

## **“WHERE IS YOUR GOD?”**

**06.22.25 Psalm 42 & 43**

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“Where is your god?”

There is, usually, no malice in the question. It’s a genuine response to very real tragedy, to pain, to loss. Often, it is not asked directly but hinted at in comments and words written of grief and despair. And, if we are honest, we will probably admit that we have, from time to time, asked it of ourselves.

“Where is your God?”

A child dies in a house fire. A tornado levels a home and kills an entire family. A flood drowns a grandmother. A schoolgirl standing on a street corner is killed in a drive-by shooting, collateral damage in a gang war.

“Where is your God?”

It’s a question as old as scripture itself. Elijah used it to insult the prophets of Baal. The adversaries of the psalmist taunt him with it when he is at his lowest, when life has fallen apart.

“Where is your God?”

Has God forgotten us in these dark and oppressive hours? Has God withdrawn from us? Is God too busy to pay attention? Does God no longer care?

“Where is your God?”

Where, indeed?

### **IN NEWTOWN OR MYRTLE BEACH?**

“Newtown,” is a documentary film about the parents of the children killed in the Sandy Hook massacre. It is, reportedly, very difficult to watch and as we look at the faces and hear the words of those grieving parents. And what do we answer when they ask us, “Where was your god?”

In 2016, a group of cyclists who had bonded with and befriended each other through their enthusiasm for bicycling, not the hardcore competitive biking we see on ESPN, but the friendly Saturday morning, out-for-a-nice-ride-on-a-beautiful-day-with-our-friends kind of bicycling, were riding together through the Michigan countryside. They playfully referred to themselves as “The Chain Gang.” Most of them were approaching if not fully into retirement age.

Then all of that ended when a pickup truck ploughed into them on a rural road, killing five and injuring four others.

A few days later the group re-formed and participated in a “silent ride” past the place where their friends were killed. A memorial had been erected there with flowers and notes and a bicycle painted white, a “ghost bike.” I don’t know about you but I would certainly understand if, in their grief, they turned to us and asked, “Where was your god?”

And now, the Myrtle Beach community of Little River has joined the list, the litany of places where mass shootings have left us shocked and heart broken, stumbling in the darkness of grief and pain, and asking questions for which there are often no satisfactory answers.

Newtown – Aurora, Colorado – Charleston – Virginia Tech – Fort Hood – San Bernadino – Las Vegas -- New Orleans – Myrtle Beach, again. If these don’t all sound familiar it’s because mass shootings now occur so often in the United States that most of them don’t make the evening news. As of May 1, there have been 117 mass shootings in the United States with 4 or more victims in 2025. 155 people killed and 443 people wounded.

The questions pile up like the flowers at those makeshift memorials. Why? Was it terrorism or hate or both? And what kind of hate was it? Religious hate? Political hate? Homophobic hate? Or was it just the broad and general hatred of a broken and twisted mind for everything and everyone, for life itself? Why didn’t someone see this coming and take steps to prevent it? Or was it just the unpreventable, unavoidable, inevitable result of the gun loving culture we have chosen for ourselves? Have we sewn the wind? And are we reaping the whirlwind as scripture has warned us we would?

Did the shooter call 911 during the massacre and pledge his allegiance to ISIS? Was that a real allegiance, or if there was no ISIS would he have just found another hate group to which he could attach himself, some other venom spewing church or club that would justify his own demented loathing?

Politicians scramble to use the newest tragedy in shoring up their campaigns. Gun advocates rush to defend their 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment rights, blaming “hearts without God, schools without prayer, and courts without justice” rather than entertaining the possibility that our gun laws are inadequate and our gun culture is out of control. Others rush to offer solutions to their favorite peeve whether or not it played a role in this particular tragedy.

An immigrant on an expired visa tries to kill a group of senior citizen Jews with Molotov cocktails, injuring several and seriously injuring four and our president responds to the atrocity by closing the gates of our country to people from a dozen other countries. Except Egypt, where that man came from, is not among them.

And amid it all there is a cacophony of name calling, blame shifting, defensiveness, bombast, weeping, and lamentation, if we listen closely, we can hear a small voice asking the question that gnaws at the back of our own minds:

“Where is your God?”

Where was your God when the shooter was surveilling the night club, the church, or the concert, when he was planning his attack, when he was loading his guns? Where was your God when hate and bitterness and resentment were slowly poisoning his mind and twisting it into something inhuman? Where was your God when those children were screaming in terror and falling to the floor in pain? When bystanders were running, frantically trying to put out the flames. Where was your God?

And where is your God, now? Where is your God as those parents hear the names of their children read from the list of the casualties? Where is your God as our LGBTQ children try to come to terms with the very real fact that they are not safe in this country? That they may be murdered just for being who they are?

Where is your God?

Where was your God when tornadoes took the lives of 32 people in Kentucky and Missouri and fires destroyed the homes of thousands in California?

Where is your God?

As Christians and Methodists, let us see if scripture does not point us in the direction that will answer or at least begin to answer that age old and heartfelt question.

### **LIKE A DEER**

Psalms 42 and 43, which we heard read just a few minutes ago, are probably a single psalm that was divided by accident at some time during the 3000 years of copying and transmission.

