Storm center: When bad things happen

by Peter J Gomes in the May 31, 2003 issue

Set a straight course and keep to it, and do not be dismayed in the face of adversity. (Ecclesiasticus 2:2, The Apocrypha, Revised English Bible)

After a child has been baptized in the traditions and liturgies of the Greek Orthodox Church—and by "child" I don't mean a squalling seven-year-old but a real infant, literally still damp—the minister or priest or bishop takes his very large pectoral cross—twice the size of mine—and forcefully strikes the little child on its breast, so hard that it leaves a mark, and so hard that it hurts the child and the child screams. In the West, we give the child roses. What is the difference here?

The symbolism of the Eastern baptism is clear. The blow indicates that the child who has been baptized into Christ must bear the cross, and that the cross is a sign not of ease or of victory or of prosperity or of success, but of sorrow, suffering, pain and death. By the cross those things are overcome. The symbol of our Christian faith is the cross—visible on the holy table, carved in a choir screen, worn around the necks of many of us and held in honor and esteemed by all of us. It stands to remind us of the troubles of the world that placed our Savior upon it for sins that he did not commit. Like those Greek Orthodox babies, then, we Christians ought to expect trouble, turmoil and tribulation as the normal course of life. We don't, however. We have been seduced by a false and phony version of the Christian faith that suggests that we are somehow immune to trouble.

Because we have been nice to God, our thinking goes, God should be nice to us. Because you have interrupted your normal routine and come here today, God should take note of it, mark it down in the book and spare you any trouble, tribulation or turmoil. Tribulation happens only to bad people—shouldn't it therefore be happening in spades to all those people who are not here this morning but just getting up out of bed, recovering from a night of pleasure and satiety? Tribulation happens only to the nonobservant and the bad people. When, as Rabbi Harold Kushner so famously

noted, bad things happen to good people, we feel that something has gone terribly wrong. God is not supposed to behave that way. That's not part of the deal, and we ask, "Where is God?"

The answer to that conundrum is not a false conception of God. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the so-called death of God, and everything to do with the life and the faith of the believer. It is not the death of God that should concern us; it is the questionable state of the life of the believer. God does not spare us from turmoil, as even the most casual observance of the scriptures can tell us. God strengthens us for turmoil, and we can find that in the Good Book as well. It is a shabby faith that suggests that God is to do all the heavy lifting and that you and I are to do none. The whole record of scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, and the whole experience of the people of God from Good Friday down to and beyond September 11, suggests that faith is forged on the anvil of human adversity. No adversity; no faith.

Consider the lesson from the ancient Book of Ecclesiasticus. Could it be put any plainer? "My son, if thou comest to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for temptation. Set thy heart aright, and constantly endure, and do not make haste in time of calamity." You don't need a degree in Hebrew Bible or exegesis to figure out what that is saying. What is the context for these words? Trouble, turmoil, tribulation and temptation: that's the given, that's the context. What is the response for calamity? Endurance. Don't rush, don't panic. What are we to do in calamitous times? We are to slow down. We are to inquire. We are to endure. Tribulation does not invite haste; it invites contemplation, reflection, perseverance, endurance.

When the Jewish people celebrate the Days of Awe, beginning their new year and atoning for their sins, they always remember two things. First, they remember the troubles and the tribulations through which they have passed, and they recite the history of those sorrows and troubles. They remind themselves and one another, and everybody else, of how they have been formed and forged through the experience of trial and tribulation.

The second thing they remember is how the Lord delivered them out of those troubles and helped them to endure and bear and eventually overcome them. They remind themselves of it over and over again. When it is said that "it is not the Jew who keeps the law, but the law which keeps the Jew," it is to this process of remembrance, endurance and deliverance that the aphorism speaks. Again, in the Book of Ecclesiasticus, "Look at the generations of old, and see. Whoever did put his

trust in the Lord, and was ashamed? Or who did abide in his fear, and was forsaken? Or who did call upon him, and he despised him?”

The history of the Jews in the world is not a history of escape from trouble; would that it were, but it is not. It is the record of endurance through tribulation, an endurance that would have been impossible without God. If any people had the right to claim that God was dead, or at least on sabbatical, it was the Jews, but they never have said it, and they never will, for they know better. They do not worship a metaphor or a simile, or a theological construct. They worship the one who stands beside them and who has been with them from Egypt to Auschwitz and beyond, and who enables them to stand up to all that a world of tribulation can throw at them. If we want to know about outer turmoil and inner strength, we need look no further than to our neighbors the Jews.

We may also look a little closer to home. We may look to the authentic witness of the Christian faith to which we bear, in this church, unambiguous allegiance. We do not just believe in God in general, or in a spiritual hope: we believe in Jesus Christ, who is all that we can fully know about God. So we look at this tradition for inner strength in the midst of outer turmoil.

Consider St. Paul, a Jew and a Christian, and his view of things in a less than agreeable world. He says: “We are handicapped on all sides”—a very fashionable translation of the word, but apt—“but we are never frustrated. We are puzzled, but never in despair. We are persecuted, but we never have to stand it alone,” and “we may be knocked down, but we are never knocked out.”

