

Preaching in Moments of Crisis



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When the News Intrudes

What do you say from the pulpit about national crises and tragedies?

by Eric Reed

When President Kennedy was assassinated almost 40 years ago, Walter Cronkite interrupted “As the World Turns” with the tragic announcement.

Pastor Gene Boutellier climbed the tower of his Fresno church, and began pulling the bell rope. Much later, exhausted from his tolling, he descended and found the sanctuary full of weeping people. Tear-streaked faces turned upward, wondering what he would say.¹ The scene was repeated the following Sunday in virtually every church in the nation. People needing hope turned to their pastors. Preachers of the generation called it “The Sunday with God.”

When President Kennedy’s son died in a plane crash, the news media climbed their towers and sounded the alarm. After witnessing a week of non-stop coverage, pastors ascended their pulpits wondering, *What should I say? Should I say anything at all?*

And if they’re like me, they wondered, How do I preach to the endless tide of natural disasters, terrorist attacks, celebrity deaths, and political intrigue? And why does this seem to be happening so often?

Preaching at the speed of satellite

I watched the famed low-speed Bronco chase from a Holiday Inn in Tallahassee, Florida. Returning home from a week-long vacation, I had turned on the television to see what my congregation might be talking about. What I found was a major shift in the way news is processed and presented.

With their interminable reportage of O.J. Simpson’s murder trial, the networks discovered an insatiable public appetite for the mindless repetition of scanty facts. With the proliferation of satellite news channels, tragedies once distant now unfold without interruption in our living rooms. And senseless acts, once given some context by those reporting them, are increasingly presented raw.

Are there more wars? Or is it that we all have cable access to rumors of wars? Are the earthquakes severe? Or are we harder rocked by sensurround accounts of them? Whichever the case, the world as seen on TV makes less sense than it ever has. And the people who soak in an average of four hours of television per day come to church hoping on some level that the preacher will make sense of it all.



Rather, rather not

As a journalist-turned-pastor, I have regularly used the news to illustrate my sermons, but only once have I preached a whole sermon on a news event. In one memorable week, our city was shaken by the drive-by shootings of several children, one of them in our neighborhood; a suspected drug dealer was found slain execution-style four blocks from our church; and police reported that New Orleans once again led the nation in murders. I had to address the fear that gripped us all.

We must deal with tragedies when they are our own, but even if they are distant, episodes like the massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, and the killings at Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth force the preacher to reconsider the sermon schedule. If my recent conversations with pastors are any indication, few are comfortable doing so.

Tim Keller pastors Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. “Some of my folks here have said they wish I’d talk more about current events,” he says candidly. “I’m not sure I’m wise enough to pull it off.”

Keller has two concerns: one is that the news will overshadow his message. “When you talk about something that is making headlines, the illustration becomes the point.” Keller says his listeners, including non-Christians, “want to hear eternal truths, not an interpretation of news events.”

He wonders too about the unreliability of early reports. He usually waits a year or more before referring to a news event. “It often takes months to get perspective,” Keller says.

Keller points to the sermons of the old masters as examples. The only sermons of Jonathan Edwards and others that seem irrelevant now are those preached about national events, Keller says. “It is remarkable how poorly reasoned those sermons are. That is what originally made me hesitate about preaching on current events.”

“Who says a sermon has to last for 500 years?” counters Joseph Jeter, Jr., professor at Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University and author of the book *Crisis Preaching*. “All of us would like to preach a 500-year sermon, but it would have to be a very general sermon.”

In his research, Jeter found many preachers who refused to speak to news events. “Some said they don’t know what to say; others don’t want to sensationalize. But if your people bring to church a concern they’re confused and disturbed about, and nothing is said, that is like looking for bread and getting a stone.”

Choosing to address a news event requires discernment: of the likely lasting impact of the event, of the emotional needs of the congregation at the moment, and of the Spirit’s leadership in sermon preparation.



Lessons from the epicenter

A tornado ripped through Goshen (Alabama) United Methodist Church during the Easter drama on Palm Sunday 1994. The building just exploded, says Pastor Kelly Clem, burying worshipers crowded in the sanctuary under three feet of rubble. When the debris was cleared, 20 were dead, including Clem's four-year-old daughter Hannah. The media descended on the tiny community outside Birmingham.

"They asked us 'Why?'" Clem says. "Isn't the sanctuary supposed to be safe? Isn't this going to shatter your faith?" And the larger, and harder question: "Why would God let this happen to a church?" "During the crisis is not the time to ask the why question," Clem says. "The real question is 'What am I going to do with the life I have today, with the family members I have today, with the church I have today?'"

Clem's words to her congregation on Easter morning a week later spoke to the need of the moment: How can we be the comforting church when we're all suffering? Help with the why question came later.

The pastor's temptation in a crisis-prompted sermon is to offer answers. Although the people may say they want answers, what they really need is help dealing with overwhelming emotion.

A little more than six months after the shooting deaths of 15 students at Columbine High School, nearby West Bowles Community Church continues to wrestle with the catastrophe while at the same time watching a great revival in Littleton and in their church.

"Some wanted to make sense of (the deaths)," says Pastor George Kirsten. "I don't think we can. Others would say, 'Where can I turn? Is there any hope? Is there any comfort?' That's the issue we addressed loud and clear."

Kirsten's church became a clearinghouse for wise counsel. Many Columbine students came to West Bowles two days after the shootings to talk through their trauma. They didn't seek out the counselors sent by the school system, according to Kirsten, but went instead to other teens, youth from the church who were willing to listen and to cry with them.

Both Kirsten and Clem approached the preaching task as fellow strugglers. They expressed what their people were feeling and what they themselves were feeling. "Sometimes that's all we can do—cry with our people," Jeter surmises.

About Natural Disaster

The pastor helps people wrestle with the sovereignty of God.

Earthquakes are ultimately from God. Nature does not have a will of its own. And God owes Satan no freedom. What havoc demons wreak, they wreak with God's permission.

That's the point of Job 1-2 and Luke 22:31-32. God does nothing without an infinitely wise and good purpose. "He also is wise and will bring disaster" (Isaiah 31:2). "The Lord is good" (Psalm 100:5). Therefore, God had good and all-wise purposes for the heart-rending tragedy in Turkey that took thousands of lives on August 17, 1999.

