

New life from crisis

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The decline of mainline Protestantism is clear. What's less clear is what the church should do about it. "Strange as it may seem," writes Diana Butler Bass,

in this time of cultural anxiety, economic near collapse, terrorist fear, political violence, environmental crisis, and partisan anger, I believe that the United States (and not only the United States) is caught up in the throes of a spiritual awakening, a period of sustained religious and political transformation during which our ways of seeing the world, understanding ourselves, and expressing faith are being, to borrow a phrase, "born again." Indeed, the shifts around religion contribute to the anxiety, even as anxiety gives rise to new sorts of understandings of God and the spiritual life.

Might these crises lead us to new ways of knowing and understanding God? Could we learn about the providence of God from economic instability, broken global financial systems, and the crushing indebtedness of marginalized people? Could partisan bickering, rising tides of violence, and uncontained warfare across cultural and religious lines reveal new sides to God's sovereignty? We face conflicts over gender inequality, rape culture and masculinity, sexuality and marriage, even the persistent evil of racism--might these all be trials by which we might know God's reconciling peace anew?

Perhaps--if we follow the example of the psalmist.

The psalmist did not turn away from the burning pain of reality:

I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads.... Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion.

The psalmist takes a hard look at reality. This provides a reason to remember, even understand more deeply, the goodness and greatness of God:

Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.... Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

What new things might we learn about God if we delve deeply into the crises around us? What new life might we receive as we struggle to speak God's truth to cast out the fear of the world?