Now, Paul is not an abstract theologian. Paul speaks from the experience of a frustrated but not defeated believer. This is not the “How to be leaders and win” sort of stuff; this is not the kind of CEO book that they trot out in business schools and motivational seminars. No. Paul writes out of failure, frustration and conflict, but never out of despair. If you are looking for something to read in these troublesome times, do not turn to books of cheap inspiration and handy-dandy aphorisms; do not look for feel-good and no-stress and gain-and-no-pain kinds of books. They’re out there, and you will be sorely tempted, but if you want to read something useful during these times, read the letters of Paul. Read them and weep! Read them and rejoice! Read them and understand that neither you nor I are the first people in the world ever to face sorrow, death, frustration or terror. There is a record here, not only of coping but of overcoming. If you do not wish to succumb to the tidal wave of

despair and temptation and angst that surrounds us, you will go back to the roots of our faith, which are stronger than any form of patriotism. Don't misunderstand me—I don't despise patriotism—but there is no salvation in love of country. There is salvation only in love of Jesus Christ, and if you confuse the two, the greatest defeat will have been achieved.

According to 2 Corinthians 4, this is not a faith of evasion, a faith of success or a faith of unambiguous pleasure and delight. It is reality, a reality that believers have always been forced to face. "In the world," says the apostle John, "we shall have tribulation." Jesus says, "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." Well, that's all very right and good for Jesus, who in fact has overcome the world, but for us who have not yet overcome the world, John's Gospel is as true as ever it was. In the world we shall have tribulation, and anyone who promises you otherwise is either uninformed or lying, or perhaps both, and owes no allegiance to the gospel. When we face the world as believers, we face it with tribulation on every hand.

My predecessor Willard Sperry used to quote Georges Tyrell, a Catholic modernist. In a time when World War I was still fresh and World War II was on the horizon, Sperry often cited Tyrell's definition of Christianity: "Christianity is an ultimate optimism founded upon a provisional pessimism." In this world we shall have tribulation.

Still, a reasonable person might ask, "From where has this notion come, that Christians are entitled to a free 'Get Out of Jail' card, an exemption from the world of turmoil and tribulation?" This misreading of the Christian faith comes from the fashionable, cultural faith with which we have confused the Christian faith. Most of us aspire to be believers in the Christian faith, but all of us to one degree or another subscribe to the cultural faith, which in times of prosperity is often easy and always dangerous. It is dangerous because prosperity itself can become a terribly tempting false god and a substitute for religion. In the name of the religion of prosperity, success and control, most of us will do anything and almost everything—and we have.

In times of prosperity either we make prosperity our religion, or we imagine that we can do without religion altogether. Who needs it? When turmoil happens to others we can be mildly empathetic, perhaps even sympathetic, and maybe we can even utter that famous aphorism, "There but for the grace of God go I." When turmoil hits us, however, when we are knocked flat, when all of our securities and our cherished illusions are challenged to the breaking point and break, then comes the great

question we must both ask and answer: What is left when everything we have is taken from us?

“How will you manage when trouble comes? How will you manage when you are tested and fail the test? How will you cope with frustration and fear and failure and anxiety?” Sometimes students think those questions quaint and even rude, the kind of rhetorical excess that preachers engage in around commencement time, a kind of raining on their parade.

Since September 11, however, they are no longer abstract, philosophical or theoretical questions, and people have gravitated in astonishing numbers to the places where such questions are taken seriously. Every rabbi, minister, priest and imam whom I know reports an incredible turn toward faith in this time of crisis. Probably not since World War II has there been such a conspicuous turn to the faith in our country to faith. On Tuesday afternoon, September 11, 2001, thousands gathered in Harvard Yard in an ecumenical witness; on Friday of that week we saw almost as many in the Memorial Church for a Service of Prayer and Remembrance. These days, the daily service of Morning Prayers in Appleton Chapel is nearly standing room only.

These are extraordinary times. Is it not an incredible irony, in the face of the most terrible and tangible facts available to us, the destruction of those monuments to material success—the brutally physical worldly reality, with the violence before our very eyes—that men and women instinctively turn to the very things that cannot be seen? They turn not to the reality of the visible but to the reality of the invisible, which ultimately endures. Seeking faith amid the ruins is the subtext of these days. As the temple to which we offered our secular worship is destroyed before us, we seek the God who precedes and follows these temples made and destroyed by human hands.

In light of this, the question “Where is God?” seems almost irrelevant. This was the question of the day for the religion editor of the *Boston Globe* recently, and a host of my clerical colleagues attempted an answer or two. I was not asked—another proof of the existence of God—but had I been, I would have said that the question is not where God is when disaster strikes, but where you were before disaster struck. Where were you two weeks ago? Where will you be two weeks from now? God has not forgotten you, but is it not reasonable to suggest that before September 11 many of us had forgotten God? It is we who have to account for our absence.