—John Piper
pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church,
Minneapolis, Minnesota. An excerpt from his church
newsletter, reprinted in *World*, September 4, 1999



Craig Barnes calls this “emergency room talk.” Barnes is pastor of National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. He recommends the E.R. approach to emotionally wrenching crisis. “You don’t do a lot of constructive theology in emergency rooms. You just remind them that we live in the hands of God, and that’s a wonderful place to be. The constructive preaching comes in the second wave.”

Breaking news can wait

“Crisis rips the veneer off,” Barnes says. “It can be very helpful.” Yet in 20 years of pastoral ministry, Barnes counts only a handful of occasions when national news became sermon fodder. Most he treated briefly—the deaths of Princess Diana and Mother Teresa in the same week produced two paragraphs to close a message on the cost of following Christ.

“We live for moments when we stand on the stump and say, ‘I have a word from the Lord.’”

—M. Craig Barnes

Pastoring in the nation’s capital, Barnes has felt pressure to speak to the news. He has resisted. For many months he refused to address the investigation that led to the impeachment of the president. “I told my congregation I was taking the high road, but when everything finally came out, I had to speak.”

News anchor Peter Jennings called while Barnes was preparing his sermon. “He was taking a survey on how churches were handling it. He wanted to know whether I was calling for the head of the president or the head of the special prosecutor. Those were my only two options.

“I explained that the gospel is a little bit larger than that. My intent in this kind of sermon is to transcend the options. I want to say something that is clear and useful as people work their way through the issue. The crisis sermon should draw them to Jesus as Savior, as opposed to leaving them with the ‘right’ answer.

“We live for those moments when we can stand on the stump and say, ‘I have a word from the Lord.’ If it’s truly the word of the Lord, then it’s not just for the president or the prosecutor. It’s for all of us.”

The preacher’s temptation is to exegete the crisis, rather than the Scripture. Barnes avoids this by starting with his congregation’s emotions and moving quickly to the text.

“All preaching has to maintain both sides of that sacred conversation,” Barnes says. “You have to tell the Lord how it is down here. The people need to hear that. They need to see you as Moses, as the person who is speaking on their behalf before the Lord, in order also to hear the word of the Lord from you.”

For the most part, Barnes sticks to his preaching plan. He has found that his text, selected as much as a year in advance, has spoken to the need on the few occasions when he has preached on a crisis.



Like Keller, Barnes waits to refer to events such as Columbine and Wedgwood. “There are some pretty heroic stories that emerge in the second wave of media coverage. I think there is more valuable information there for the preacher.”

While crises that directly affect the local church must be addressed immediately, others, more often national or world events, can wait until more information is available and the lasting impact of the event has been determined. A real crisis will still merit attention in a few weeks or months. Until then, inclusion in the pastoral prayer will suffice to acknowledge awareness of the congregation’s feelings.

Other crises—and many of the incidents generating non-stop news coverage fall in this category—are simply distractions.

Grieving for people you don’t know

“I’m surprised by how much that hurts me,” my wife said, some months after the death of John Kennedy, Jr.

“That it hurt at all? Or that is *still* hurts?” I asked.

“Both, I guess. I see their pictures at the magazine stand, and I ache, deeply. Some celebrity deaths you expect to affect you. Diana, certainly.” (My wife had stayed up overnight so she would not miss the royals’ wedding on television.) “But I didn’t expect to feel this one.”

I understood her feelings. In our star-eyed culture, we keep electronic vigils by many bedsides, and the deaths of people we’ve never met become very real to us. Our listeners need help mourning losses both real and imagined. But do tragic, widely reported deaths merit attention from the pulpit?

Some instances should be referenced, but most are distractions from the real issues, according to Argile Smith, preaching professor at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. “What separates them from truly catastrophic events is that they are everyday events that happen to famous people.” People are born, live, and die, and except for their fame, most would not make the news. Neither should they make the pulpit.

Still, Smith admits, the emotions of his listeners must be considered. “I had prepared to preach on death and resurrection one Sunday. The night before that sermon, Princess Diana was killed. Because that was what everybody was talking about, I scrubbed my

During a Political Scandal

The preacher identifies with the feelings of the listener.

This has been a difficult week for the American public. How many times have we seen the banner “The Presidency in Crisis”? There is no shortage of people offering their political analysis of this.

I have no calling to add to that analysis. Instead, as a pastor, my calling is to speak to the anxiety of our own lives. These are clearly anxious times for us. We feel upset, discouraged, frightened, and a bit sick to the stomach.

Now on Sunday morning, we have gathered into church to look for a Word from the Lord. In my experience the Word of the Lord doesn’t come as a word about someone else, a political agenda, or a word that easily reduces to the simplistic options we construct. Rather the Word of the Lord comes as a ray of light that pierces through the darkness of our own lives. So the real question the church should be asking is not what should *he* do, or *they* do, but what should *you and I* be doing now?

—M. Craig Barnes
pastor of National Presbyterian Church,
Washington D.C. The introduction to his sermon from
Romans 13:11-14, September 13, 1998.



introduction and started with her death. The message wasn't about Diana, but it spoke to some things people were thinking about."

Smith is watchful when invoking the names of the famous. "Be careful not to make value judgments on dead people or speculate on their salvation," he warns. "The preacher can help his congregation with their emotions without expressing opinions about the deceased." In other words, don't say anything you wouldn't say at the celebrity's funeral.

In time, Smith says, the preacher develops an internal mechanism for deciding which events are worth talking about.

That's the way it really is

The danger of preaching to the crisis too frequently is that the temporal rather than the eternal begins to drive the preaching schedule. The preacher becomes reactionary, Chicken Little in the pulpit. On the other hand, ignoring crisis, whether real or perceived, may be seen by our listeners as failure to speak to their needs.

By preaching appropriately when the news intrudes, we can show our listeners that God still cares and that he can still be trusted even in catastrophe's aftermath.

Our goal, always, is to help people view the issues of life and death in the light of Christ. "If this world is going to make sense," Smith says, "it will only be when we see it through the eyes of Jesus."

—Eric Reed is managing editor of *LEADERSHIP*.

"When the News intrudes," *LEADERSHIP*, Winter 2000,
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1. Boutellier told his story to Joseph Jeter, Jr., in *Crisis Preaching* (Abingdon, 1998).

After a Terrorist Bombing

Evangelist says God can be trusted.

