

## **Where is your God?**

Psalm 42:1-3

December 1, 2013

I have been haunted this week by a photograph. It began Tuesday morning as I was sitting on the love seat in my office, meditating on these first three verses of Psalm 42, trying to choose a sermon title. The last few words of the stanza kept echoing in my brain: "Where is your God?"

Where is your God? Where is your God? I looked up and my eyes fell on a magazine cover, on this photograph on the cover of the December issue of Sojourners magazine, and as I looked into the eyes of the young girl pictured in the photograph, I heard that gut-wrenching question again: "Where is your God?"

The young girl is eleven-year-old Natalie Barden. Her mother, Jackie Barden, is cradling her head and kissing her on the forehead during a gathering of families to mark the one-month anniversary of the Newtown shootings. Jackie's son, Natalie's brother, seven-year-old Daniel, was one of the twenty-seven people killed in a gun assault by Adam Lanza at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.

I am haunted by her face, by her eyes. Her eyes are not empty, not hardened, not angry, but sad, deeply sad, and old, too old. An eleven-year-old girl's eyes should be happy and sparkling and mischievous and eager, not like this, done in and forlorn and devoid of hope.

It is an unthinkable grief to lose a child. It is an unthinkable grief to lose this child, Daniel Barden, described by his family as "always smiling, unfailingly polite, incredibly affectionate, fair and so thoughtful towards others, a constant source of laughter and joy."

A mother's grief is unspeakable, but what about a sister's grief? An eleven-year-old girl does not have the experience or perspective or emotional resources of her mother. This is all she knows. This is now her world, a world where little brothers get shot and killed at school.

That's what I see in her eyes: not only grief over the death of her little brother, but grief over the loss of the world she thought she knew, living on, as she can, growing up, as she must, in world robbed of joy. I look at her and I hear them saying -- the doubters, the scoffers, the unbelievers -- "Where is your God?"

Where is your God?

What do you say? What do you say in the shadow of her grief, or in the shadow of your own grief? What do you say when a cyclone devastates the city of Tacloban killing thousands? What do you say when a tornado flattens the town of Washington, Illinois? What do you say when a drone strike aimed at an insurgent riding a motorbike kills a two-year-old boy in Afghanistan?

What do you answer, when they say: "Where is your God?" What will you tell Natalie Barden?

Some will say: "It doesn't matter."

It doesn't matter, because it doesn't matter, because it doesn't make any difference. It is what it is. Violent people will always be violent. There will always be more killings. There will always be another disaster. There will always be more death. So, get used to it. This is the world we live in. Just hope that fortune smiles on you and it never happens to you!

Or when they ask, "Where is your God," some will say, maybe you will say: "I don't know."

Because you don't know. Because it doesn't make sense. Because it isn't right, it isn't fair, it isn't just, and you can't understand why a God who is right, who is fair, who is just, would let it happen.

But some will answer the way the poet answers:

*As a deer longs for a stream of cool water,  
so I long for you, O God.  
I thirst for you, the living God.  
When can I go and worship in your presence?  
Day and night I cry,  
and tears are my only food;  
all the time my enemies ask me,  
"Where is your God?"*

They're asking him all the time: "Where is your God?" Because he is in exile, far from home and homeland, in exile in Babylon.

I don't know if we can fully fathom, not just the physical displacement, but the emotional and spiritual displacement of being in exile. It can only compare, I think, to something like the experience of the three young women who were kidnapped and held in the Cleveland home of an older man for ten years. They

were held in exile, wrenched from their homes and their families against their will, made to live, as it were, among foreigners in a foreign land. Can't you hear them saying: "Day and night I cry, and tears are my only food?" Can't you hear them asking, over and over and over again: "Where is my God?"

But listen again to the words of the poet in exile:

*As a deer longs for a stream of cool water, so I long for you, O God ...*

Where is my God? I may not know, but it does matter. It matters to me! And so I long for God! I thirst for God! When can I be near you, the living God, and worship you again?

