

**Message - Cincinnati Friends Meeting
September 13, 2009**

Signs, Wonders, Miracles, and 9-11

by Donne Hayden

On my way to the meetinghouse on Friday, the radio announcer called my attention to the fact that we were “coming up on 8:46 a.m.”, the precise time eight years ago when the first airplane crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center. He went on to report the four minutes of silence to be observed in remembrance of that tragedy. In New York, perhaps, they observed silence; in Madeira, Ohio, everything was business as usual. Without television (which is by choice because I don’t want to be bombarded with the media’s selection of information), I may not be quite as tired of hearing about 9/11 this week as some of you are. On this subject, as with most things, we suffer onslaughts of information from the media until we are numb, numb to horrible tragedy because we’ve heard about it so much, and then it’s on to the next thing.

Truly, I’d rather not talk about 9/11 today, but it weighs on me and I can’t seem to avoid addressing it, partly, I think because of the question I heard someone voice this week. “Where was God on Sept. 11, 2001?” the person asked. That question has led me today to a defense of God. Of course, who am I to defend God? And this is a purely personal thing, here, so please don’t think I’m telling you how to think or believe. I just felt like I need to say something about this, about whether it is God’s fault or not when things like 9-11 happen. I don’t particularly feel inclined to defend religion, because I

think it is part of the problem, but the *Creative Source of All Love*, which is what I mean when I say “God” –that I am declined to defend.

As always in the face of great suffering, humans ask, “If there **is** a perfect, all-powerful creator who rules the world, why did he (or she) let it happen?” And if we can conceive of *no other kind* of God except an omnipotent, omniscient, “big boss”-in-the-sky, then we are left with the idea expressed by Archibald MacLeish in his play *J.B.* – “If God is good, he is not great; if God is great, he is not good.” By the same token, if one can conceive of *no other kind* of God than one who demands bloody sacrifice of his own son, it may be preferable to believe in no God. Sadly, if a God of Love is so clearly powerless, there is no reason perhaps to believe that God exists.

I can’t get there. I’ve *been* there. Maybe in some ways, I tried to stay there. But I have had too much experience that leads me to know, to have faith, that there is a divine entity that loves us beyond measure. Now I can’t prove that; if I could prove that it wouldn’t be faith, it would be certainty. But I have faith in this loving divine entity.

These questions of theodicy are not new, of course—theodicy relates to how we explain the actions of God. If God could stop pain and suffering, why *wouldn’t* He (or She)? For eons, humans have struggled with the question of suffering for which they blame God, suffering they perceive as allowed by an indifferent or even cruel God. Greater minds than mine have wrestled with the question, and I’d like to explore a few answers people have come up with.

One answer some people came to is that God is simply dead. Maybe there was a God alive at some time, but God’s dead now, and they use the phrase “God is dead,” from Friedrich Nietzsche to defend atheism. But they take the phrase out of context. Using this declaration to prove the case against God omits the most powerful message in

Nietzsche's thought. Listen to the entire piece, with "God is dead" in context, and you will find a description of what happens when hate rules the world and dominates religion. Nietzsche wrote:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, "I seek God! I seek God!" As many of those who do not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Why, did he get lost? said one. Did he lose his way like a child? said another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated?" Thus they yelled and laughed. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his glances.

"Whither is God?" he cried. "I shall tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers . . . God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever will be born after us—for the sake of this deed he will be part of a higher history than all history hitherto."

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they too were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke and went out. "I come too early," he said then; "My time has not

come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering—it has not yet reached the ears of man . . .”

It has been related further that on that same day the madman entered diverse churches and there sang his *requiem aeternam deo*. Led out and called to account, he is said to have replied each time, “What are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?”

– **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900)

I don't hear this as a literal statement that the Divine is dead, but that we humans have *really* messed up. Even a century ago, Nietzsche could see that the Christian church itself, advocating blood theology, holy wars and violence in the name of God, had successfully “killed” the God of Love that the teachings of Jesus tell us about.