Since I have been here (in Oklahoma City) I have been asked the question: "Why does God allow such a terrible thing to happen?"

Over three thousand years ago, there was a man named Job who struggled with the same question. He asked why. He was a good man, and yet disaster struck him suddenly. He lost seven sons and three daughters. He lost all his possessions. He lost his health. Even his friends turned against him. His wife said, "Curse God and die."

In the midst of his suffering he asked this question: "Why?" Job didn't know. "Why did I not perish at birth?" he cried.

Perhaps this is the way you feel. And I want to tell you that God understands those feelings.

I have to confess that I never fully understand, even for my own satisfaction. I have to accept by faith that God is a God of love and mercy even in suffering. ... Times like this will do one of two things: either make us hard and bitter and angry at God, or make us tender and open and help us to reach out in trust and faith.

I pray that you will not let bitterness and poison creep into your soul, but that you will turn in faith and trust to God even if we cannot understand. It is better to face something like this with God than without him.

—Billy Graham
at the memorial service for victims
of the Murrah Federal Building bombing
in Oklahoma City, April 25, 1995.



At a Glance

Preaching in times of crisis

You may not have all the answers, but you should acknowledge the questions.

1. **The crisis is only part of the message.** Current events serve as good introductions. Start with the story people are talking about, then lead them to Scripture.
2. **Weep with those who weep.** Approach most events from the same perspective as your congregation. Express their worry, grief, or confusion. Say what they're feeling.
3. **Exegete the Scripture, not the crisis.** The event is not the sermon. The tragedy must not overshadow the eternal truth.
4. **Eulogy comes from "praise."** Illustrate without making value judgments on deceased persons or the disposition of their souls.
5. **It's okay to ask "Why?"** The pastor doesn't have to give all the answers. Raise questions that should be discussed in small groups or handled more fully in newsletters or other forums.
6. **Find the redemptive center in a crisis.** Share hope. Point to Jesus.



SURVIVAL GUIDE: PREACHING IN MOMENTS OF CRISIS

The Sacred Conversation that Follows Crisis

What preachers do better than anyone is speak into the fear with a sacred Word.

by M. Craig Barnes

Let's go back to Sunday morning, September 16, 2001: Five days ago the nation experienced the greatest crisis most of your parishioners have ever seen. Today they pack out your sanctuary feeling frightened, angry, confused, and overwhelmed. As you walk to the pulpit it occurs to you that you are about to give what may be the most important sermon of your life.

The room is now so quiet you can hear your own heart pounding in your chest. As you glance across the pulpit you are struck by the tender eyes of your congregation. It looks almost like they are pleading.

How do preachers ever rise to such an incredible moment? We don't. But we pray that the Holy Spirit will descend on the congregation and miraculously speak God's own Word. Nothing we have to say can fill the void in their souls.

Right. No one is clearer about that than preachers. But what do we actually say? Do we speak directly into the crisis with our own critical evaluation of what happened and how we should all respond? Well, that doesn't really sound like the Word of God. Do we just keep rephrasing the scriptural text and refuse to worry about relevance? That doesn't sound like the Word that became flesh and dwelled among us.

In order for the sermon to actually become the Word of God, the preacher has to carry on both sides of a sacred conversation between the people and their God. In the fine tradition of Moses, the preacher both tells God how it is on behalf of the people, and tells the people how it will be on behalf of God.

If preachers rush to biblical prescriptions about faith and trust, without first establishing pastoral contact in the sermon, we are in violation of the incarnation. In the sermon, the preacher has to dwell among us for a while. It is for this reason that the best preachers are always pastors who know what has been banging around in the hearts of the congregation all week. We carry their words of lament and anxiety in the crucible of our hearts where they are mixed together with the sacred words of the Bible. The congregation can only believe that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" after the preacher has indicated that he or she knows just how much trouble we are in.

In addition to the moments of national crisis, every congregation has its own moments of local crisis that are just as overwhelming: the church burns down, one of the pastors dies suddenly, a major employer lays off twenty percent of the church's members. Whenever these disasters hit, people always run for cover to the sanctuary.



For the congregation that I served in Washington, D.C., the national crisis was also a local crisis. About half of our members work in government buildings, one of which now had a gaping wound in its side. All of these facilities are targets for terrorists. So every morning our members hugged their families a little longer before going to work, knowing that they may not come home at the end of the day. By the time they made it safely to church on Sunday, they had heard lots of words all week long, most of which have only made them more anxious. As they sat in the pews, I could almost hear them wondering, “What about God? Does God have a word for us?”

The answer that the preacher has is “Absolutely, and I’m here to give it.” Whether we realize it or not, preachers actually live for these moments of crisis. We cannot offer our people the best therapy they can find. Nor do we run the best children’s programs in town, offer the best music, or provide the most effective relief to the poor. We work hard at all of those things, but what we do best, and better than anyone else in town, is climb behind a pulpit and speak into the fear and chaos with a sacred Word.

On the Saturday night following September 11, 2001, when preachers across the country were focused on the challenge that was waiting for them the next day, I received an e-mail from a pastor who recently lost his pulpit. He sent this message to about forty of his preacher friends: “I know that you are intimidated by the challenge that lies ahead of you in the morning. Just remember that the only thing worse than having to preach tomorrow is not being able to.”

—*M. Craig Barnes is editor-at-large of LEADERSHIP*

“The Sacred Conversation that Follows Crisis,” Leadership Weekly Newsletter, September 5, 2002.
www.LeadershipJournal.net.



SURVIVAL GUIDE: PREACHING IN MOMENTS OF CRISIS

Ministry at the Makeshift Memorial

After a kidnapped child was found dead, how could I help at the impromptu wailing wall?

by Connie Regener

Outside Samantha Runnion's condo, the courtyard was all chaos and paradox. Children played hopscotch and older boys rode skateboards while news crews on deadline frantically interviewed the growing crowd. Photographers with long lenses vied for position.

Parents were crying and hugging their children. People were kneeling, praying, crossing themselves, and lighting candles, many, many candles. Amid the din in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese, I heard strains of The Lord's Prayer.

