

Life is Fragile...Evil is Real...God is Sure!

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**Sermon Series: From
the Pew to the World**

Psalm 19:7-11

*...what does
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We're in the midst of a sermon series on the subject of mission.

We had arranged for Elizabeth Brooken-Sturman, organizing pastor of our new church plant in the Brambleton area of Loudoun County, to preach today. We agreed that's a sermon for another day. The Virginia Tech shootings short-circuited our plans. To ignore what had happened is to bury our heads in the sand. There is one thing on our minds today; how to recover from this incredulous tragedy.

I won't be talking about mission today, although what happened this past week had set in bold relief what we are doing here. The need for the good news of Jesus Christ has never been more compelling. Does anyone doubt whether our message of reconciliation and forgiveness has something to say to our broken world?

Crisis has a way of ripping the veneer off life. We don't minister in a rosy world. We live in a real world of pain and suffering, evil and death.

I've made it a point to read every editorial I can find in the aftermath of this carnage. Most editorials cluster around three issues: the debate over gun control, public good versus private rights and whether school administrators and police handled this crisis appropriately. These subjects are

worth exploring, but not today, not when emotions are so raw and tender.

I'd like to take a step back and ask, as Christian people, what does our faith have to offer us at a time like this?

The question on most people's minds is why—why did this tragedy happen? Professional counselors are being grilled over the psychological profile of the killer. Why is also a religious question—why, God, why? How can we deal with this awful tragedy, yet still believe that God is good?

I find myself in Job's predicament—speaking about things I do not understand, things too wonderful for me to know (Job 42:3).

Genesis declares God created the world good. Evil appears in paradise to thwart God's good intentions. The rest of the Bible is essentially a commentary on the struggle between good and evil. God summons us to do justice and love mercy, while at the same time preserving human freedom to make choices about good and evil.

The Bible also cautions us that things are not always what they seem. Sometimes the way of evil prospers. But the final chapter has not been written. Now I understand why there is a judgment day, when justice will be mediated and righteousness vindicated. One day, God will set all things right!

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I am reminded of an old story about a Christian minister and an atheistic barber who walk the blighted section of their city, where poverty and crime flourish. The barber says, "This is why I can't believe in your God of love. If God is as kind as you say, he wouldn't permit all this poverty, disease and squalor. He wouldn't allow these poor street people to get addicted. No, I cannot believe in a God who permits these things." The minister is silent until they meet a man with scraggly hair and a half-inch stubble on his face. The preacher says, "You can't be a good barber or you wouldn't permit a man like this to continue living here without a hair cut and a shave." Indignant, the barber answers, "Why blame me for that man's condition? He has never come to my shop. If he had, I could have fixed him up and made him look like a gentleman." The preacher responds, "Then, don't blame God for allowing people to continue in their evil ways." Poverty is an altogether human invention.

After the events of 9/11, I talked about three takeaways from this horrible tragedy: Life is Fragile...Evil is Real...God is Sure. These three realities resurfaced for me again this week.

We have been reminded recently that *Life is Fragile*. Thirty-two people began their Monday ritual, oblivious to what would happen later that morning. We've had a crash course this week on the tenuous nature of life. When everything is going well, we

appear invincible and strong. But when something like 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina or a shooting spree occurs, we are reminded once more that life is exceedingly fragile. Everyone breaks so easily.

Every day is a gift. We do not earn or deserve this gift of life. God gives life to us, not because we are good, but because God is good.

We have been reminded this week that *Evil is Real*. It seems odd to hear our secular culture using religious words such as evil so liberally. Evil can strike the modern ear as almost medieval. But what we witnessed this week is evil, pure, unmitigated evil. The first photos of Seung Hui Cho make him seem meek and withdrawn. But in the videos sent to NBC, he looks positively menacing, brandishing semi-automatic weapons, dressed in commando gear. His poems and plays are so twisted that they shock our anything-goes culture.