Because of the attack on the World Trade Center, some Americans lost their faith entirely. “If God could let that happen,” they felt, “then there isn't a God, or I don't want to believe in Him if He acts like this.” Others, who had no faith to begin with, saw what happened as confirmation of their opinion. Some people experienced remarkable miracles and their faith was renewed. I'll come back to this a bit later; Quakers have always, from the beginning, believed in signs, and wonders, and miracles and dreams and visions.

We ask, “What kind of God would permit such things to happen?” To me, this is entirely the wrong question. Did anyone ask God's permission, do you suppose? No. Do we ask ourselves that question about the way our nation responded? Do we ask “What kind of God would permit the United States to destroy an entire nation and kill and

maim hundreds of thousands in revenge for the deaths of 2976 people on 9/11?” Do we ask that?

Misguided human beings were responsible for the 9/11 tragedy, not God. Misguided Americans are responsible for the deaths of over 4000 U.S. soldiers, and approximately 100,000 civilians whose deaths can be documented, though other estimates are as high as 1,339,771. In addition to these deaths, of course, are the deaths of soldiers and civilians from other countries serving in Iraq. Over 30,000 Americans have been wounded, and no one can even estimate how many Iraqis—soldiers and civilians—have suffered irreparable physical and emotional damage. (I cannot feel entirely clear of responsibility for this. I opposed the war from the beginning, but my tax dollars have gone to pay for it. I don’t pay that much in taxes, but what I do pay, I would that it *not* go to such a cause, that it not help my government accomplish such destruction.)

So, did God do all this? Or did we do this in his Name? I distinctly remember George Bush using God’s name, but I don’t believe for a minute that Bush asked for and received God’s permission to start a war that has resulted in such devastation and is still not over. What happened on September 11, 2001 is no more God’s doing than what has happened in Iraq since then. Isn’t this instead, an example of what Nietzsche meant when he said that “We, *we* have killed God”?

I agree with Lyndon Harris, an Episcopal priest at St. Paul’s Chapel, which survived despite the fact that it “stood in the shadow of the towers”: “God gave us free will,” he said, “and some people choose to do evil. But the first heart to break on 9/11 was the heart of God.”

Here's a little story, under the category of signs and wonders such as early Quakers would testify to; their testimony was their experience of things miraculous and wonderful and beyond our understanding. Quakers today may dismiss such things as what I'm about to tell you. You don't have to believe it; it's up to you. I like it.

A few years ago I was listening to a program called "Interconnect" on our local NPR station out of Oxford, Ohio. The hosts of the program interviewed (by telephone) experts in the field of religion, theology and spirituality, and then took calls from listeners. They had well-known guests like Marcus Borg, John Shelby Spong, and Bart Erhman, but they also had guests like the woman who had written a book on angels. She was the guest on the day this story is about. She sounded quite down-to-earth, not fanatic, or woo-woo, "New Age-y"—just an ordinary woman talking about angels. After a while, the radio hosts opened the telephone lines so listeners could call in with questions or comments. A woman called in to tell a story of the time when she had been attacked in her home and brutally violated, so much so, that she detached herself from her body. She said she was floating up at the ceiling, looking down, watching what was happening. At one point she became aware of another man sitting beside the bed; he was weeping and weeping and weeping. She interpreted him as an angel, or a guide (or whatever you want to call it). She knew he was someone filled with love for her, who was beside her and weeping for her, and perhaps weeping for the man who was violating her. Just knowing that he was there, she said, helped her deal with the trauma in the months that followed.

I sometimes think, when I look around the world—how *many* angels must be weeping at what we do to each other.

I'd like to end today with something that expresses a completely different understanding of God than any you have probably heard. Because it does not fit with any traditional understanding we have, some of you will not accept it, or you will seek to find a logical explanation that dismisses the possibility that it really happened. Some of you will find it simply too hard to believe. Some of you may find it both overwhelmingly sad and comforting at the same time. This emerged from the experiences of some who worked at Ground Zero, immediately after and for the weeks and months following 9/11.

