

“Where is God?”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*by Rev. Patrick David Heery*

I’m going to be honest. It’s been hard to write this sermon. I’ll tell you what I wanted to write about: a burnt-out prophet revived by a God encountered in a small, quiet voice of peace. This is the theme of nearly every sermon and commentary online. And I wanted to write beautiful, comforting words like theirs. But I found myself standing like Elijah on that mountain, and all I could hear was the wind, splitting and breaking. All I could hear was the thunder of gunshots in a nightclub in Orlando. The earth shattered with the roar of a bomb in Jerusalem or an airstrike in the West Bank. Flames licked the sky, as Buddhists in Myanmar staged violent anti-Muslim riots. Thunder spit as yet more shots rang out almost a year ago to the day in a Charleston church, as people gathered to pray.

With so much noise, the beautiful words stuck in my throat, and I was afraid.

I was afraid to think God could be like this. Afraid to know that this violence is a part of my identity as a Christian.

I was afraid because I stood on the mountain, and for all the claims on God, I couldn’t find her.

We’ve been searching for a long time.

It is March 4, 1865. Abraham Lincoln, who will be assassinated in little more than a month’s time, stands before thousands of people who have waded through mud and standing water to hear Lincoln’s second inaugural address. For four years, war has raged. More than 620,000 of America’s sons have died. Another four million have lived and died seeking their freedom from the iron and whip of slavery, wielded by Christian hands.

The country addressed by Lincoln that day writhed in spiritual crisis. The South killed brothers from the North and justified slavery in the name of God and freedom. The North killed brothers from the South and justified federalism in the name of God and freedom. The earth had little room for so many bodies, and the faith of humanity had even less for such terror.

Some historians even trace the beginning of the United States’ decline in religious practice and belief to this time.

The identity of God seemed irreconcilable with slavery and the death toll, and yet both the Union and the Confederacy claimed to have God on their side. “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other,” Lincoln said. “The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully.”

Today, 150 years later, we stand in the same mud, unable to make sense of the same self-perpetuating violence that, if we're honest, is as much a part of us as it is them (whoever "them" is).

In Orlando, Florida, 49 people are dead and another 53 wounded, shot by a man who believed God was on his side.

Omar Mateen, claiming allegiance to the terrorist organization ISIS, chose his target carefully: the nightclub was popular among Latino/a Americans and among the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community.

I wonder, Did he think he'd hear God in the gunshots that exploded? If he hadn't taken his own life, would he now hear God in the wailing of the families of those 49 people: Juan Ramon Guerrero, who had just started college and only recently come out to his family as gay; Eddie Justice, an accountant who quickly texted his mother during the shooting, "Mommy, I love you"; Darryl Roman Burt II, a financial aid officer known for his colorful bowties; Amanda Alvear, who wanted to be a nurse; Brenda Lee Marquez McCool, a mother of 11 and grandmother of six, who loved dancing salsa, a cancer survivor, who was there that night with her 21-year-son—he lived because she stepped in front of him and took the two bullets meant for her son.

At some point in his life, this man, who seems to have struggled with his own sexuality, may have been told that he was an abomination; if so, he was told this by a man who believed God was on his side.

And right now, there are calls for vengeance; some contemplate attacks on American Muslims. These people, wracked with grief and fear, believe God is on their side.

And that is why I stand here on the mountain, stuck in the wind and the fire, unable to move past that first line of our Scripture text this morning: "Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword."

Our passage begins with a reminder that Elijah—dear Elijah who helped the widow and her son, the prophet venerated by our text—has just killed 450 people. Murdered them. In cold blood. And he did so believing God was on his side.

You see, Elijah is in a lot of pain. Ahab and Jezebel have killed his friends, the prophets of God; and he is consumed with righteous rage. So he has the people seize the prophets of Baal, and, once defenseless, he kills them, one by one.

How his arm must have ached swinging that blade 450 times. How certain he must have been that these men deserved to die and that their deaths would restore faithfulness.

But in the end, there is no revival of faith. And now Jezebel is convinced that her God demands she kill Elijah. Elijah runs away to find God; he says he can't take it anymore; he's ready to die.

Something unexpected happens next. An angel of God appears, encouraging Elijah to get up and eat. It's a mundane command, seemingly inadequate before the despair faced by Elijah. But it's something that those of us trained in grief counseling know is essential: he invites Elijah back to daily life. He gives him bread and water. He touches him. He gets Elijah moving.

Next, Elijah is told that God's going to show up also. But it's not going to be the God Elijah expects. I quote: "Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer of silence." Or, as the King James Version renders it, "the still, small voice." The Common English Bible puts it this way: "After the fire, there was a sound. Thin. Quiet."

This voice tells Elijah that he is not alone, that he shall appoint kings, be joined by a new prophet Elisha, and that there remain 7,000 people still faithful.

Now I'm not going to glide over the fact that this voice also goes on to promise more violence. There's no evidence that the authors of 1 Kings believed in an all-loving, nonviolent God; they want a God who's going to fight on their side.

But I think the Spirit may have something else in mind. Our Holy Word, I believe, has found a way to answer our question, shouted from the mountain, "Where is God?"

God appears, not in thunderous violence and triumphalism, but as the calm after the storm, as peaceful whisper, as food provided, as comforting angel.

God doesn't just follow the storm; God remakes it. God takes this awful thing—that which is not God—and turns it into an opportunity for community and divine encounter, a chance for prophets to arise.

And indeed, as I stood there, on the mountain, ringed by wind and fire, looking for this God, I heard her.

I heard her.

I heard American Muslims speaking a message of solidarity with the victims. I heard them bowing their heads in prayer to a God of peace.

I heard thousands of Orlando residents lifting candles in the dark sky in vigil for the victims.

I heard *Hamilton* star Lin-Manuel Miranda accept his Tony award by reading a sonnet to Orlando, crying, "We rise and fall and light from dying embers, remembrance that hope and love last forever. And love is love is love is love is love is love is love is love is love cannot be killed or swept aside."

I heard Anderson Cooper read each of the victim's names out loud.

I heard people filling the streets all across the world, from Tel Aviv to Paris to outside Stonewall Inn.

I heard churches offering grief counseling, food, and free funerals, saying, “This is my brother, this is my sister.”

I heard the LGBTQ community proudly declare their love and refuse to answer hate with hate.

I heard the father of victim Mercedes Marisol Flores say through tears “I forgive the boy,” the shooter.

And when I heard that Westboro Baptist Church would be there to protest the funerals of the victims, I also heard that angels would be there. Angels not so different from that angel who visited Elijah all those years ago. People who, dressed as angels, will spread out those giant, beautiful wings to shut out the hate.

God is here, after all. For I have heard the quiet sound of love. I have heard the cry of Hallelujah at a funeral. I have heard singing when there was no reason to sing. I have heard a still, small voice that, after the last lash of the whip and the last hammer of the nail, spoke from the cross, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

I have heard God whisper. And it wasn’t in the violence. It wasn’t in the wind or the earthquake or the fire. It was in the peace that followed. It was in the love that could not be broken.

And, you know, suddenly I don’t feel so afraid anymore. **Amen.**