Five-year-old Samantha, kidnapped two days earlier while playing on that same sidewalk in Stanton, California, would not be coming home alive. At her residential complex, the vigil became a wake, the yard commandeered for sacred space. The mourners quickly erected a makeshift altar of massive floral displays punctuated by butterfly balloons, American flags, and windmills. Children brought mounds of new stuffed animals and even left their favorite worn toys. Religious statues and votive lights spread onto the sidewalks, spelling out Samantha's name.

But these expressions of grief could not ease the pain of those drawn to the site—small children, foreign tourists, and Samantha's family. Who could minister to such diverse needs? The Orange County sheriff called in a ministry team with which I volunteer. It was my most intense season of ministry ever.

In crises like this, too often ministers are spectators, wondering what to do. Working with a counseling team, I am ushered into the mess and welcomed to minister. The Trauma Intervention Program (TIP) works alongside police, fire, rescue, and emergency medical personnel. Our chapter is part of a national organization of volunteers called to the scenes of tragedy or hospital emergency rooms. This time our assignment: the "walking wounded" at Stanton.

Comforting strangers

Not having an exact procedure for "makeshift memorial duty," I wasn't sure what to expect.

While I am surveying the crowd, one trembling woman with three girls approaches me. She says she is pregnant with a female baby—and unsure she wants to bring another girl into the world. I give her my full attention. She needs comfort and encouragement. Part of my job is to tell her not to make life-changing decisions while under such stress.



The needs are so diverse: Some parents are afraid to let their children play outside. One mother confides that her children are scared and didn't sleep well last night. Another mom sounds overly compulsive about locking doors and windows. Many have lost children, and this tragedy has renewed their pain. A few are loud and angry. One woman looks especially stunned—she worked with the suspect.

A news photographer mentions how tough this is on him emotionally. When I ask him to elaborate, he points to the memorial and the notes in children's printing he has just photographed: "You were very brave. You scratched and screamed. You did everything you could." "Dear Samantha, Hope you are enjoying heaven."

I nod in silence, holding back tears. I sense that the photographer is asking for acknowledgement of his grief and someone to share it. Sometimes silence is the best response. Here it bonds us together.

I constantly scan the crowd for hidden victims—those who are too quiet, or children hiding behind parents. I listen, empathize, suggest, validate, hug, and pray when requested. I have communicated in French, English, and sign language.

Having done what I can for the hurting, now I hurt, too. My feet ache, my lips are chapped, and I am sunburned. I head for the Red Cross canteen in the nearby Sheriff's Emergency Command Post. And so ends the first day.

People from all over the world streamed to the memorial for six days. On the seventh day everyone rested.

Now it was time to prepare for the funeral.

Public grief, private pain

Samantha's father, Derek, and his two sons flew to California to attend the service. The morning of the funeral, Derek requested a private viewing of the body. I was dispatched to assist with this solemn task. After a brief introduction to Derek and his police escort, the two of us were left alone in a small room at the mortuary.

First, I took time to orient Derek and bring him up to date. He asked about the makeshift memorial and the emergency command post, both recently disassembled.

He regretted he had only seen glimpses of them on TV. I was able to describe both to him in detail. I made a mental note that in team debriefing we should discuss how important it is to arrange for the family to see and touch these tangible things.

Then, after some trust was built and Derek was ready, we walked together to the viewing room and slowly opened the door.

What happened next is confidential, but needless to say it was difficult. It took a while. Derek hadn't said goodbye when Samantha was alive. No parent ever anticipates having to bury a child. I know that pain first-hand. Although it was a privilege to be there for Derek, it was also an emotional drain. Thank God there was time to rest and pray before escorting him to the funeral that evening.



We assembled at a meeting point. After instructions, a uniformed police officer transferred us to an unmarked car. On the way to the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, I tried to prepare Derek. The building itself is imposing. We would pass by the cathedral's cemetery and mausoleum, which could trigger pain. But we were both unprepared for what we saw as we turned into the driveway.

A sea of news vans spread as far as we could see. It hit Derek hard that a worldwide audience was coming to his daughter's funeral. He was still thinking of Samantha as the adorable five-year old who brightened the lives of her small circle in Stanton. By public acclaim, Samantha had become everyone's little girl.

Some of those who could not crowd into the cathedral pressed their faces against the glass walls to peer inside. A crowd gathered around an outdoor screen. Others left flowers around the statue of Christ, surrounded by children, carrying a lamb.

As our car crept forward, the family and I rehearsed the protocol from the police one last time. The police had a detailed script coordinating their actions and ours. They alerted us to the entrance we were to use, the seating plan, and the media positions. Then we took a private moment to gather courage, and opened the car doors.

With only one pool camera allowed inside the cathedral, all the news crews outside were trained on us. The moment was private no more. Ushers in red blazers quickly rescued us. They led us inside to our seats in the front row, before Samantha's tiny coffin.

Samantha's mom, Erin, had wanted the funeral to be perfect, and it was. A few moments were especially poignant: A playmate played the violin. One stand of the child's favorite flowers, pink roses, were in the shape of a broken heart. The concluding video collage of Samantha's life—including many pictures that Derek had taken—provoked emotion we could not choke back.

After the funeral, the crowd rushed the child's father. They pressed flowers and cards into his arms as we made our way slowly back to the car. Derek remarked he didn't know so many people cared. It was a momentary comfort in the stifling grief.

Later that evening we watched a repeat broadcast of the funeral on television. I stayed with the family to help as they relived the day's grief.

I had earlier advised Derek of his media rights, and we again reviewed his options and preferences. I provided him with a TIP booklet, "Dealing with the Media: Your Rights." It covers issues such as selecting a spokesperson for the family, the right to review quotes before they are published, and controlling the release of photographs. People in the spotlight are vulnerable and may need an informed advocate to help them stay calm.

I also emphasized the need for the family to continually renew its source of strength, and to anticipate the emotional roller coaster that would follow. They faced so many difficult transitions in so little time.



The next day, over burritos and enchiladas, we discussed their return to Massachusetts. Life would be routine, but not again normal after the brutal murder of Samantha.

Frontline tactics

My work with the community crisis support team has opened many doors for ministry, both to suffering families and to the larger community.

Sometimes simply being there for others is one of the most Christ-like things we can do. I recently spent one gut-wrenching afternoon at the wake of a teenage football player who was killed in a car crash.

In nearby San Diego County, high school students were shot and killed by another student. This had a ripple effect in our community, so I was invited by a local religious school to address students' fears and concerns. That provided a chance to reinforce the messages we most wanted them to hear—of their parents' love for them and our concern for their safety.

