Sunday, October 8, 2017
Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 3: 8-18
Title: Where is God Amidst the Chaos – Ann Burnham, Certified Lay Servant

Ted and I were quite excited last week because our 27-year-old grandson confided to us that upon his return from a business conference, he would be proposing to his girlfriend. His girlfriend, Sonia, is the young woman we have been praying for who was diagnosed with Lymphoma – and for Ted and me to know he would be proposing on Friday, August 6th was even more exciting because it would be on our 33rd wedding anniversary. Imagine our horror when we found out about the Las Vegas massacre knowing our grandson was in Vegas. After texting madly back and forth with our daughter, I learned Sean was near the scene but safe. I dropped to my knees and thanked God that he was unhurt. I then prayed for the victims and their families.

So as daunting as it is to deliver the message today, I truly feel however to avoid the tragedy that took place in Las Vegas would be wrong. Fifty-eight people lost their lives and 489 others were wounded and some of those so severely, they may be disabled for the rest of their lives. We know all of those who attended that concert will suffer from that traumatic event.

Why do these things happen – Where is God and why does a God who is good and loving, allow evil and suffering to exist? This very question has been asked for thousands of years. In Job 7: 19-20, we hear Job asking the Lord; "Will You never look away from me, or let me alone even for an instant? If I have sinned, what have I done to you, O Watcher of men? Why have You made me Your target? Have I become a burden to You?" Job had everything taken away from him and then he was afflicted with a terrible disease. What was Job left with? A wife who told him to "Curse God and die!" Not a lot of comfort there. We often hear of the "patience of Job", but what he endured took far more than patience. It took a true love and faithfulness to God.

Has not the WHY been asked so many more times in modern times: During the Holocaust, the genocides of Armenia, Rwanda, Cambodia, Bosnia, Darfur, the Syrian slaughters and more. What about Columbine, the horror of 911, the movie theater in Aurora, the Boston Marathon, the 2016 Orlando nightclub – and now a Country music festival in Las Vegas. How do we hold on to our faith through all of this?

No one on this earth can answer you and I certainly am not qualified to answer you but I do know this – I do not have God's mind and knowledge. I do not know his plan but I do know that 1 Corinthians 13:12 says, "Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely."

Still we wonder if God is so powerful, why did he not stop this – why did he allow this?

We tend to think of God in what we want – We forget the world that God originally created – a perfect world. In Genesis 1:31 it says: God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. God did not make evil, greed, or hate. What God did do was give us the ability to love – but loving people means we have free will and we do know that God gave us free will. We are blessed with good brains, brains that can reason, brains that can make choices – we choose who to love, what we want to eat, where we want to go and we choose between evil and good. God allowed us to choose to love him and follow him but again – it is a choice because we have free will. He did not make us robots programmed to do his bidding. We also know there is evil – and evil can be invited in. We can choose to be lazy and just follow whatever whim we want or we can do what is right and good. You can take a knife in your hand and use it to cut up vegetables to serve to your family or the poor or you can stab someone with it and steal their money. It is your choice – your free will.

We know that Jesus suffered – the son of God suffered for us. Jesus knew pain and suffering would come. Jesus told us the truth – he said in John 16:33, "You will have suffering in this world." He did not say you MIGHT, he said it IS going to happen. So what can we do – We can be Christians and show our love, our compassion, lend a hand and pray – pray for those victims souls. Pray for those who are hospitalized and pray for the families of all. Look up at your screens and see the faces of the victims – The media focuses so much on the perpetrator of the crimes but look at these names and faces. These are the ones who were taken from their parents, children, siblings, loved ones. These are the innocent victims and these are the ones we should know. Truth be told we should pray for the person who did this and his family as well.

I also know something else: With every tragedy comes great feats of heroism, of selflessness. We hear of men protecting their wives, of people refusing to leave their wounded friends, of total strangers loading victims in their personal trucks and cars and driving them to the hospital. We have heard it over and over because we have free will. We can choose to take off and focus on saving ourselves or helping our fellow man. I will say it is the only time the media focuses on good deeds and people praying – imagine that - talking about faith and praying!

