Sunday, April 30, 2006
IS GOD INDIFFERENT?
Romans 11:33-36

If you could have recorded the last words of the skyjackers of United flight 175 and American flight 11 as they crashed into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, you might have heard an exultant shout in Arabic, which if translated into English would have been: "God is great!" Religion was once again used to justify a terrible act of inhumanity — murder in the name of God! The men flying the airplanes sincerely believed that they were doing the will of Allah.

In the book of Joshua in the Old Testament of the Bible, you will find this story and many others like it: "So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, including all men, women and children." And then this verse is the punchline: "As the Lord God of Israel commanded."

If you read the Bible carefully, you will discover that God is as likely to swallow you up in an earthquake or drown you in a flood as God is to forgive you and take you into God's arms. The reported behavior of God in the Bible is erratic at best and terrible in some instances. God rescues the Jewish people from oppression in Egypt in one chapter and a few chapters later has to be convinced by Moses not to destroy the people he rescued.

Between the years 1099 and 1291 A.D., Christian rulers in Europe, actively aided by priests and other religious authorities, launched at least seven armed excursions into Palestine. These so-called "crusades" were intended to free the Holy Land in general, but more particularly the holy places, from the hands of the "infidels," mainly Muslims. People were slaughtered in the name of God.

The mass murder in Europe by the Nazis of some six million men, women, and children, the vast majority of whom were Jews, during the Second World War, is well documented. The Jews were singled out for one reason alone — their religion. Most Christians did not actively participate in the Nazi extermination project, but most did not resist either. German Christians, Catholic and Protestant, had developed a culture of anti-Judaism that was taught in church schools and reinforced in the regular liturgy week in and week out.

Martin Luther, the German priest whose protests had begun what came to be known as the Protestant Reformation, had written attacks on the Jews back in the 16th century because they would not join Luther's movement. These teachings were indirectly incorporated into the life of the church. When the Nazis came to power, Luther's writings were republished and were used to support the Nazi propaganda program.

Another dramatic example in the United States was the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. Its appeal was especially to white Protestants by stressing anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic, and anti-Black convictions in the name of religion.

Religion, public and private, has often been used as justification for people to commit acts of violence and hate. Religion, public and private, has often blinded people from recognizing injustice and has numbed people into accepting oppression while waiting for some form of heavenly relief.

The “anger” of God has also been used to explain natural disasters — earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, and floods. They are called “acts of God.” There are always politicians, ministers, and others who want you to believe that God is only on their side. Some have even claimed that God has been banished from public schools.

It’s nothing new. For thousands of years, people have been trying to use God for their own purposes — controlling their children, keeping church members in line, and explaining human suffering and misery by calling such things “the will of God.”

Some years ago, lightning struck the York Minster Cathedral in England. The force of the lightning splintered the cathedral’s 13th-century oak beams and sent the roof of the south transept collapsing in flames to the flagstones below. The lightning bolt hit the cathedral only three days after the consecration of the Reverend David Jenkins as the Bishop of Durham, a town sixty miles north of York. Bishop Jenkins was a somewhat controversial figure within the Church of England. Some of his opponents argued that God was angered because Jenkins was made a bishop, and therefore sent the bolt of lightning as a divine signal.

The question of what caused the destruction brought forth other theories. One person writing to a London newspaper said the lightning bolt was probably an accidental by-product of some Yorkshire farmer’s prayer for rain. She said, “For the God of storms is also the God of harvests. Naturally, God sends rainstorms on request — it’s hardly God’s fault that Christians insist on building their monuments directly in God’s flight path.”

Bishop Jenkins, with a smile, offered some other theories. He said, “My daughter asked me why people didn’t say instead that the devil was so angry at my consecration that he set the church on fire.” Someone else commented that if God was really angered about the new bishop’s appointment, why didn’t the lightning strike the bishop himself, rather than causing the destruction of a cathedral? It reminds me of the mother who sent a note to her son’s second-grade teacher. She wrote, “My son Billy is a very sensitive boy, so if he misbehaves, hit the boy in front of him and that will scare Billy.”

Some people also use God as a way to explain personal tragedy. Rabbi Kushner tells the story of a woman named Helen, who noticed herself getting tired after walking several blocks or standing in line. She chalked it up to getting older and having put on some weight. Then she began to stumble and fall over things. So she made an appointment with her physician.

