

## Healing

My wife's close friend, Shelly, died Monday from breast cancer.

She was 46.

We stopped by to see her the Saturday before she died, and on the way out, Shelly's mother stopped us.

Her mom is a very gentle, very kind woman.

She stopped us as we were leaving and said what I have heard so many say in similar situations: "God wants her back;" "God is taking her from us because he has other plans for her;" "It is God's will."

I must say that those words stopped me right in my tracks.

And while I couldn't say anything to her at the moment; I can say it to you today; because the sentiment Shelly's mom expressed is so widely held in our world, in our churches.

Most of us have heard those words before, perhaps many times.

Many of us have spoken those very same words.

I imagine they were spoken of that young man killed next door just last week.

And yet, the belief that God wills death, that God wills disease, that God wills that children live the rest of their youth in the absence of their mom or dad; that a husband, now a widower, or a widowed wife, must live without their spouse: that any of this is the will of God is completely contrary to what our faith teaches us about who God is and what God wishes for each of us.

Perhaps we assign tragedy to the "will of God" because it is comforting to believe there is some rhyme or reason to the accidents of life.

But the Christian faith won't let us stop at the easy, and erroneous answer, that life's accidents, life's tragedies, are caused by God.

Our faith takes us deeper.

It begins with the truth that disease and hurt and death are enemies, not friends, of God.

Isaiah today almost rudely reminds us that when we start to think we have God all figured out; we usually have it wrong.

"Have you not known?" he insists almost sarcastically.

"Have you not heard?" he implores.

"Has it not been told to you from the beginning?" he urges us, speaking almost as a teacher to a wayward student.

What, Isaiah?

What have we known or heard or been told that so quickly slips away whenever awful things happen?

Tell us, just one more time what we need, for truth's sake, to know, to hear.

Isaiah does not disappoint.

Yes, God is the God of all that exists, Isaiah announces, and thus, in one way, God is utterly mysterious, utterly removed, utterly beyond our grasp.

God is that, Isaiah insists, but God is not only that.

For Isaiah goes on to cajole you and you and me that ours is a God who, while at once completely ineffable, is also completely near; standing right before our eyes, if only we have eyes to see.

“He gives power to the faint.”

He “strengthens the powerless.”

And those who wait for him, why, “they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk, and not faint.”

As Meister Eckhart says: “People go far away or near but God never goes far-off; he is always standing close at hand, and even if he cannot stay under your roof, surely he goes no further than your porch, where he waits.

God is a God of life, not death; of healing, not sickness, of presence, not absence.

This truth is hammered home in Mark’s gospel today.

Mark continues his rapid-fire reflections on the ministry of Jesus; and what you can’t miss is that where Jesus is; there is life, not death, there is healing, not sickness, there is presence, not absence.

From Peter’s mother-in-law who, upon her recovery becomes the very first deacon, serving those in need; to the whole town of Capernaum, where the sick are healed, disease is routed, and devils are put to flight.

This is what the Kingdom of God looks like, this is God's activity in the world; not causing floods or cancers or killings.

And yet, there is Shelly and Reiki's death; Lina's cancer; Iustina's faltering kidney.

There are the starving poor in Somalia, the malnourished children in our own Appalachia, in our own Palama.

And it is here, where the finger of God touches the tragedies of this fallen world, that the miracle of our faith invites us into deep contemplation.

In the midst of all his healing, Jesus leaves town long before sunrise, heading off to the desert, off to the deserted places, to pray.

Jesus goes to the desert because it is in the desert, in places of desolation, that we can get closest to God.

I don't know why that is really, but it seems that desolation opens windows that are not otherwise readily opened, windows that allow us to peer into the profound mystery that is our life.

Jesus heals those in desolate circumstances; then heads for the desolate places to encounter the Father.

And I wonder if what we are to take from the desolation that will invariably arise in your life, in mine, is not that such desolation is caused by God; but that when it comes, God is waiting, as always, only now, perhaps, we can see, perhaps we can hear, the still, small voice that longs to assure us that we are each of us beloved children of the God who gathers the outcasts, who heals the brokenhearted, who binds up our wounds.

And who better to do so than the very one who was wounded by us, and for us, so that we might hope in his steadfast love.

In the end, it is the cross, that horrific reality of human sadism; that eternal symbol of the desolation God endures in order to bring us home.

It is the cross that makes it safe to venture out onto the tightrope of faith, because Jesus has shown us that death is not the worst thing.

Death is even now defeated.

And the God who is faithful to us in life shall remain faithful to us even in death.

This is the message of Jesus Christ: proclaimed in Galilee, proclaimed to the ends of the earth!

+amen