I was struck by something I read as I was researching this tragedy. Maybe I have not been paying enough attention to the news but did any of you see what happened in Tennessee on September 24th?

The 25-year-old black man accused of a deadly shooting at a church near Nashville had a note in his car that made reference to revenge for the church massacre carried out by a white supremacist in Charleston, S.C., according to a report by The Associated Press.

Investigators found a note stating that this attack was in retaliation for the actions of Dylann S. Roof, the white supremacist responsible for the 2015 murders at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston that shocked the country. Mr. Roof, then 21 and lacking any direct ties to white supremacist groups, had become radicalized online and carefully planned the assault, which he carried out after participating in the church's Wednesday night Bible study. Nine people were killed. Mr. Roof never demonstrated any public remorse for the attack.

One person was killed and seven others were wounded after a gunman opened fire on Sunday, September 24th at a church in Antioch, Tenn., near Nashville. About 50 people were in the church at the time of the shooting, which was reported at 11:15 a.m. local time as services were ending, the police said. Robert Engle, an usher at the church, the Burnette Chapel Church of Christ, was pistol-whipped when he confronted the gunman and a struggle ensued with the gunman accidentally shooting himself.

Mr. Engle, 22, then ran to his car, got his gun and returned to ensure "the gunman didn't make any more movements until police arrived," Don Aaron, a police spokesman, said at a news conference. The police described Mr. Engle as an "extraordinarily brave individual" and say that his actions helped end the shooting.

A man who lives near the church said people had come to his home looking for help, so he headed over. He told a local television station that by the time he arrived, the gunman had shot a woman in the back in the parking lot, and "then he turned around, and rolled her over and shot her in the face."

"Then he went through the church, and he knocked one older man off a walker on the floor," he added.

The person killed was Melanie Smith, 39, of Smyrna, Tenn., the police said. The other victims were identified as Joey Spann, 60, the church's minister; Peggy Spann, 65, his wife; William Jenkins, 83; Marlene Jenkins, 84; Linda Bush, 68; and Katherine Dickerson, 64. None of their injuries were life-threatening, the police said in a news release.

In a welcome message on its website, the church described itself as "a friendly, Bible-based group of folks who love the Lord and are interested in spreading his word to those who are lost."

Do you know what these people did after the church was surrounded with crime scene tape? They all went about a mile down the road to another church and PRAYED – prayed for their congregation, the shooter and his family. And that, my friends, is what the church members in Charleston did! They prayed for their congregation and for the shooter and announced that they forgave him. They did not excuse what he had done, but they forgave him.

Isn't that free will? The gunman chose evil and both of those congregations chose to follow Jesus despite their horrific experiences.

But who can provide true comfort to those who have been victimized? I will give you a brief overview of the story I read from a Boston Marathon victim named Rebekah Gregory.

Rebekah Gregory is a simple small-town woman and mother whose life was forever changed due to the events of the Boston marathon bombings on April 15, 2013. This horrible act of terrorism left her as one of the names of the seventeen amputees and therefore permanently handicapped at the young age of only twenty-six years old.

Instead of being bitter, Rebekah has used her platform in a huge way by encouraging others worldwide. Speaking out about her story and own daily obstacles, she believes that life's struggles are not only meant to teach us lessons, but make us better versions of ourselves than before. Rebekah's delivery with her quick wit and contagious optimism is sure to have everyone feeling inspired and ready to make their own life changes. Outlining her popular phrase, "with every new day comes new hope" she never fails to leave her audience ready to "change the world" by keeping their spirits alive in Christ and their eyes on God. Rebekah says that people ask what her "secret" is and she responds, "that the secret is not a piece of information – it is trust. It's trusting that God has control. It's growing in my faith even as I face obstacles. It's asking myself how Jesus would ask me to look at life".

Rebekah says, "When we look back at the people in our lives who did or said things that truly stuck with us in Christ-like ways, these are the moments when they were letting their inner lights shine. The light that guides me is he simple secret to how I took my life back".

And that is what we must do - hang on to our faith and let our inner lights shine!