Through a church-sponsored bereavement group, I ministered to a couple whose daughter had drowned during a Mother's Day picnic at the beach. The couple later told our congregation they were grateful that a church in the community was equipped to share their pain and move them toward healing.

Ministering after such events helps a community regain its equilibrium and hold onto its faith. Here are a few ways I've found churches can help.

- 1. Care for the wide circle of people involved.** The concerns exposed at Samantha's memorial site are universal. Many people felt them, and many people needed ministry. It took 27 TIP team members to provide emotional and spiritual support to our community: to Samantha's extended family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, playmates, teacher and classmates, the girl who was with Samantha when she was abducted and her family, the men who found Samantha's body, family and co-workers of the suspect, law enforcement, and the media.
- 2. Include the youth.** Young people from one church assisted hundreds of children who visited Samantha's memorial by helping them write notes to the family.
- 3. Minister in the local language.** At the memorial site, one church group sang in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese during a daily evening devotional.
- 4. Say what you mean.** One church offered "anything the family needs." When asked to provide one meal for three people, they said they were out of money. They said they meant any prayer support the family needed.
- 5. Offer to fill an unmet need.** During the Laguna Beach fires, one church offered their facility as a shelter for victims with pets before the emergency



kennel opened. Elderly pet owners who didn't want to be separated from their pets were especially thankful. The church and its location were prominently announced in the media.

- 6. Keep it short.** At one large public funeral, a stage full of pastors greeted, read, prayed, worshiped, reminisced, and preached for two and one-half hours. A community already on emotional overload will appreciate sincerity *and* brevity.

In times of tragedy, the church needs to go where the action is, where the hurt is. This is the frontline of ministry.

—*Connie Regener is a minister and writer in Irvine, California.*

"Ministry at the Makeshift Memorial," LEADERSHIP, Spring 2003, Vol. XXIV, No. 2, Page 88

Before Crisis Strikes

Prepare to serve when the siren sounds.

You may not have all the answers, but you should acknowledge the questions.

- 1. Collaborate.** Ask about existing crisis intervention programs in your community. In a crisis, the church needs to function as a responsible part of the entire community's caring response.
- 2. Connect with local law enforcement.** Start by adopting a fire station or police station. One church near a fire station held a get-acquainted potluck for the firemen. You are more likely to be invited to help in an emergency if they know you.
- 3. Prepare counselors.** Sponsor an Emotional First Aid Training weekend. Trauma Intervention Program (www.tipnational.org) offers training and has chapters across the USA.
- 4. Stock grief- and trauma-counseling materials.** Pamphlets such as CareNotes (800-325-2511) use Scripture, but are nondenominational.
- 5. Set aside funds and a quick method of accessing them.** I gave up calling churches and tapped my local Rotary Club because their president can say yes on the first call.
- 6. Identify pitfalls.** Examples: Home-cooked dishes were refused at the emergency center near the Amtrak train wreck in Yorba Linda due to Red Cross regulations. A church offered religious tracts for the Runnion memorial, but the homeowners association had banned the distribution of all literature when advertisements of products for sale showed up.
- 7. Minister appropriately.** Some people will welcome discussions about God. Others simply want a shoulder. Respond to the needs the people express. Comfort everyone, but share faith and pray only when the people are open to such ministry.

—*Connie Regener*



SURVIVAL GUIDE: PREACHING IN MOMENTS OF CRISIS

When a Child Dies

In times of greatest grief, there's power in the presence of a pastor.

by Cinda Gorman.

I was pushing my two elementary-school-aged boys through their bedtime routine when the phone rang.

“Cinda, this is Dr. Steele. I’m in the emergency room at Grossmont Hospital with Keith and Judy Meeker. Their son, Jarrett, hanged himself on a backyard rope swing this afternoon. He’s been pronounced dead. They asked that you or your husband be here.”

My husband, Steve, another pastor at our church, had already left for an evening meeting. Searching my memory for a picture of the Meeker family, I came up blank. Then I remembered that last weekend Jarrett and his dad had been with the males in my family on a fishing trip with the boys’ choir.

I told the doctor I would be there as soon as I could find care for my boys. I shared the news with my children as gently as possible. My friend Shar was scheduled to drop by that evening, so when she did, I greeted her as the “angel” God had provided to care for my boys.

At the hospital, I got the story: Jarrett had come home from choir practice and was playing in the backyard while his sister napped. His mom had asked him to stop throwing rocks, so he began to swing on a nylon rope suspended from a eucalyptus tree. The rope was knotted at the bottom for a foothold, but a section above the knot was unwoven and created a loop. Judy went into the house to answer the phone and then returned outside to continue her yardwork. It was then that she felt the silence.

Jarrett’s lifeless body was hanging from the loop in the rope. She pulled him out, ran into the house, and phoned for help. She continued her efforts to revive him, carrying her son to the front yard so the paramedics could quickly find them. But it was too late, despite lengthy procedures in the ambulance and at the trauma ward. No one knew exactly how Jarrett’s slender body had accidentally slipped through the rope swing.

Much has been written about helping people through the loss of an infant, but little about the loss of an older child. This requires a specialized and careful pastoral response, as I learned by experience.

Caring for the parents

The first task in pastoral care is ministering to the parents.

Help them talk about the child. The hospital’s “scream room” or “cry room” was ours alone that night. The stunned parents sat together on a couch, their 8-year-old son’s



body on a gurney in another room. We talked about the recent fishing trip, about Jarrett's gregarious, friendly style with other children, his learning disabilities that were improving, his love for God's creation, and his relationship with his 5-year-old sister, Jennifer.

I didn't press for details of the accident, because I knew the deputy coroner would soon come for a complete report.

Encourage them to spend time with the body. We went into the trauma room where Jarrett's blanket-covered body lay. He looked like a sleeping child. I encouraged the parents to stroke his face and hair. Like any caring parent, his mother commented on his dirty socks.

The grandparents and an aunt and uncle arrived. Soon I was in a corner with my arms around Jarrett's father, a usually cool lawyer who now sobbed over his lost son. I provided tissues and a shoulder to cry on, saying quietly, "It is good to cry," while we shed tears together.