Be certain of one thing, however: we should not be embarrassed that now in adversity we seek the God whom we had forgotten in prosperity; for what is God for if he is not to be there when we seek him? We should not be embarrassed that in trouble we have remembered one profound theological truth: that God is to be found where God is most needed—in trouble, sorrow, sickness, adversity and even in death itself. Over and over and over again the psalms make this point, as in Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble."

Or as Martin Luther said in "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God":

> Let goods and kindred go,
> This mortal life also;
> The body they may kill;
> God's truth abideth still,
> His kingdom is forever.
> Or the old hymn "How Firm a Foundation":
>
> Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed!
> For I am thy God and will still give thee aid;
> I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
> Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.

Those hymns were written not by people who did not know turmoil, but by people who in the midst of outer turmoil had inner strength.

As I've thought about this morning and my obligations toward you, two images have flashed in my mind. One was the indelible image of those burning towers and those terrible encounters with the airplanes. The other image is from one of my favorite movies, *Mrs*. *Miniver*. The last scene takes place in a bombed-out church on a Sunday morning. The window has been destroyed and the cross is standing in that broken space as the people of the congregation, ripped apart by Hitler's bombing of their little village, sing, "Children of the heavenly king / As we journey sweetly sing." I know it was a great propaganda film, designed to rouse the souls and the spirits of the British people. I know all of that, and I believe it! God is with us at the most terrible moment of our time. He is not in front to lead, not behind to push, not above to protect, but "Beside us to guide us / Our God with us joining."

In the Book of Common Prayer there is a collect that begins, “God of all comfort . . .” To some who don’t know any better that sounds like something soothing, adequate words in troubled times of turmoil and tribulation, a kind of Band-Aid on cancer. Do you know the proper meaning of the word “comfort”? It means “to fortify; to strengthen; to give courage, even power.” The God of all comfort is the one who supplies what we most lack when we most need it. As Paul puts it, God gives us sufficient capacity that when we are knocked down we are not knocked out. The God of all comfort is not the god who fights like Superman or Rambo or Clint Eastwood. The God of all comfort is the one who gives inner power and strength to those who would be easily outnumbered, outmaneuvered, outpowered by the conventional forces and the conventional wisdom. Inner strength is what is required when we do not know what to do with our outward power and our outward might.

The world has always been a dangerous and precarious place. It’s just that some of us have now discovered this terrible fact for ourselves. The shrinking world that has allowed us to export technology abroad has now permitted terror to be imported to us. The question is how we stand and manage in a world less brave, less new.

Inner strength, I believe, comes from the sure conviction that God has placed us in the world to do the work of life, and not of death. This is what St. Paul says: “We are always facing death, but this means that we know more and more of life” (2 Cor. 4:11). Faith is not the opposite of doubt or of death, but the means whereby we face and endure doubt and death, and overcome our fear of them. We believe that neither death nor doubt nor fear is the last word. This is a sure conviction for Christian believers. Because that belief is testified to by the experience of our ancestors in the faith and our contemporaries who labor beside us and for God in the rubble, we are able to endure. We are able to go through the worst for the best, come what may. Endurance is what it takes when you have nothing left. Heavy loads have been placed upon us in these days, and even greater burdens and sacrifices are to come. Like Jesus in the Garden, we would be less than human if we did not pray that this cup might pass us by—but it won’t. How will we manage?

Ernest Gordon, for many years dean of the chapel at Princeton, was captured on the River Kwai during World War II. While in a Japanese prison camp, Gordon and his fellow British captives were initially very religious, reading their Bibles, praying, singing hymns, witnessing and testifying to their faith. They were hoping and expecting that God would reward them and fortify them for their faith by freeing them or at least mitigating their captivity. God didn’t deliver, however, and the men

became both disillusioned and angry. They gave up on the outward display of their faith; but after a while, as the men began tending to the needs of their fellows—caring for them, protecting the weaker ones and in some cases dying for one another—they began to discern something of a spirit of God in their midst. They discovered that religion was not what you believed but what you did for others when it seemed that you could do nothing at all. Compassion gave them their inner strength, and their inner strength gave them compassion.

Could it be that amid the cries of vengeance and violence and warfare, the inner strength we so desperately seek is the strength that comes from hearing and heeding the cry of the other?

In *The Beatitudes*, Hugh Martin writes:

> Some people's strength is all drawn from themselves. They are like isolated pools with limited reserves. Others are more like rivers. They do not produce or contain the power, but it flows through them, like blood through the body. The more they give, the more they are able to draw in. That strength is theirs, but it is not their own. The strength that God gives is available to those who care for others, for they are showing the spirit of Jesus. The power of God's spirit fortifies them.

Can it be that inner strength is the capacity not simply to endure, but to give? Can it be that compassion is superior to power? Can it be that amid the turmoil of that violent crowd on Good Friday, from his inner strength Jesus showed compassion? He forgave his enemies, he reunited his friends and he redeemed the criminal?

As you seek the inner strength that helps you not only to endure but to overcome, do not look for what you can get, but for what you have been given, and for what you can give. We begin with calamity, but we end with compassion.

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