Sometimes, evil portrays itself as seductively alluring. Not this week! Evil overplayed its hand this time around. This is what happens when evil runs its wretched course. Hatred resorts to violence and murder.

There is, today, a growing market for evil. For too long we have naively believed in the utopian idea of human progress, that we are getting better and better all the time. No, evil is real! Sin can lead to monstrous evil. The horrors of evil ought to awaken us from the dream of thinking evil is no big deal. Evil is a horribly big deal!

The tendency at a time like this is to think that evil is more menac-

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ing out there somewhere than in the human heart. I am reminded of something Solzhenitsyn said: "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

We've been reminded this week that although Life is Fragile and Evil is Real, *God is Sure*. That's why I read Psalm 19 to introduce this sermon:

"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; The decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring for-ever; The ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether" (19:7-11).

The word "sure" describes something firm and reliable. God is trustworthy. I am reminded of the words George Washington's mother spoke to her son when he left home as a young man: "Son, remember that God is your only sure trust."

God never promises Christians will live trouble-free lives. Several self-professed Christians were gunned down this week in Blackburg. True believers don't live

charmed lives. Sometimes the wicked prosper and righteous suffer.

God doesn't protect us from trouble; God protects us in trouble. The most persistent promise Jesus makes to his disciples appears in the closing line from Matthew's gospel: "I am with you always, even to the close of the age" (28:20).

Paul's triumphant words to Christians facing hardship in Rome come to mind: "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

Three symbols were used by the early church to identify Christianity: a fish, a dove and an anchor. Anchors were placed on early Christian epitaphs as symbols of secure hope. In the letter to the Hebrews we read, "We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (6:19).

Let me return to the question asked at the outset of this sermon: What does our faith have to offer people at a time like this?

In 1989, 96 fans, mostly young people, were crushed to death in a football (soccer) stadium in Sheffield, England and another 200 were injured. At one of the hospitals where victims were taken, an attending surgeon spoke to parents who had come to find out the fate of their children. The surgeon read the names of those killed and expressed his sympathy. He said that he believed God understood the par-

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ents' grief and was with them in their time of need. One father bitterly responded, "What does God know about losing a son?"

It turns out God knows quite a bit, actually. Christianity does not answer specifically the problem of suffering. But it does offer the promise of God, who is present with us in suffering. Christianity is the only faith that tells you God lost His Son in an act of violent injustice. In the person of Jesus Christ, God suffered as you have suffered. God, in the person of Jesus Christ, took into Himself the cause of it all—sin and evil. And God achieved by Christ's death the cure of it all—forgiveness and everlasting reconciliation with God.

The song Becky is about to sing was offered Wednesday night at our prayer service in response to this tragedy. The song was recorded by Natalie Grant and written by Christa Wells. Christa wrote the song as a gift to three close friends. One friend lost a baby at birth, a second friend's baby died of crib death and a third friend lost her husband at age 30. Christa was inspired to write this song after witnessing God's mercy in her friends' lives.

Some people encouraged Christa to rewrite the lyrics to make them easier to hear and accept. But Christa stood by what she wrote. She said, "It's a tragic story and it has some hard content, but that's how I wanted it to be." It's a song about suffering, healing and God's faithfulness. The refrain tells it all: "This is what it is to be

loved and to know that the promise was that when everything fell, we'd be held."

Held

by Natalie Grant

Two months is too little
They let him go
They had no sudden healing
To think that providence would
Take a child from his mother while
she prays
Is appalling

Who told us we'd be rescued?
What had changed and why should
we be saved from nightmares?
We're asking why this happens
To us who have died to live?
It's unfair

Chorus:

This is what it means to be held
How it feels when the sacred is torn
from your life
And you survive
This is what it is to be loved
And to know that the promise was
When everything fell we'd be held

This hand is bitterness
We want to taste it, let the hatred
NUMB our sorrow
The wise hands opens slowly to
lilies of the valley and tomorrow

Chorus

Bridge:

If hope is born of suffering
If this is only the beginning
Can we not wait for one hour
watching for our Savior?

Chorus