Discuss burial arrangements. After a while, we discussed the decisions they now faced. Should Jarrett's body be cremated or buried? This was a crucial decision, calling for mutual agreement. When they decided on burial, I encouraged them to find appropriate ways to involve their daughter in the decisions so she would not feel left out or abandoned during the next few days. They decided to include her in the trip to the cemetery to choose a plot.

Discuss memorial funds and gifts. I brought up the topic of memorial gifts during that first evening at the hospital. This might seem premature, but it was fortunate that we did that night. Media attention the next day provided an opportunity for Jarrett's parents to make a positive response in the midst of a tragedy. They had established a special fund by then, using the Deacons' Fund in the church as a collection point. The donations would be used to finance a week of "zoo school" at the San Diego Zoo for needy children. They chose an experience Jarrett had enjoyed.

I also accompanied the family to the next painful stage—returning to the scene of the accident, their home. By now my husband had arrived at the hospital to finish the evening with them. He and I exchanged a few words in the hall and went back into the conference room for prayer. I left the Meekers after offering to return in the morning to help share the news with Jennifer, who was staying with friends that evening. Visibly relieved, they said this was one of the most troubling tasks on their minds.

Discuss available support groups. Later on, parents will need to know about support groups for families who have experienced the death of a child. Some in our area include Empty Cradle (for families who have lost a child under 2 years of age) and Compassionate Friends (for any parent whose child has died). In addition, local hospitals often offer seminars on grief, helpful to families in the months following a child's death. Groups of this type broaden the number of people with whom grieving families can feel a kinship.



The Meekers found the support they needed within the congregation. Judy's statement, "People in the church praying for me has been the only thing that keeps me going," is a testament to the love and care of the people of God in a crisis.

Caring for siblings and friends

I also discovered the importance of helping the brothers, sisters, and young friends of a child who has died deal with their loss.

"Metaphors about "sleep" and "God needing Jarret" can be frightening to children."

—Cinda Gorman

Avoid misleading terms. While in the hospital's conference room, we talked about how and when to tell Jarrett's sister and cousin. Metaphors about "sleep" and "God needing Jarrett" can be destructive and frightening to children. Since children are literal thinkers, these terms could cause them to become afraid of going to sleep or to resent God for taking someone they love.

In the morning I notified Jarrett's school principal. We discussed the exact details of the accident so she could share the news factually with the school counselor, teachers, and students. I suggested she avoid using the words *hanging* or *hanged himself* since my older son's question had been, "Did he do it on purpose?"

By using "accidentally strangled," the counselor could rule out suicide in the minds of Jarrett's classmates. A visit to the school later in the day reassured us about the sensitivity with which the staff dealt with Jarrett's friends. I assured the principal that the memorial service would be appropriate for children and that any parents who inquired should know their children were welcome to attend.

Choose the discussion site carefully. As promised, I called on the Meekers that first morning to be there when they told Jenny their sad news. Cradled in her parents' laps, she alternated between tears and amazingly perceptive observations. She said, "I wish I could just wake up and this would all be a bad dream." When we discussed that accidents sometimes happen even to children, she remarked, "Jarrett never got to grow old and be a grandpa."

While we chose Jenny's bedroom for this conversation for the sake of privacy, I now consider that a mistake. Her subsequent unpleasant dreams about things on the walls and dressers might have been because we shared such traumatic news in a place she called her own.

Many books help explain the concept of death to children. Most agree that a 5-year-old has a limited concept of the finality of death. This was not a problem with Jenny, as evidenced in her statements about her brother. We talked about Jarrett's body still being at the hospital, but that it would be buried in the coming days. (While not the case in this situation, some children take discussion of "bodies" to mean that the head is not included. Again, it helps to remember how literal children are in their understanding.)



Assure children that a full range of emotions is normal. It's okay to cry—or to laugh. Children in a grieving family need to be assured they can express a range of feelings even though many sad people surround them.

I told Jenny that in the next few days she would want to cry sometimes, and other times to laugh and play even when grownups were sad. Jenny later told her mother, “Pastor Gorman said I could laugh and play or be quiet and show sadness and tears, and it was all okay.”

Include children in the funeral and memorial service. The death of a child also involves ministering to friends and their families. I found myself spending a great deal of time on the phone with other mothers who were suddenly facing the mortality of their children.

One way of reaching out to them was scheduling a specific time to be available at the mortuary. The funeral home provided a filmstrip on questions that naturally curious children ask, such as, “How do they dig a grave?” After viewing the filmstrip with several children, my husband and I added thoughts about what we as Christians believe about resurrection. Parents seemed relieved to have assistance explaining the difficult topic of death.

Jenny's parents and I planned the memorial service the morning after the accident. We scheduled the service so classmates and teachers could attend. We decided to use taped music of the boys' choir Jarrett had been in. I planned to give a children's sermon, and friends would be invited to share some good memories of Jarrett. In addition, Jarrett's baseball team would take up a collection for the memorial fund.

For the children's sermon, I used toy caterpillars that unzipped into butterflies. I made up a story of two caterpillars discussing what it would be like to fly. One then spun a cocoon (a paper bag) and came out a butterfly. It couldn't come back and tell its friend what flying was like. Flying was beyond any description a crawling caterpillar would understand.

“In a similar way,” I pointed out, “Jarrett can't come back to tell us what it's like where he is now. But we know it's a wonderful, happy place.”

Keith and Judy prepared a display of Jarrett's models and baseball cards for the reception following the memorial service. This gave them some tangible way to share their son with their friends and to remember his many interests.

Schedule follow-up time. I stopped by the Meekers' home after the service. The eucalyptus tree in the backyard had already been removed, and the Meekers commented on the wonderful view they didn't know they had been missing. (Some experts may suggest this was a premature action of denial, but removing the tree was a decision the family could make and take action on.)

When a child dies, we grieve not only the loss of that child, but also the loss of the future anticipated for the child. Most of the memories center around holidays and particular sports, friends, and sites. For this reason I contact the parents around the



holidays associated with children—Halloween, Christmas, and Jarrett’s birthday. I noted these dates and the anniversary of his death on my calendar.

Christmas was the most difficult holiday, and the Meekers chose to celebrate it at a mountain cabin and to keep the holiday rather low-key.

Looking back, I would be more assertive about follow-up than I was. Distance made dropping by difficult, but I wish I’d have done it on a regular basis and with more pointed questions. Not until six months later was I able to encourage more formal counseling.

