

**THE UNSOLICITED GIFT OF TRAGEDY; ECCLESIASTES 3:1-22;
FEBRUARY 15, 2009; THOMAS H. YORTY, WPC**

As Phil said, I'd like to go in a different direction today. In light of the terrible events of the past few days I'm suggesting we pause and turn to the ancient wisdom of the bible and our faith to consider where we are.

I say "events" because, in addition to the crash of Flight 3407, the gruesome death Thursday of Aasiya Hassan at the hand, allegedly, of her husband presents us with yet another tragedy to absorb.

Aasiya was one of the visionaries and day to day managers of Bridges TV, a cable network designed to offer a moderate Muslim voice in a world of religious extremism. I participated in a few Bridges interviews and got to know Aasiya. She was a lovely person.

An airline disaster, a horrid episode of domestic violence. That's not all the bad news by any means; but they are some of the current human lives which tragedy has visited and to whom we are painfully close. One of the newspaper accounts said everyone here in Western New York knows someone who knew someone on that ill-fated plane.

Two degrees of separation. But really there is no separation. "We all belong to one another," as Pastor Karl Eastlack said at the prayer service held at Eastern Hills Wesleyan Church in Clarence Friday night.

The illusion is that there is any separation. Six degrees say mathematicians for the world population. But a degree of separation refers only to direct contact, one-on-one knowledge. When you consider the life we share – as Donn Esmonde so eloquently said – the feelings and values, the hopes and dreams there are no walls, we are all one.

If a church exists to do or say or stand for anything it is, it seems to me, to bear witness to the irrefutable fact that we are all one and that the barriers that divide us are false.

Let me be more specific. Differences exist: age, race, gender, socio-economic background, ethnic identity, geographical place, sexual orientation to name a few.

But to allow our differences to supersede and take precedence over the truth that we are all one is a falsehood. Lincoln in this 200th anniversary of his birth last Thursday testified to this in his Second Inaugural Address. It was clear the South would lose the war and many in the audience that day were still focused on differences and wanted revenge but Lincoln said it is time to be one, to be the *United* States of America.

If there are forces of darkness they exist, I believe, to confuse or discourage us from realizing we share this mortal life with one another and with the living planet itself.

Were we to comprehend not just our vast common ground but our interconnectedness we'd see that we truly do belong to one another and we would become a church, a city, a nation, a world as one – as the bible says God intended.

But we go about many of our days thinking in terms of we/they rather than acknowledging our belonging to one another until the unsolicited gift of tragedy opens our eyes and removes what we thought were barriers.

The poet of Ecclesiastes writes with eyes opened and sees that what we share far outweighs our differences. He's not just talking about humans, he is talking about the oneness of all living things – humans have no advantage over beasts, he says.

It is a statement Charles Darwin, who like Lincoln was also born 200 years ago on February 12, would agree with.

The “grandeur” of this view of life, as Darwin referred to it in the closing paragraph of his famous treatise, is not the diversity of life by itself but the *interconnectedness* of the diversity of all living things. The oneness. The commonality. The kinship. The sublime beauty of having descended this vast planet of life forms from a common ancestor.

But you get the feeling reading Ecclesiastes and Darwin that no matter who we are or how long we live the dissonance of grief and loss, the twist of fate and disaster is never far away. Every positive has a negative: things planted/uprooted; things built up/pulled down; things gathered/scattered; things mended/torn.

The poet says there is not and will never be any utopia, any heaven on earth where this principle is suspended or does not apply.

And then his struggle seeps more transparently into his meditation: what gain is there for us, he asks. As this world goes spinning along the best we can hope for is to live in the present, to be happy, to do our best. But there are plenty of days when we experience far less. It is a glass half empty and who cannot have felt the emptiness of life this past 48 hours in Buffalo?

In fact, says Ecclesiastes, in a world where we so often find wickedness where justice and righteousness should prevail, the will to live can wane.

Yes, God judges all alike and yes, this world is a test of our ability and to live faithfully the principles of decency and humanity. Yet for all his clarity of thought and faith the haunting question of Ecclesiastes is futility.

We are all creatures of chance, he says. “One mischance awaits us all.” Death comes to humans and animals alike. We draw the same breath. We have no advantage over one another. All come from dust and return to dust. You see it is a clockmaker God the poet believes in; a God who got everything going and established principles for the natural order and human life then stepped away never to intervene or interfere again.

The Book of Ecclesiastes is like a partially cloudy day: moments of bright sunlight talking about honest labor and its reward but then the sun disappears behind clouds that are swollen and dark with the futility and grief.

This is why Ecclesiastes and Job are included in Holy Scripture – they voice our deepest questions about the meaning of life in the face of loss and despair.

My hunch is most of Western New York is asking about the meaning of life this weekend. Playing over and over that horrible disaster from a routine aviation problem and why something, someone couldn't have reversed it. The victims – brave activists, gifted artists and athletes, business men and women, parents, children, they were, someone said, our neighbors and family members.

But as much as churches exist to honor and testify to the oneness of life we also exist to bring hope and healing to the world. Not our hope and healing but God's hope and healing to a world ruptured by disaster and despair.

The original reading for today is Jesus healing a man with leprosy which has a poignant connection to our circumstances. The other unsolicited gift of tragedy to go along with eyes open to our oneness is a spirit of humility and surrender.

Lepers in Jesus' time were banished from society. The bible tells of powerful people with the disease who were finally made aware of their powerlessness. Even our somewhat stable middle class lives give us a false sense of security. You never think it's going to happen to you, until your loved one is on the plane that went down or someone you love is in danger. One mischance awaits us all, says the poet.

Then we know what it is to be powerless. The life we have carefully constructed crumbles but we are not, reassures today's Gospel, helpless. We do not have the power to reverse catastrophic events, but we need not be paralyzed from reaching out for help.

Like the man in today's story. Totally, submissive to Jesus' decision or not to heal him, he simply presents himself, not unlike the prodigal son kneeling at his father's feet about to ask for forgiveness. And in both stories it is not confession that is expected but new life that is given.

That is the beguiling, life-sustaining truth of the New Testament that responds to the despair of Ecclesiastes and to our despair: when we surrender ourselves and our burdens before God and ask for help, help and hope are given. Freely, without reservation.

And that, pure and simple, is what our faith teaches. In times such as these of catastrophic loss, human injustice, and economic turmoil what we have is neither the God of Deism who steps away from us nor a holy puppeteer who plucks airplanes out of the sky, or intervenes like a superhero where villains are at work, or waves some economic wand.

Such a God and existence would be little better than Mt. Olympus where, Homer said, the gods had no number to the limit of their days but envied mortals precisely because their days were numbered and gave them a sense of each moment as irreplaceable and holy.

Which would we prefer – a life where danger, disappointment and grief were unknown but neither were the value of choosing the right thing to do? Or a life where comfort is provided by friends, even strangers in times of need; and strength offered by a God who reminds us again and again that his willing embrace awaits every broken and confused one of us?

You see, that leper was brought out of the emotional and social isolation into the light and life of the community when Jesus touched and healed him.

My hunch is the tragedy of Flight 3407 causes not a few of us this weekend to suffer from the leper's isolation and despair and Ecclesiastes' sense of futility.

The good news today is that the unsolicited gift of our pain is discovering not only that we belong to one another but with God's help, in words of the old spiritual, we shall overcome and be made whole again. Amen.