

TURNING TO GOD IN TROUBLED TIMES

Kathleen Fischer

WHEN HURRICANES, EARTHQUAKES AND TERRORIST ATTACKS strike in quick succession it can seem as if humanity has never before borne so many disasters and so much pain. But throughout history human societies have endured events bringing widespread devastation and death, from ancient Near Eastern floods and droughts to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, two characteristics of the present era have dramatically intensified our experience of such suffering: a heightened awareness of global interdependence and the vivid communication made possible by current technologies. When violence or terror, earthquakes or floods, occur anywhere now, the media instantly relay powerful images of shattered buildings, mangled victims and grieving survivors to the farthest reaches of the globe. People everywhere respond with a complicated mixture of horror, anger, fear, helplessness and compassion. Further, these events expose the inequities in the global community, just as collapsed structures reveal the cracks and strains that made them vulnerable.

Such has been the impact of the recent series of disasters—the Asian tsunami, flooding in Guatemala, multiple hurricanes, a major earthquake in Pakistan, and terrorist attacks and violent demonstrations on several continents. In the wake of so much human heartache, young children ask if their homes and families will also be suddenly swept away, teenagers wonder whether the end of the world is coming, and adults find themselves deeply troubled. Loss and chaos on so large a scale can stretch compassion to breaking point. Asked to respond to yet another instance of unthinkable human suffering, even generous believers sometimes simply turn away, overwhelmed and apathetic. Faith teeters, buffeted by questions about God's relationship to evil.

As the cosmic community comes together, we become ever more acutely aware of such disasters. What response can we hope for from Christian spirituality? What relevance do the world's major spiritual traditions have for the anxieties of our time? Many spiritual practices emerged amid crises, and, as we shall see, offer valuable resources for the present. In them we discover a spirituality for a broken-hearted world, one that shows us how to integrate our painful emotions into prayer, teaches us to trust in a hidden God, roots our compassion in the divine heart, and moves us not only to charity, but to justice as well.

Bringing Painful Emotions to Prayer

A family surveys the rubble of what was once their home. A husband holds the lifeless body of his wife. A mother reaches out to the horizon where the roiling sea has claimed her children. Not only survivors of disaster, but also people everywhere who view their plight, must find ways to mourn such loss. Psychic numbing and apathy more readily overtake us when we cannot speak the anguish and anger wrought by suffering. Shrieks and groans, wails and raised fists—these are the spontaneous eruptions of the human spirit in grief.



©Helmut Issels

After the Tsunami, 2004: a scene from Phuket Island, Thailand

The wisdom of the biblical psalms assures us that prayer need not censor these raw expressions of pain, nor gloss over anger and despair. The psalms address God in unabashedly honest prayer: ‘O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest’ (Psalm 22:2). Over a third of the psalms are laments, and many are communal responses to the ravages of war and national loss. One of the most familiar of these is Psalm 137, a lament over the afflictions of the Exile which followed the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE: ‘By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion’ (Psalm 137:1).¹

An impassioned manual of prayer, the Book of Psalms has taught generations of believers how to take their emotions to God. And lamentation, a shrill and daring cry for help in the midst of pain, occurs not only in the psalms, but in other parts of the Bible as well. Wandering hungry and thirsty in the desert, the Israelites complain to God that they have no water fit to drink (Exodus 15:22-25); Job regrets the day he was born in language we might consider too candid for prayer: ‘Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?’ (Job 3:11) These laments encourage us to come to God just as we are.

The biblical prayers of lament also force us to recognise the violence and vengeance in our hearts. The so-called ‘cursing psalms’ not only name enemies; they also include specific suggestions of what God should do to them: ‘All my enemies shall be ashamed and struck with terror; they shall turn back, and in a moment be put to shame’ (Psalm 6:10). Though we may find these calls for divine retribution repugnant, we may well, if we are honest, identify with the psalmist’s feelings: ‘Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!’ (Psalm 137:8) The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann believes such ‘venomous passages’ in the psalms are to be understood as cathartic, that is, they bring troubling emotions to awareness and expression so that we may move beyond them. When we take these feelings to prayer, we name the depth and intensity of our hurt. Acts of

¹ For helpful discussions of biblical lament, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) and *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, edited by Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

violence need not follow. This language of vengeance is offered to God and the results are left to the divine wisdom.²

Biblical poetry shows us how painful emotions are transformed in God's presence. Although laments characteristically begin with a description of pain and a plea for help, they commonly close with expressions of praise, thanks, and an assurance of being heard. For example, Psalm 22 opens with 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (v.1); then pleads with God, 'O my help, come quickly to my aid!' (v. 19); and finally culminates in stanzas of praise and thanks for divine deliverance, 'You who fear the Lord, praise him!' (v. 23)