The divorce rate for parents who experience the death of a child is high, so monitoring family dynamics is critical. While Jarrett’s death didn’t threaten this couple’s marriage, it did raise other issues in their extended family.

Judy has repeatedly said she had too little time alone with Jarrett at the funeral home. Now I would suggest that visitation by family and friends be scheduled at a time other than when the parents go to the funeral home. That way there would be no scheduled end to their time with the body. Providing appropriate time for parents to be with their dead child is a key function of pastoral care.

Caring for yourself

Pastors in this kind of crisis will initially devote a great deal of time to the family in need. By the third day, I was exhausted from a lack of sleep; I took my first-ever sleeping pill. I needed to monitor my needs during this crisis. I also needed to be attuned to the feelings of my two sons, so I sent notes to their school teachers about their friend’s death, making the school aware of my sons’ grief.

While I have never felt crying at a memorial service is inappropriate, I feared that if I cried at this one I’d be unable to regain control. I asked people to pray for my husband and me to get through the service. This wasn’t from a sense of steely pride (I had cried enough by then); I didn’t think my tears would help those attending. Our composure that day was due to God’s help.

I was strengthened by my husband, who was also a colleague. Pastors facing a tragedy that impacts not only a family but a community need partners to share the emotional load. A spouse, a colleague, or a small-group member can be an essential support. Pastors should not have to walk alone.

I wouldn’t want to rerun those wrenching days, but they focused my perspective on ministry and sharpened my skills in grief counseling. And they showed me how God and his people can be faithful to those who mourn.

*—Cinda Gorman and her husband, Steve, copastor Westwood First
Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati, Ohio.*

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SURVIVAL GUIDE: PREACHING IN MOMENTS OF CRISIS

Speaking into Crisis

What we can learn from two pastors—Bonhoeffer and Thieliicke—who ministered in terrible times.

by Gordon MacDonald

I have long been romanced by the story of Paul's bold intervention among the soldiers and sailors in charge of a ship that is breaking up in the middle of a Mediterranean storm. Having exhausted their routine responses to severe conditions, they had given up hope of being saved.

Enter Paul! "Men," (and I'm paraphrasing here) "you should have listened to me earlier when I said not to leave port, but you didn't. But don't be afraid. I've received a word from God. The good news is that no life is to be lost; the bad news is that the ship has made its last voyage. Keep courageous, men; God will do as he's promised."

Here was a voice speaking confidently into crisis, offering a message that steadies people and provides reliable direction. It's an apt subject for our times in which people are scared, wonder of the future, and speculate on their personal security. Not always the most important issues, ultimately, but nevertheless the ones on people's minds.

In times of crisis, people listen for a voice. They're tuned to receive messages of hope, courage, God's purposes, and meaning. Augustine's was such a voice when Rome was coming apart. Luther's was heard when the Holy Roman Empire was crumbling. Wesley's spoke into the turbulent times of industrial revolution.

More recently two insightful voices spoke into the crisis in Germany during the 1930s and '40s. Amid the economic, political, and military upheaval, only a few stood to speak for God. Among them: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Helmut Thieliicke. The two stand like human bookends at the beginning and the end of World War II. Bonhoeffer's greatest years were from 1932 to 1945 while Thieliicke ascended to his prime in the mid-war years and those that followed.

It was given to Bonhoeffer to warn the German people of the political and moral consequences should they select Hitler as their national leader and then follow him to his grave. Thieliicke's task was to challenge the German people to the task of spiritual and moral reconstruction. Both men did their jobs admirably.

The cost of Dietrich's discipleship

In 1933, just two days after Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, Bonhoeffer preached on the radio, warning of a leader "who allow(s) himself to succumb to the wishes of those he leads, who will always seek to turn him into their idol, then the image



of the leader will gradually become the image of the 'misleader'. ... This is the leader who makes an idol of himself and his office, and who thus mocks God."

Bonhoeffer was cut off the air as he spoke, presumably by Hitler sympathizers, and he was forced to publish the talk in print to make sure that his audience heard everything he had to say. But he'd made his stand, and soon there were those who questioned his patriotism.

His preaching and his instruction to student preachers took on an increasingly confrontive tone. "Do not try to make the Bible relevant," he said. "Its relevance is axiomatic ... Do not defend God's Word, but testify to it ... Trust to the Word. It is a ship loaded to the very limits of her capacity."

Bonhoeffer's greatest books come out of this era. The *Cost of Discipleship* called for one to pursue the selfless life, or, to use a more modern phrase, Bonhoeffer was trying to say, "It's not about me!"

"The cross is laid on every Christian," Bonhoeffer wrote. "As we embark upon discipleship ... we give over our lives to death."

In 1939, Dietrich Bonhoeffer visited New York, and friends in the church world passionately tried to keep him there for fear that if he returned to Germany, he would lose his life. But Bonhoeffer chose to sail back to Germany.

"I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people," he said.

"Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security."

In the wartime years that followed, Bonhoeffer's logic led to relationships with people (including members of his extended family) who plotted to take Hitler's life. When they were almost successful, many were arrested throughout Germany, including Bonhoeffer, and he spent his last years in prison before being executed at Flossenburg in 1945, shortly before the war ended.

Even in prison, Bonhoeffer was ever the preacher. At one point he reflected on the hope generated in a fresh Christian marriage. "Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God," he quoted from the Scriptures, then expounded: "In a word, live together in the forgiveness of your sins, for without it no human fellowship, least of all a marriage, can survive. Don't insist on your rights, don't blame each other; don't judge or condemn each other, don't find fault with each other, but accept each other as you are, and forgive each other every day from the bottom of your hearts."



The larger significance of these comments is that Bonhoeffer never accepted the notion that life is only about the crisis. Rather, life goes on, and the more hopeful, new-start-oriented statements we can make—like marriage—the better.

Bonhoeffer was one tough preacher, and he called people to resistance against evil, to courage, to nobility of life and witness, to pure fellowship among Christ-following people.

“Who stands fast?” Bonhoeffer wrote in 1943. “Only the man whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God—the responsible man, who tries to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God. Where are these responsible people?”

Bonhoeffer was even preaching when they came to take him away to the place of execution. In his last hours, he was asked to speak to the prisoners. At first reluctant, Bonhoeffer relented. The text, from Isaiah, was “by his stripes we are healed.”

