texas? Where was God when all of these attacks and many more took place? The psalmist assures us that God will watch over us and take care of us, but was God slumbering on the job? Is God asleep at the wheel? Can we trust God?" Those of us who are faithful might be asking the same questions.

The problem of evil is an eternal issue. Why was there even a tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden to tempt Eve and Adam? Why was Abel's gift accepted by God but not Cain's and why did Cain resort to violence against his brother? "Why do the righteous suffer?" Job wanted to know. Why does anyone suffer needlessly, we all want to know.

To a large extent, the Old Testament suggests that no one suffers needlessly. The prevailing opinion among the ancients was that suffering was an indication of sin. Good health and general well-being were indicators of the blessing of God. We still hold to that belief to a great extent. Jesus, however, did not buy into that theory. Jesus indicated that sometimes bad things happen to us through no fault of our own. That is not to say that he did

not think there are consequences to our sin. There are, but Jesus observed that sometimes people get sick or experienced some tragic, even deadly, event because that is part of being human. Accidents sometimes happen and sometimes sick or otherwise unstable people do horrific things.

We cannot solve the mystery of the origin of evil this morning, but we can explore what it means to trust God and have faith in God. Can we trust God?

Our faith teaches us that God is omnipotent—all powerful—and able to do whatever God pleases. If so, does it not please God to have a world free of violence? Does it not please God to make the world safe for people, especially people in a church? How can bad things happen to good people if God is on his watch?

Among the gifts God gave to us humans when he first blew breath into that lump of clay by the river was the gift of freedom. That freedom grants us the privilege to make our own way in the world, to explore everything God has provided—the good and the bad. We can make use of the various talents and abilities God has given us—or we can ignore them. We can choose to do great things that benefit humanity or we can choose to do horrible things that hurt the people around us. We even have the freedom to choose whether or not we will return God's love. That freedom opens us up to all of the wonders of this magnificent world and makes our love authentic. It also makes us vulnerable to all of the destructive things that happen in the world and subject to the pain that comes with love.

I do not believe that God desires or wills that anything bad happen to us at all. I do believe, however, that in order for us to be truly free, God has limited his intervention in the world. I also believe that when those bad things happen, God cares, God grieves, and God helps.

Some of you may have heard the interview that Terry Gross of NPR's *Fresh Air* conducted with Greg Boyle last Monday evening. Father Boyle is a Catholic priest and for thirty years has lived and ministered in the toughest neighborhoods in Los Angeles. He founded a ministry called Homeboy Industries where ex-offenders and former gang members are employed and supported as they discover how to live a new life. Over the years, Father Boyle has seen a lot of violence and suffering. He has conducted over 200 funerals for young men and children whom he knew and loved. When asked to talk about whether or not God provides a shield against the bad things in

life, he replied, "God doesn't protect us from Hurricane Maria, but will sustain us as we lock arms with one another in its aftermath."<sup>1</sup> He explored his understanding of the power of prayer and concluded that our spoken prayers are fine, but words alone cannot fix the wrongs in the world. We have to take action to get things done. He said, "I may not be able to carry what you are carrying, but we can carry you."<sup>2</sup> It is the community of faith acting in solidarity to help one another in God's name that makes a difference in our world.

We know from experience that God does not prevent natural disasters or human cruelty from happening, though we wish God did. We also know from experience that when we hurt, our family of faith is there to help and God is in the middle of it all. We can trust God to help us.

Martin Marty likes to tell a story that illustrates his understanding of trust:

Two men in a boat are having fun fishing. They have been out there three or four days. It is toward evening and the one says to the other, "Where is your wife tonight?"

He says, "I haven't the faintest idea."

The first said, "How can you trust her?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I can tell you where your wife is tonight. She is with mine. I had her called and they are supposed to be playing bridge. Somebody else was to take her bowling last night. Tomorrow I am going to call back to find out where she is."

"Why do you do that?"

"I want to be able to trust my wife."<sup>3</sup>

The man who said he wanted to trust his wife obviously did not trust her while the man who was not orchestrating his wife's every move clearly did trust her. Marty suggests that the man who had to have proof day by day of his wife's faithfulness did not have the basics of trust while the man who was content to let his wife live her life when he was away demonstrated immense trust. In our relationship with God, we do not have to put God to the test day by day. We know that no matter what comes our way, God watches over us,

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<sup>1</sup>Terry Gross, "Priest Helps Former Gang Members Start New Lives," interview on *Fresh Air*, NPR (November 13, 2017); podcast available at: <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/381444908/fresh-air>.

<sup>2</sup>Gross.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Marty, "Reflection: Trust," Program 3421, *30 Good Minutes*, The Chicago Sunday Evening Club (1990/1991).

cares for us, and provides for us. Conversely, when God needs us, we ought to be at the ready as well.

Trust does not come cheaply. There is risk involved. Jesus told the familiar parable of the businessman who was going on a journey and gave three of his servants money—according to their ability. Two of the servants invested what the man had given them and doubled his money while the third man buried the money he was given until his master returned. Certainly, the parable is a good one about stewardship and how we need to invest what God has given us for the greater good of the Gospel, not to mention the local church!

The parable is about trust, however. Even though the master was not the Citizen of the Year and involved himself in some questionable practices, he trusted his servants to do well by him and, when he returned, he rewarded the two men who had demonstrated their trustworthiness. The man who did nothing but hide his one talent proved that he could not be trusted. Trust involves risk. In life, we trust that God will be with us and help us and sustain us. Living out that trust in the world is a risk. We invest ourselves in the Gospel which is truly risky business, but we trust that God will keep our life and our going and coming, no matter what happens. We only question God when God does not live up to the expectations we have of God. Part of the risk of faith is exploring who God is and how God relates to us. Part of the risk of faith is moving beyond childish ideas about God to embrace a child-like trust in God.