The diagnosis was multiple sclerosis. All she could think about was, why should this happen to me? Was God personally reaching out to punish her for something she had done? She said, “I’ve tried to be a good person. I have a husband and young children who need me. I don’t deserve this.”

Her husband tried to console her. He said, “You can’t talk like that. God must have reasons for doing this, and it’s not for us to question God. You have to believe that if God wants you to get better, you will get better, and if God doesn’t want you to get better, there has to be some purpose for it.”

She didn’t want to question God or be angry with God. But her husband’s words only made her feel more abandoned and bewildered. On top of it all, she felt guilty for being angry with God. And suppose God had sent her this affliction, how could she ask God to cure her? If it was God’s will that she be sick, would she be going against God’s will if she tried to get well?

To believe in a loving God does not mean that you believe God causes bad things to happen to you or to anyone else. In too much of the loose talk about God, people don't think through their assumptions and implications.

Last week in the sermon, I quoted William Sloane Coffin, Jr., who died on April 12, after a long illness. Years ago, his son Alex, age 24, was killed in an auto accident while driving in a terrible storm. Ten days later, Bill Coffin delivered a sermon on the death of his son to his congregation at Riverside Church in New York City. Here's part of what he said.

"When a person dies, there are many things that can be said, and there is at least one thing that should never be said. The night after Alex died, I was sitting in the living room of my sister's house outside Boston, when the front door opened, and in came a nice-looking, middle-aged woman, carrying about eighteen quiches. When she saw me, she shook her head, then headed for the kitchen, saying sadly over her shoulder, 'I just don't understand the will of God.' Instantly I was up and in hot pursuit, swarming all over her. 'I'll say you don't, lady,' I said.

"For some reason, nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn't go around this world with his fingers on triggers, his fists around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths."

"This is not to say there are no nature-caused deaths. I can think of many right here in this parish — deaths that are untimely and slow and pain-ridden, which for that reason raise unanswerable questions. But violent deaths, such as the one Alex died, to understand those is a piece of cake. As his younger brother put it simply, standing at the head of the casket at the Boston funeral, 'You blew it, buddy. You blew it.' The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, 'It is the will of God.' Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex died; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."

Here's a poem to remember:

I walked a mile with Pleasure,
She chattered all the way,
But left me none the wiser,
For all she had to say.

I walked a mile with Sorrow,
And ne'er a word said she;
But oh, the things I learned from her
When Sorrow walked with me.
(Robert Browning Hamilton)

St. Paul wrote to the church at Rome: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable are God's ways. For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" And remember Jesus said, "God makes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."

There's a mystery to God that is always beyond us and yet, as Jesus demonstrated and taught, underneath it all God loves and cares for everyone. God is not indifferent to your joy and your suffering. God is within them. God is like life — the older you grow, the more mysterious life becomes.

I find myself increasingly uncomfortable with some of the past and current images of God that are almost totally devoted to self-realization and personal salvation. We human beings, especially in today's world, have a tendency to put ourselves, our problems, and our desires in the center of the universe. Too many people regard their humanity and this present age as the final goal of God's creation. Humanity as we know it is a magnificent beginning, but not necessarily the last word.

Here's some wisdom for you. An individual said, "Before I was 20, I never worried excessively about what other people thought of me. But after I was 20, I worried endlessly about all the impressions I made and how people were evaluating me. Only sometime after turning 50 did I realize that they hardly ever thought about me at all." Too often we presume ourselves to be at the center of everyone's attention and end up performing for an audience that isn't there.

A scientist wrote: "Ninety-nine percent of all the species that have lived on earth have died away, and no stars will wink out in tribute if we in our folly soon join them."

Is God indifferent? In some ways, yes, and in others, no. To many of your petty and puny selfish and self-centered interests, yes! To being with you in joy and in sorrow, no! Our Christian faith, as taught and lived by Jesus, affirms that creation is saturated with God. There is also mystery. Can anyone truly comprehend the kind of love that dies on a cross and does not fight back? Can you understand the kind of love that forgives your enemies? You can only stand in reverence, awe, and gratitude in the presence of that unconditional love.

"O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things." Amen.