Then he was led to the gallows, where after his execution, his biographer records, “his body was taken down and burned, along with his suitcase and manuscript.” His manuscript! Bonhoeffer never stopped preaching and writing, even in the worst of times.

Sermons in a bombed-out church

If Bonhoeffer’s calling was to warn the German people of the consequences of Hitler’s political philosophy, Helmut Thielicke’s calling was to sustain people through the war and then to help them rebuild their lives spiritually and morally afterward.

In 1936 Thielicke was awarded a professorship at the University of Heidelberg. But four years later he lost his position when the Nazis became sensitive to his growing criticisms of the Hitler regime. He eventually moved to St. Mark’s Church in Stuttgart, where he preached despite changes in venue from week to week due to damage from Allied bombing. John Doberstein, Thielicke’s English translator, says that, after each sermon, “hundreds of volunteer stenographers remained and took down dictated excerpts, which they then duplicated privately. Printing was forbidden, but these copies of the Christian message, handed from person to person, found their way to thousands of eager readers.”

At one point during the war Thielicke felt in desperate need of rest. He reasoned that some weeks spent in a quiet village in the countryside would be good medicine. Yet the retreat to the country failed to restore him, and he soon returned to the city. Yes, the village had been peaceful. But something was missing, which left him restless.

He concluded that people in the village were of a different mind, not deeply touched (yet!) by the war. And he craved to return to the city where people were clawing for survival. Among them he found a spiritual strength and vitality that was far more restorative than the “escapist” life of the countryside. So Thielicke returned to the



bombs, the damage, and the suffering. Because there he found reality and courage and community. And that became the seedbed of much of his preaching.

“I have been interested in the theological question of what change takes place in a man,” writes Thieliicke, “when he finds God and so also finds himself. For of one thing I was always sure, that when a man seeks himself, he fails to find himself, and that he gains and realizes himself only when he loses his life in God.”

He was bold when he called men and women to Christ. “I believe,” he said, “that one can do justice to the seeker only if one leaves him under no illusions about the existence of a steep wall at which decisions must be made. He must be led to face the granite greatness of a message that brooks no evasion.”

In another place: “Anybody who looks downward and measures himself by the weaknesses of his fellow men immediately becomes proud ... “ And again: “When a man really turns to God with a burdened conscience, he doesn’t think of other people at all. There he is utterly alone with God.”

Are his comments out of date? Or do they call us back to something that may be lost in our time of sermons that smack more of self-help than deep-spirited and thoughtful gospel. When we look for the voices that have spoken out most eloquently and spiritually since September 11, will we hear any of the substance that these two “bookends” gave to the German people?

Some time after the war Thieliicke visited the United States and toured the United Nations building in New York. When he was shown the “chapel” in the UN building, he was appalled. It was a room decorated by spotlights and little else.

“The spotlights were ignorant of what they were illuminating, and the responsible men who were invited to come to this room were not shown to whom they should direct their thoughts. It was a temple of utterly weird desolation, an empty, ruined field of faith long since fled ... only here, where the ultimate was at stake, only here was emptiness and desolation. Would it not have been more honest to strike this whole pseudo temple out of the budget and use the space for a cloakroom or a bar?”

The man was a prophet.

What do they say today?

What can we say of these two World War II “bookends”? Certainly that they in fact did speak into their crisis. They were tough on their hearers; they expected much from the people to whom they preached and wrote. Their preaching was not parochial, pandering to the fears and superficial patriotism of their people. And they were willing to accept the consequences that came from proclaiming biblical truth.

For Bonhoeffer, this meant not just proclaiming but living out the message that ministry is more important than security. Instead of escaping the place of danger, he stayed where he could do the most good and paid the ultimate price for doing so.



Likewise, I hear Thieliicke saying that the greatest preaching is most likely to come from the lips of a preacher who suffers alongside his or her people. We are not called—neither preacher nor hearer—to run fearfully from affliction or to curse it (and those who cause it), but rather to stand and face it, to squeeze from it everything God might like to say to us.

In the wake of the horror of the World Trade Center/Pentagon attacks we need to ask ourselves some challenging questions. Who speaks for God now? And how is His message heard, both in the churches and in the larger public?

Billy Graham's eloquent remarks at the National Cathedral on September 14 will (or should) long remain a textbook in prophetic preaching. In a few brief moments the raspy and aging voice of this Christian statesman called the country to alertness, courage, grace, and truth.

We need such voices that are tender, firm, thoughtful, timeless, and candid enough to call us to a life higher than the ordinary.

What we do not need are voices that speak out in vindictiveness, even, supposedly, in the name of biblical truth. It is not a time to blame various people groups with the word evil or warlike (a selective reading of our Older Testament will not make the Jewish/Christian tradition look too peaceable either). It is not a time to take advantage of people's fears to raise money or prestige.

Speaking into crisis means focusing on themes such as:

- **Hope** because people wonder if there is a tomorrow.
- **Courage** because people succumb too easily to fear.
- **Nobility in the normal Christian life** because living for the glory of God is our calling every day, but especially in times of crisis, and because loving (and forgiving) one's enemies is imperative.
- **Repentance** in those circumstance where we have come across as an arrogant and materialistic nation.
- **Biblical justice** because so few of us really understand what it is.
- And what **substantial prayer** looks and sounds like—praying for the leaders of this world, for peace, for those who suffer far more than we do.

Finally, how would a larger, God's-eye-view perspective on world events take shape in preaching? The horror of the World Trade Center losses (some 4,000 people dead), as New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani put it, is unbearable. But Christians need to be reminded by their preachers that as many as seven times that number (mostly children) die every day in the world because of disease and malnutrition. Additionally, preachers may need to help some hearers understand that terrorism has been around for a long time in other parts of the world. We simply cared too little when it was inflicted upon others not of our nationality.



But the most important theme to speak into crisis is theological at its base. It is to preach the sovereignty of a great and powerful God, of a Christ who weeps over the city (or the country, and not ours only) and who longs to come again to create a new heaven and a new earth. This kingdom-dream leaps off the pages of Scripture from beginning to end and tells us that life and relationship will be better, much better than we know today, when everyone shall bow to confess Him as Lord of All.

What a day that shall be! And what a privilege to preach about it in the midst of crisis.

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