Robert Alter, a professor of Hebrew and comparative literature, identifies a feature of biblical poetry that illumines this movement in the psalms. What we might casually hear as repetition is seldom simply the restatement of a theme. We are taken through a powerful crescendo of emotional expression. Ideas and images are intensified and made more specific from one verse to the next.³ For example, the images in the opening lines of the Book of Lamentations progress from the loneliness of an abandoned city to the immense grief of a widow: 'How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!' (Lamentations 1:1) This deepening is also beautifully illustrated in two verses from Isaiah that describe a distressed Israel pouring out her prayer: 'Like a pregnant woman whose time draws near, she trembles, she screams in her birth pangs' (Isaiah 26:17).⁴ The second part of the verse is not only more concrete than the first, but also represents a later moment in the process. We move from late pregnancy to the midst of labour itself.

**Turning to
God in
catastrophe
clarifies
painful
emotions**

In praying the psalms, we must expect something new to happen from one line to the next. We discover that turning to God in catastrophe has power gradually to clarify and to transform painful emotions, even if this process initially involves deepening and intensifying the painful feelings. Prayer in the pattern of the psalms

² Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, Mn: St Mary's Press, 1982), 69-70.

³ See Robert Alter, 'The Characteristics of Ancient Hebrew Poetry', in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, edited by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 1987), 611-624.

⁴ I am using Alter's translation of this verse in 'The Characteristics of Hebrew Poetry', 618.

rests on the bedrock of God's love for the world and on the steadfastness of divine mercy.

Trusting in a Hidden God

Suffering raises questions about God's presence and power that trouble us profoundly. It is at the emotional level that we protest against God's apparent absence when we feel most in need: 'Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?' (Psalm 44:24) Though nothing can easily soothe these painful feelings, spiritual teachings provide insight into the meaning of God's hidden presence in times of sorrow.

The mystical tradition of the dark night of the soul, found in the spiritualities of Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross, and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, assures us that divine silence offers the possibility of deep transformation. Though John applies the term *dark night* to the individual's life of prayer, not to the experience of whole societies and peoples, his metaphor can be extended to broader encounters with God's absence.⁵ In the personal experience of the dark night of the soul, and likewise in global dark nights, a veil of mystery covers a divine presence quietly and unceasingly bringing about something new. Our journey of growth feels more like death, as we are forced to let go of old ways that no longer work, and our usual means of controlling outcomes fail. Systems on which we depended fall apart, and it is difficult to believe that new kinds of love and insight are being born. As John says: 'Everything seems to be functioning in reverse'.⁶ In this darkness, even our images of God are shattered and shown to be idols.

In the tradition of the dark night of prayer, this dying is a prelude to life. It offers societies the possibility of embracing a radically new vision. Realising the limits of current ways of thinking, we might learn to use technology to end disease and poverty rather than stockpiling

⁵ Constance FitzGerald provides an excellent example of such interpretation in 'Impasse and Dark Night', in *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, edited by Joann Wolski Conn (New York: Paulist, 1986), 287-311. See also Jane Kopas, *Seeking the Hidden God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005).

⁶ *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, revised edition, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), *The Dark Night*, book 1, chapter 8, no. 3.

weapons of war; we might overcome the division of peoples into oppressor and oppressed; and we might heal the rift between the human and the natural worlds. Concealed in the dark night is the invitation to accept a new vision of the planet, to undergo a transformation into the *shalom*, or peace, that God holds out to us:

I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety (Hosea 2:18).

Another tradition of spirituality similarly suggests a path to the divine in dark times: it calls us to recognise God's presence in the stranger in our midst. The book of Genesis tells how Sarah and Abraham, having abandoned family, friends and homeland to pursue a promise from God, pitched their tent at Mamre in the hill country of Judah. In the oppressive heat of the day, three strangers arrive. Sarah and Abraham immediately bring them water, wash their feet, and prepare a meal for them of cakes kneaded from choice flour, a tender calf, curds and milk. To Sarah's amazement, these strangers proclaim God's promise that she will throw off her barrenness and give birth to a child, despite her old age (Genesis 18:1-15). Later, the prophet Isaiah evokes this old tradition of God's presence in the midst of loss to a people deep in the resignation and despondency of exile, in the heart of Babylon: 'Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many' (Isaiah 51:2).

The call to look for the hidden God in the stranger who is before us occurs throughout the New Testament. One of its most familiar expressions comes from the parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew's Gospel. The righteous, those who extended mercy to the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick or imprisoned, are amazed to learn that in serving the least valued members of society they were in fact encountering the divine. And the accursed, who failed to respond with compassion to others in need, are equally astonished to realise that they have missed a meeting with God (Matthew 25:31-46). The poet Denise Levertov expresses beautifully this gospel teaching that care for one another is a sacrament of the divine presence:



Again before thy altar, silent Lord.
Thy presence is made known
by untraced interventions
like those legendary baskets filled
with bread and wine, discovered
at the door by someone at wit's end
returning home empty-handed
after a day of looking for work.⁷

To find God in disaster, we must let grace alter our sight, and take us beyond established expectations as to what the divine presence might look like.