Betsee Parker is an ordained Episcopal priest who served as volunteer chaplain at Ground Zero of the World Trade Center site and was then appointed to "head the interfaith team of chaplains who have worked since then with the victims' families at the site and at the temporary morgue at Bellevue Hospital."¹

This is from an interview with Reverend Parker in the book, *Holy Tears*.

Betsee: ... it was very shortly after the attack . . . That was the first time I heard it.

. . .

I was at the chief medical examiner's office at Bellevue, at the morgue. One of the things I did each morning was to start my day by walking through Memorial Park where all the body parts were kept and just saying some prayers for those who were there and who died in the World Trade Center. This was just a simple ritual that I had. It took me all day to get up to the end of the site because so many people needed to talk ...I always

¹ Kimberly Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley, eds. *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 287-289.

started at Memorial Park, which I saw as the heart of the Pit—the heart and soul of God—you know: the locus, the nexus—all those words, the junction where God was.

That particular morning I heard a very deep, very frightening deep moaning sound as I walked through Memorial Park. It frightened me because I had definitely never heard this sound before. And, because I hadn't heard it before, you'd think I didn't know what it was, but I did know.

I knew that I was hearing God weeping.

Interviewer: Why was God weeping, Betsee?

Betsee: *Well, my sense was that it was because those whom he loved the dearest had been ravaged and hated and destroyed by those whom he loved the dearest.* [Italics mine. Now **that's** the kind of God I can believe in. **D.H.**]

And I had happened quite unexpectedly upon this just as if you walked into the room of a cabin or something and saw someone sitting and weeping quietly and you had not meant to see this. ...

To hear this—and it was inescapable; wherever I walked in that place that day, it pierced into me deeply. The feeling was terrifying—of what in the world was I doing hearing this sound of the weeping of the depths of the—of God? And the sound—the only sound on earth that I could really compare this to was a very low drone. It reminded me of some of the Eastern musical instruments—very primitive musical instruments. It had a very, very deep vibrating resonance. . . .

To hear it was actually a physical experience, because you could almost feel your ribcage vibrating . . .

Interviewer: You said once to me that it made you want to leave.

Betsee: Desperately. It made me want to run and hide. I felt so inappropriate. ... I felt like I was ... walking in on God. “God—you just made a mistake? You let me hear you crying!” I really didn’t know how to act. . . .

Interviewer: Did you hear it many times?

Betsee: Yes ... I never knew when I was going to hear it. The shocking thing was that one day, one of the disaster morticians . . . heard it too. ... [she] said to me, “Chaplain Parker, I have something to ask you that—don’t laugh at me, please-- ... because this is going to sound like I’m going crazy with my work.”

I said, “What is it?”

And she said, “You know I heard God crying down here today—I know I did ... I’ve never heard it before and I know I heard it,” and I said, “I’ve heard it too.”

“You heard it,” she said, and she just broke down and wept.

Interviewer: That was the first time anyone had spoken to you about it? You knew then that you were not the only one?

Betsee: Yes, that was the first time, but there were others who told me they heard it, too. Some of the Jewish volunteers who sat *Shimrah* would go down there . . . Several of them claimed that they had heard this sound, as well as some police.

. . . I don’t know why I was given the honor of hearing this sound, which I’ll never forget. I’ll never know why I was given the honor to hear that, but I never had an experience in my whole life that was more humbling.

. . .

I simply was permitted to hear it at length and to sit with that, to deal directly with what I was feeling, because it helped me to understand the depth of the love God has for creation, which is way beyond any depth of love I've ever felt.²

So how do we reconcile events like 9-11 and the Iraq War with a belief in God? I have done it for myself; I don't blame God. I understand that part of experiencing life on earth is also experiencing death, and I believe we are accompanied by Love through all the pain and suffering we experience. I have a theodicy that works for me, but mine may not work for you. We each have to come to our own. I leave you with these words from Julian of Norwich, "We understand God through two ways: in bliss and in sorrow."

²Ibid. pp. 287-289