God's apparent absence is not reason enough to forget him. God's apparent absence is not reason enough to give up. Longing is not giving up. Longing is not despair. Longing is filled with desire. Longing is filled with hope. He wants God. He hopes for God. He longs for God. He longs, not just to be home again, but to be with God!

The poet is longing, and waiting, because longing and waiting go together. The word itself implies it -- long-ing. Fulfillment of this desire may well be long in coming, not quick, not easy. When you long for something, when you long for someone, you will wait, as long as it takes!

Longing and waiting. This is our theme for Advent, because Advent is about waiting and longing. Longing is borne out of pain: out of the pain of exile in Babylon, out of the pain of suffering the indignities and cruelties of Roman rule, out of the pain of unspeakable loss, out of our pain.

Longing for God is borne out of our pain, but longing for God is not despair. Longing for God is hope. We long and we wait. In spite of the facts on the ground, in spite of any and all evidence to the contrary, in spite of the questions of the doubters and scoffers and unbelievers, we wait. We wait for God to come. And we will wait, as long as it takes.

It has been one year now since the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School. The anniversary comes two weeks from yesterday, on December 14. The photograph of Natalie Barden and her mother on the cover of Sojourners' December issue headlines a group of short essays written to mark that anniversary, under the title: "Grief, Courage, and Perseverance." I would add another word, too -- grief, courage, perseverance, and hope, because it is no irony, but providence itself, that we remember that tragedy during Advent.

The last essay of the group was written by Anne Howard and is entitled, "In the Name of the Child of Bethlehem." Let me read you her words about hope ...

*"WHY BOTHER?" I asked the rabbi. It was 1982, and I was working for an interfaith nuclear disarmament group, pushing against the massive nuclear weapons buildup of that day. I went to see Rabbi Beerman, one of our advisers, on a day when I was just about ready to give up. I was feeling that it was futile to protest the arms race when every day the weapons budgets swelled bigger, the nuclear stockpiles rose higher, and our country sold more and more weapons to more and more Third World countries. The spiral of violence seemed out of control.*

*"Our efforts are so puny. Nobody listens. It's hopeless. Why do we bother to keep working for change?" I asked.*

*Rabbi Beerman listened, as he always listened to my questions and complaints. Without a word, he reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a picture of his new grandson, Matthew Benjamin. He asked to see a picture of my new baby son, Benjamin Michael.*

*In the style of all wisdom teachers, he asked me to think about these two little boys and the world in which they would grow up. He asked me to think about what we owed them. And then he asked: "If we cannot cultivate a passion for what one human being owes to another, what are we?"*

*I can hear the echo of his question from that day to this, from that arms buildup to "shock and awe" over Baghdad to unending war in the Middle East to Columbine, Tucson, Trayvon, Newtown, Chicago, Boston, the Navy Yard, and all the other reasons for despair. I hear the rabbi's question, from that day to this, as a call to hope.*

*And now I have a new call to hope. My baby son has grown up. He is now a doctor, training in trauma surgery and serving an urban population, where he too often finds himself sewing up the gunshot wounds of inner-city children. I ask him my new version of "Why bother?"—"What keeps you going?" He says, "I feel honored to do my best. I owe each one my best."*

*So, in this season of Advent and Christmas, when we share again the story of God becoming known to us in fragile flesh, born in a stable under the boot of imperial rule, I hear the call that each life asks us to give our best, to resist the violence, to cultivate a passion for what one human being owes to another, in the name of that Child of Bethlehem.*

Where is your God? What do you say? What will you tell Natalie Barden? What will you tell your children and your grandchildren when they too must grow old all too fast living in this world as it is? Where is your God?

I say, there! There, in the stable! There, walking the dusty roads of Galilee and Samaria and Judea. There, bringing a healing touch to sick bodies and dying souls. There, standing up to evil without resorting to evil. There, standing

against violence of every kind without resorting to violence. There, the prince of peace.

There, bearing the worst with us. There, suffering alongside us. There, entering into the pain with us. There, descending into hell itself, and coming out. leading us out, on the other side!

Where is your God? There. And I am waiting for him. I am waiting and longing for him to come ...