In *The Hidden Face of God*, Richard Elliott Friedman probes God's mysterious disappearance in the course of the Bible. Friedman discovers a gradual movement from a world where God is known in manifest ways to one in which God's face is increasingly hidden: 'In Genesis and Exodus you see Him; by Ezra and Esther you don't'.⁸ The Hebrew Bible, Friedman notes, uses the metaphorical phrase 'God

⁷'Altars', in Denise Levertov, *Sands of the Well* (New York: New Directions, 1996), 126.

⁸(New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 69.

hides His face' more than thirty times. In the later books, God sometimes speaks through inspired leaders and prophets, but there is less direct divine communication and there are fewer miracles. Perhaps, Friedman suggests, this concealing of the divine points to the responsibility which we human beings are to assume for our world.

So, when times are difficult and God seems absent, we are challenged to trust more deeply, to look for God in the stranger, and to take greater care of our world.

Rooting Our Compassion in the Heart of God

As Jesus enters the Garden of Gethsemane, he asks his disciples to watch and pray with him, telling them: 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake' (Mark 14:34). Distressed and agitated, Jesus pours out his lament to God, returning to his disciples several times only to find them sleeping. Like us, these disciples discover that good intentions are sometimes hard to sustain; flesh is weaker than spirit. On their own, they cannot attend with mind and heart in the hour of darkness; without prayer, they abandon Jesus to his night of agony, failing him when he most wants their companionship. Numbness and sleep overtake them in the face of impending danger. The same is often true of us, which is why sustaining compassion over the long haul requires participation in God's own compassion for the world.

When a Sufi friend asked Thomas Merton how he prayed, Merton replied in a letter that his method of meditation was centred on the presence and love of God. It was not, however, an effort to think about anything; rather, it was a kind of praise rising out of nothingness and silence. Finally, he wrote, prayer is a 'seeking of the Face of the Invisible'.⁹ But Merton believed that such contemplation unites us with our brothers and sisters and all other beings in the universe. We find them in God. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton describes the nature of the care and communion that flow from Christian prayer:

When you and I become what we are really meant to be, we will discover not only that we love one another perfectly but that we

⁹ Merton's letter to the Sufi scholar Abdul Aziz is quoted in Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 433.

are both living in Christ and Christ in us, and we are all one Christ. We will see that it is he who loves in us.¹⁰

When compassion grows out of contemplation, its roots lie deep in God; and it is the divine Spirit who sustains us in 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control' (Galatians 5:22-23). Without that Spirit, we run the risk of going dry, and of becoming incapable of generosity, kindness or love.

As Merton reminds us, it is through prayer that we gradually come to love with the very love of God. John of the Cross underscores this point when he speaks of contemplation as 'a secret, peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love'.¹¹ In prayer we open up our hearts for God to fill them. Then, when we are asked to respond to disaster, we find that God is already there, that God is weeping with us in our pain and longing for the redemption that we ourselves so desire. Even as Jesus mourned the fate of Jerusalem, so God loves and suffers with us:

For a long time I have held my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in labour,
I will gasp and pant (Isaiah 42: 14).

Through prayer, we become partners with holy Wisdom, a God who is in labour to bring to birth justice and a new heaven and earth. This divine Wisdom urges us away from violence and exploitation towards an ever greater inclusiveness and reconciliation. Left to our own efforts, we despair of such a vision ever becoming a reality. But we do not depend on our own limited resources to heal the world's brokenness; we do our part, and then let God be God.

The realisation that our compassion resides within a wider divine wisdom illuminates another aspect of the experience of catastrophe: how can we feel gratitude and contentment for the goodness of our lives when others are enduring such crushing losses? How can we reconcile our small daily joys with the sorrows of the world? Jesus showed us how to give thanks, even in troubled times, for the beauty of

¹⁰(New York: New Directions, 1962), 65.

¹¹*The Dark Night of the Soul*, 1. 10. 6.

flower and field, the comfort of food and friends, and the ever-present mercy of God. He faced the evils in our universe squarely, but he taught us to celebrate the light wherever it appears, so that it might expand to illumine a darkened world. Jesus' death and resurrection were the fullest expression of this paradox, but it is also present in stories of the last who are first, of the emptiness that is fullness, and of the lost who are found. In thinking about world sorrow, and in making our way through troubling events, we will indeed know anger, guilt, fear and grief. But there is room also for joy, gratitude, hope and love. In the house in Amsterdam where Anne Frank and her family hid from the Nazis, two charts hang side by side on the wall of the central room. One contains a column of horizontal lines that Otto Frank used to record the growth of his children over the years. On the other a series of pins marks the advance of the Allied forces across a map of Europe. In every era, moments of evil and pressing danger coexist with daily grace.