Then there is the matter of faith. True, faith and trust are closely related, but there is a distinction. The writer of Hebrews said, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Trust involves our understanding of what we know about God. Faith involves our commitment to those things we cannot fully know.

In the middle of the nineteenth century there was a Frenchman known for being a funambulist or tightrope walker. His given name was Jean François Gravelet, but he was better known by his stage name—Charles Blondin—given due to his golden hair. Standing only five feet tall and weighing no more than 140 pounds, Blondin was well-suited for his tightrope antics. His dream was to be the first person to cross Niagara Falls on a rope, a feat he attempted in the summer of 1858. A hemp rope, two inches in diameter and 1,300 feet long, was stretched from the American to the Canadian side

of the falls. He used no net or safety rope, believing that preparing for disaster made it more likely.

A little before 5:00 p.m., he began walking toward the Canadian side, using a balancing pole. When he was a third of the way across, he sat down, lowered a line to the Maid of the Mists boat far below, and hoisted up a bottle of wine and enjoyed a glass. He got up and ran across the middle of the rope and made his way to the Canadian side. Twenty minutes later, he walked back across to the U.S. side but with a bulky camera on his back. Two hundred feet out on the rope, he removed the camera, set it up, and took a picture of the Americans waiting for him. He then finished his walk across.

On July 4, Blondin took to the rope again. At the halfway point, he flipped around and walked backward. On his return to the American side, he wore a sack over his body to prevent him from seeing the rope. On July 15, he walked the entire rope backward and pushed a wheelbarrow on his return trip.<sup>4</sup> Legend has it that he asked the crowd if they believed he could push the wheelbarrow across with a person in it. They roared, “Yes!” When he asked for a volunteer, however, no one stepped up.

Two weeks later, he did somersaults and back flips all the way across the Falls, stopping at times to hang by one hand over the roaring water below. On his return trip, his friend and manager Harry Colcord was on his back. He reportedly told his passenger, “Look up, Harry . . . you are no longer Colcord, you are Blondin. Until I clear this place be a part of me, body, mind, and soul. If I sway, sway with me. Do not attempt to do any balancing yourself. If you do we will both go to our death.”<sup>5</sup>

Trust is believing that someone can carry another person on his back safely across a rope strung over Niagara Falls. Faith is climbing on that person’s back.

Our world is a wondrous, exciting, exotic, surprising, amazing place to live. Sometimes it is also frightening and puzzling and dangerous. We know that God will take care of us, but we are not always willing to climb on God’s back. We are not always willing to become one with God, to sway with God instead of trying to balance life all by ourselves. Faith is walking the tightrope of life with God despite the risk and the fear.

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<sup>4</sup>Karen Abbott, “The Daredevil of Niagara Falls,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (October 18, 2011); available online at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-daredevil-of-niagara-falls-110492884/>.

<sup>5</sup>Abbott.

I think that our free will is at least a part of the reason God does not intervene in life to prevent tragedy from happening. I still wish God would. I do believe that God grieves with us and hurts when we hurt. I do trust that God will take care of us and help us no matter what happens. And I believe that God uses his family—all of us—to help us pick up the pieces, to lock arms in solidarity against the evil in our world. I have to work on my faith, on taking the risk of the Gospel, not wasting the trust God has placed in me. I have to be willing to climb on God's back for what is surely an exciting journey on the tightrope of life. Amen.

November 19, 2017

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

With all of the sorrow and fear which have gripped our nation and world in recent days, we find ourselves anxious and distracted, O God. It becomes easy for us to dwell on the troubles around and within us, rather than being mindful of the variety and abundance of your gifts to us. But we come to worship this day and in this season with hearts overflowing with gratitude because of all of the goodness with which you have graced our lives. In the past week alone, many of us have enjoyed the support and companionship of family and friends; an excess of food and other comforts; the satisfaction of meaningful work as well as time for rest and play; the freedom to make choices and express our opinions; opportunities to worship, to reflect, to enjoy things of beauty; and countless other blessings which enrich our days but which often pass us by unnoticed and unappreciated. Trusting in your grace to sustain us through every circumstance, may we offer all that we have and all that we are each day of our lives, both in grateful response for your generosity and in humble acknowledgment that every moment we enjoy is a gift from you.

Even as we offer our praise and gratitude, Loving God, we recognize that ours is a world where many suffer more pain than we are likely to experience and have needs greater than we can comprehend. Give us compassionate hearts, creative minds and willing hands that we might do the work of loving others in your name. When we experience good health, help us to remember those who suffer. When we gather with those who love us, help us to remember those who are lonely. When we have enough to eat, help us to remember those who are hungry. When we are tired from our work, help us to remember those who are jobless. When we come in out of the cold, help us to remember those who are homeless. When we enjoy moments of quiet rest, help us to remember those whose nations are filled with the sounds of war. When we experience security and contentment because of the comforts and privileges we enjoy, help us to remember those who live in fear. But may we not stop at remembering each of these, your beloved children. May we work to ensure that all our brothers and sisters in the human family have enough, not just to survive, but also to flourish and to become all that you have created them to be. May we create in our world, in our community and in our lives a welcome place for all who are in need of your light and hope and peace. And may we raise our hearts and voices to join all creation in joyful songs of thanksgiving to you, O God, on whom our hope is founded. Amen.

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