

The scripture lessons and life pose a difficult question this week. If I were a pastor in the city of Tacloban in the Philippines today, what, **what**, could I be saying to the people? If I had survived the 200 mile an hour winds and the 25 foot storm surge, I would likely be sitting in the middle of my devastated city, surrounded by debris, by people crying out in thirst and pain, by the stench of death as the toll rises, perhaps even grieving my nearest and dearest ones. What does our faith have to say in the face of such agony?

Would the people be helped by Jesus' words in the gospel as he talks about the "end-times" to the first century faithful? "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down... Nations will rise against nations, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes (just months ago, the Philippines suffered an earthquake), and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven... But not a hair on your head will perish... By endurance you will gain your souls."

I **don't** think so. It might comfort **us** to know that in **every** struggling age people talk about, predict, even prepare for disastrous "end-times" known as apocalypse. Remember the movie entitled "Apocalypse Now?" In **every now** there is a community, a nation, a family, even individuals living their own apocalypse. Right now, it is the nation of the Philippines, and all connected to it. One of our church members in Wisconsin, Yolanda, is currently frantically searching for her whole family, mothers, sisters and brothers, who she cannot locate in Tacloban. Her husband is dying here in the States. She was recently forced out of a beloved house because of finances. Yollie is in the midst of her own apocalypse, a time of disastrous upheaval. What can I say to her? Certainly not, "Look, hear the scriptures, this happens all the time."

Would I move on to the words of Isaiah that we just heard? God speaks: "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice in what I am creating, for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress."

Sounds promising, but no, no, that would be neither helpful nor respectful. Again, it may help us, sitting relatively safely in this First Church sanctuary, to know that out of destruction and death new life follows. But for those in the thick of the death and destruction, it amounts to no more than a slap in the face. People who move immediately to what God may or may not be doing simply deny the pain and loss that is. The one who tells a grieving parent that this is all part of some divine plan, that God must have needed another angel in heaven, only continue to inflict damage on the one bearing the terrible loss. Why in the world would they want to, even if they could, look beyond their precious beloved to some larger purpose? And **why** would a loving God do something so cruel?

So, what do we say to the people of the Philippines today? To Yollie? To the grieving parent? To the person with the virulent illness? To every one experiencing apocalypse right now in this time? It is not an easy question. And the sad, sad thing about people who are suffering is that they often end up isolated because we don't know what to do. We don't know what to say. Abandonment is added to the pain they bear. On top of everything else, descends a **deafening silence**, a deep and looming **absence**, that simply affirms what they suspect at this point – **there is no God.**

Right this moment as we sit safely here thousands of people in the Philippines and thousands more around the world, perhaps someone sitting right next to you, are feeling, knowing, and living nothing but this terrible absence. And here is where we must begin. **Not** in words, even words meant to comfort, certainly not in words meant to deny the reality of their deep suffering. Not in words at all, but in presence. We must find gentle ways to be present. We must have the courage and the will to face suffering right in the face and by our actions say “We are here.” We are with you. We will not look away. We will bear this pain with you. Your pain is ours. Your grief is ours. Your loss, as much as we can, we will bear as ours.

Now, of course, this means different things in different contexts. We cannot all get on a plane to the Philippines and wrap our arms around people. This is one of those times when being present demands addressing the most dire and urgent needs. Making out a check for clean water when we cannot offer the cup of water ourselves is the most important thing that we can do. To share what we have and sending it with our prayers and love is a way of being present to anguish that we know exists halfway around the globe.

Being present to need close at hand is a different matter. It may involve sharing our resources, such as with the Food Cupboard, the Interfaith Fuel Fund, winter coats for Triad, but let's be honest. Sometimes we choose to give so that we need not engage with the ones in trouble. Giving **without love**, without a desire to know or share something of the experience of the other, may address physical needs, but not that silence, that absence, that isolates the one in need. It says, “I am here, but **not really.**” I really just want you to go away. I don't want to see you.

And this is it, isn't it? We really don't want to see suffering. We **don't** want to see grief and loss. We don't want to get close to that deafening silence, that looming absence...it might swallow us up at well. But here's the thing – when we open ourselves in our depths to the depths of another, something incredible, something sacred happens...

**God comes.** God comes... bit by bit by bit...as presence. Presence to pain. Presence to grief. Presence to loss. God comes in an outstretched hand. A simple touch. God comes in eyes that will not look away or shield themselves from another's trials. God comes in ears that will listen over and over and over again if need be to the story of another's anguish until the telling begins the healing. God comes as steadfast love, love that begins to turn a terrible absence into a fertile and tender space for whatever life there is to come. And there will be life. **There will be life.** But first, **there must be presence**, steadfast presence that comes **right through us.** Amen.