The psalm, we are told, is a "Maskil." While the meaning of that word is vague and hard to nail down, it probably meant that this was a song the purpose of which was to teach a lesson. This is not praise-music, as are so many of the psalms. This is more of a theological statement in verse.

It was written by or comes from the tradition of the Korahites, the temple singers who were descended from Korah, the son of Levi.

It contains three strophes (STRO-fee) or verses wherein the poet talks to God about the difficulties of life and those who, upon viewing the poet's difficulties, taunt him with the question, "Where is your God?" The psalmist finds comfort through remembering times past in which God has relieved the suffering of God's people and rescued them from their peril.

Each strophe ends with the poet speaking to himself in a refrain: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God." (Ps. 42:5, 11; 43:5)

The psalm begins with a simile that has been popularized in contemporary Christian music: "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God." The word for "deer" is actually better translated, "hart," or female deer. Here the deer is seen as quarry searching for

clean, flowing water which will refresh and invigorate her as she flees from harm and may confuse dogs which are chasing her scent. Watch for water to be a main theme in this first strophe.

The psalmist links his own thirsting for God with the thirsting of the doe. But instead of fresh, flowing water he has had only salty tears for nourishment. Enemies taunt people of faith who suffer: "Where is your God?"

In verse four the psalmist finds the comfort for which he longs and notes that it is to be found in remembering times past and basing his faith upon his past experiences. God has saved me then and will save me, no less, now. The refrain (vs. 5) is the psalmist's declaration of faith and hope.

In the second strophe the metaphor shifts. The water which was a source of comfort in the first strophe now becomes a source of threat and danger.

The roar of the waterfall drowns out the psalmist's own voice. Life is out of control, not unlike the chaotic waves and currents of the sea. The psalmist continues to pray but the prayers seem to do no good. The taunts of his enemies have grown to be more than a nuisance. Now they are like mortal wounds. "Where is your God?"

And, yet the poet reminds himself that comfort is to be found in remembering. God has loved us and cared for us in the past and that past reaches into this day as well.

The final strophe is in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

Now the psalmist is bolder. "Vindicate me!" He asks (or demands?) God to answer these people who keep taunting him with that horrible question, "Where is your God?" Why, he asks, does God want him to limp around like a weak and wounded man? Wouldn't it honor God more if those who worship Elohim (the name for God in these psalms) were strong and successful, if they were singing God's praise in the temple?

In verse 5, the psalmist returns to his refrain. Hope, he reminds himself, is to be found not in our own accomplishments, our own righteousness, and our own abilities but in Elohim, our God.

### **QUESTION ANSWERED**

Where is your God?

The question deserves an answer, as do those who ask it. "Where is your God?" So, let us take it seriously and offer to answer it, for ourselves, and for our brothers and sisters who long for some word of comfort.

First, however, let us explore a few answers that we, as people of faith, will definitely NOT use in times of tragic pain or loss.

We will not say that God is in heaven and that this tragedy is somehow part of God's vast and unknowable will that we must quietly and obediently accept.

That heaven is part of a three-story universe that has lost its meaning in the modern mind. The God spoken of is a distant, detached, uncaring despot who is not moved by human pain or suffering. This is not the God of the gospels, the God of Jesus and Paul whose grace abounds and whose love is greater and more wonderful than any singing of it.

In his wonderful little book, *The Will of God*, Leslie Weatherhead points out how glibly we often "identify as the will of God something for which a man would be locked up in jail or put in" hospital for the criminally insane. Such errors must be confronted and challenged with more insightful, kinder, gentler theology.

Neither will we say that God requires us to believe that the suffering we are undergoing is in some mysterious way that we don't understand, actually good. Nowhere in scripture do we read that all things are good. What we do read is that God is, in all things, working for good. (Rom. 8:28) That is a huge difference. God can take even the most painful, most horrible acts or experiences of human beings and make good come from them and that is to be celebrated but it is celebratory only to the degree that the horror from which this good has come was truly a horror.

And, of course, we will not say that everything happens for a reason or that it could be worse or any number of trite, meaningless and even hurtful clichés that make us feel better for having said them but often only hurt those to whom they are said.

No, when we answer the question, "Where is your God?" for others or for ourselves we will answer with the assurance of the psalmist who knows from experience far off in the past and as recent as yesterday, that God is always closest to those who suffer. God's voice is always loudest, and God's will is often most clearly articulated in the silent suffering of those who are oppressed. In the streets, in the ghettos, in the hospitals and medical clinics, in the jails and prisons and half-way houses, under the bridge, in the homeless shelter, on the battlefield, or standing in line at the soup kitchen, wherever we see people in pain God is there. **And if we want to stand with God, we will get up and go there, too.**

As Rabbi Harold S. Kushner said in *Overcoming Life's Disappointments*, "God is the light shining in the midst of darkness, not to deny that there is darkness in the world but to reassure us that we do not have to be afraid of the darkness because darkness will always yield to light. As theologian David Griffin puts it, God is all-powerful. His power enables people to deal with events beyond their control and He gives us the strength to do those things because He is with us."

**AMEN**