

In the Broken Places
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Eighteen months ago, when we first went into lockdown, one of the most asked question among friends while zooming or doing Facebook calls seemed to be: What are you watching? Now with streaming we have such an array of viewing choices, and everyone seems to have their best 'find' to share.

Among my favorites is a British series "Call the Midwife" – the story of the young women who live with and work with a group of nuns delivering babies and healthcare services to the residents of East London, a poor district near the dockyards, in the period after WWII.

In one memorable episode, one of the young women dies unexpectedly and the nuns are plunged into despair and grief. Sister Monica Joan, an elderly, somewhat eccentric character is particularly overcome with sadness as she struggles with the young woman's death. The simple things of daily life also seem amiss. The television, a recent addition to the nunnery of which she has become quite fond, isn't working. She fiddles with the rabbit ear antennae in an effort to restore the picture – but only snow and static remain. She slams her hand against the television in utter frustration and with much heartache in her voice cries out: "Have all the angels abandoned us?"

Given the level of anxiety and depression in the world today, we might all find some resonance in Sister Monica Joan's question. Where are all the angels? Or more to the point: *where is God?*

In a world filled with horror, tragedy, loss and disappointment, the temptation to be discontent, depressed or despairing is everywhere around us.

Just when many of us were feeling some relief at the end of 2020 due to the new anti-Covid vaccines and President Biden's election victory, Summer 2021 has not been the return to normalcy and sanity that so many of us craved...

So far, this summer has brought with it a whole new litany of bad news that keeps our nerves and minds percolating with fear and grasping for hope:

- Mother Earth is literally screaming out in pain -- there have been historic floods in Europe and Turkey killing hundreds, fires across the globe from Siberia to the Australian bush country to California, Utah, and the Pacific NW and Greece – and a summer like none in our memories because of record heat that has now killed hundreds in the US and Europe alone
- Despite the miracle of vaccines, Covid has returned as the Delta variant fills hospital beds and morgues... more than 630,000 deaths from this plague in the US (and counting the 'excess mortality' numbers, some experts think the US death toll may reach as high as 900,000 attributed to the pandemic)
- The unconscionable restrictions in state election laws and the growing worry over 2022 elections
- The beleaguered people of Haiti faced a shocking change in their government, the assassination of their President, followed by yet another earthquake that has claimed 1,000's of lives
- A high-rise building collapse in Florida during the night
- And finally, the stunning sweep of Afghanistan by the Taliban and the horrific bombing by ISIS-K, killing dozens of Afghans and 13 American soldiers – one of our worst days of the twenty-year war.

The list is exhausting – and it doesn't yet include the numerous personal difficulties and losses within our circle of families, friends and church community over the past 18 months that continue to cause sorrow and pain. It's a lot to take in...

In today's reading from Isaiah that Julie read, the prophet acknowledges this exhaustion and how the hardness of life can weigh on us -- "even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall" he says, but God is here to give us strength if we wait on Him... and Isaiah reminds us of the vastness and greatness of God and suggests such power can make a real difference in our lives. If you believe God to be great and good, you must believe that he is here, that we are not alone, that God stands by his promise: "I am with you always."

In my research for this sermon, I found that the phrases "I am with you always" and the declarative statement "I am" appear hundreds of times in the Bible. The Hebrew name for God Yahweh means "I am who I am." In making this statement repeatedly, God declares to us his existence in our lives, across all generations and to the end of the age, and as Isaiah points out, in this we learn that God is eternal, he is faithful, he is unchanging, and he is present whether we see him or feel him or not...

In reading an article from the NY Times about Estelle Hedaya, a member of the Syrian Jewish community in NY living in Miami, who was the last victim not yet found in the condo collapse at the time the article was written, I was struck by her brother's comments and how they mirrored what Isaiah says:

Here from that article...

A few days after the collapse her brother Ikey went to Florida to give the authorities a DNA sample but also to better understand what had happened. "I finally went to the site", he said. "I took one look at the debris and I thought about the fact that my sister was in all that rubble. I turned around and left." Though he and his sister were seven years apart, they texted each other nearly every day. He taught her how to play backgammon and they often jostled for the affection of his dog, Sonny. Family members sometimes called her 'cha-cha' because of her love of dancing. He takes comfort in the idea that she was asleep when the collapse happened – and that she was in a good place in her life. "My outlook is we have to mourn the person, show respect, deal with our feelings, but if you realize that God only does good, then you have a better perspective and it strengthens you and you will be open to blessings," he said. "Of course I want my sister back more than anything, but I believe that this was her time."

I think this young man Ikey got it right. Dealing with pain requires a change in perspective: to see life through God's eyes not our own. In the reading from Philippians today, Paul's advice is to fill your mind with the best of life, not the worst, the beautiful, not the ugly, learn to praise, not curse. As Estelle's brother said: *If you realize God only does good, then you will be open to blessings.*

Along this line of thinking are the observations of Margaret Renki, a NY Times columnist who offers perspectives on life from her garden in Nashville TN. In a guest essay entitled, *I Don't Want to Spend the Rest of My Days Grieving*, she spoke of how difficult this summer has been with the extreme heat and smog from the West Coast fires and adds her own list of things gone wrong...

From her column –

How brief is the season of “splendor in the grass”, as poet William Wordsworth put it. (But) what has become of the languorous summer we longed for back in the sadness of winter? Where did the endless, grass-fragrant days go? I remind myself sternly to attend to what is not dying, to focus as much on the exquisite beauties of this earth as its staggering losses. Life is not at all a long process, and it would be wrong to spend my remaining days in endless grief. The heat may be monstrous, the air may be filled with smoke from distant wildfires, and suburban Americans may be drenching their yards with poison, but in this wildlife-friendly little patch of Nashville, nature carries on in its lovely, halting way. Katydid sing in the trees at night, and crickets sing in the grass. Bats wheel in the darkening sky above the roosting box we installed in our prettiest sugar maple tree...

AND, I would add, there are hummingbirds in my garden, and my silly dog Brody, and my sweet wonderful partner Bill, and the Olympics which filled me again with pride in American exceptionalism, and my classmates on Facebook still eager to celebrate our 50th high school reunion albeit not on time but when the time is right, and my 94-year-old mother lovely and lucid as ever and my sister who soldiers on taking care of her, and dear friends, and this little place that is my spiritual home.

Hemingway said: *The world breaks everyone and afterward, some are strong at the broken place.* I believe God is there, in the broken places with us... comforting us, protecting us, and guiding us through the wreckage... offering healing and the way to new life by the power of his love. May it be so...

AMEN