Working Not Just to Bind Wounds, but to Right Wrongs

Global disasters lay bare both the interconnected nature of our world and the inequities that mar its beauty. The mostly black and impoverished lower ninth ward of New Orleans was one of the hardest-hit areas when Hurricane Katrina unleashed its fury. The residents lacked the cars, and connections, that would have enabled them to flee ahead of the storm. Some of the world's poorest people, isolated in remote mountain villages, were victims of the Pakistani earthquake. In other parts of the globe, shoddily constructed housing collapses easily in earthquakes; deforestation brings on destructive flooding; war and conflict interfere with rescue efforts after natural disasters; and violence erupts from the frustration and despair sown by oppression and poverty.

Prophets of every era have denounced the misappropriation of power and wealth that contributes to international disaster. In her collection of essays, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, Ada María Isasi-Díaz insists that Christians must move from one-sided charity to a concern for justice. More than two-thirds of the world lives in terrible poverty, and the Christian response to this suffering has traditionally been the practice of charity. But the gospel call to love our neighbour demands more than giving generously; it

requires a commitment to justice and structural change. Isasi-Diaz emphasizes that we must alleviate the conditions that breed poverty: 'Understanding the centrality of justice has led us to look at other ways of implementing the command to love our neighbours that do not stop with giving'.¹² Our common future remains bleak, she believes, unless we recognise our interdependence and embrace our common interests. We cannot escape the spiritual implications of globalisation: the call to repentance and to the liberation of oppressed peoples and of the natural world. Isasi-Diaz believes that a good place to start is with dialogue, beginning with the oppressors truly listening to all the ways in which the poor are trying to speak to them.

Dorothy Day, co-founder of the *Catholic Worker*, skilfully combined immediate, personal charity with non-violent action against war and injustice. She believed that we must put down our weapons if we are to be free to practise the works of mercy. We must discover again the face of Jesus in those around us, especially where we might least expect to find it—in the poor and in those we have named our enemies. The disciplines of the liturgy and of prayer sustained Day's works of love; she attended Mass faithfully and prayed the psalms and the rosary daily. She carried out her commitment in the unglamorous and messy practicalities of clothing distribution centres and soup kitchens at her houses of hospitality, and through controversial actions for peace and justice which several times resulted in her arrest and imprisonment. When ordinary people asked her what they could do in a world whose problems loomed so large, Day pointed to the little way of St Thérèse of Lisieux, which she felt had been misunderstood and unfairly despised. Of Thérèse she wrote:

**We must
discover
again the
face of Jesus
around us**

She began with working for peace in her own heart, and willing to love where love was difficult, and so she grew in love, and increased the sum total of love in the world, not to speak of peace.¹³

¹² *Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 101.

¹³ *By Little and by Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*, edited by Robert Ellsberg (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 335.

On the day she died, 29 November 1980, Day had been watching a news report on survivors of an earthquake in southern Italy. She spoke with her friend Eileen Egan on the phone, and Egan recalls that Dorothy's voice was full of compassion for the survivors who were struggling to keep themselves alive in the mountain snows:

She asked me what was being done for them by Catholic Relief Services, and was relieved to hear about the emergency air shipment of blankets, food and medicine. Dorothy suggested that the blankets could also be made to serve as tents.¹⁴

To the end of her life, Day maintained her focus on the sacredness of all life and on the divine presence hidden among the poor.

Foundational to Dorothy Day's spirituality was a theme that continues to resonate as forcefully in our decade as it did in hers: an unwavering conviction that we are the body of Christ. The smallest act of love reverberates throughout the universe. In a world beset by wars and rumours of war, by poverty, plague, hunger and pain, Day drew strength from the realisation that we do not live isolated lives, for we are members of one another and we dwell in a God who is ever moving all creation toward redemption and resurrection. Day's turning to God in the midst of loss brought her not only strength, but hope as well: 'Bitter though it is today with ice and sleet, the sap will soon be rising in those bare trees down the street from us'.¹⁵

Kathleen Fischer is a theologian, spiritual director and psychotherapist in Seattle, Washington. She received her PhD from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, and an MSW from the University of Washington. She is the author of numerous articles and books, most recently, *Imaging Life After Death* (New York: Paulist, 2004), *Forgiving Your Family* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2005) and *The Courage the Heart Desires: Spiritual Strength in Difficult Times* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

¹⁴ Jim Forest, *Love Is the Measure: A Biography of Dorothy Day* (New York: Paulist, 1986), 199.

¹⁵ By Little and by Little, 346.