

Where Is God?

Psalm 46:1-1

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Rev. Scott Carlson

There was once a man who was driving through his neighborhood in Southern Florida, on his way home from work. He was lost in his thoughts. All of a sudden, the bottom literally fell out from under his car and his car dropped 20 feet, with him inside of it, to the bottom of a sink-hole.

It took him a minute to gather his wits about him. In his own words he described, "One minute I was minding my own business, driving through life. The next minute I was at the bottom of a huge sink hole, with earth crashing in around me. In an instant, everything changed."

On July 14, 2007, at about 8:45 am, everything changed in my life. I went from minding my own business, getting ready to lead a workshop in an area congregation that is struggling, to finding myself at the bottom of a sinkhole, with earth crashing in around me.

Only the sink hole was caused by a telephone call and the earth crashing in around me was the news that my youngest daughter, Whitney Paige Carlson was dead. In an instant, everything changed.

Time became suspended, as I allowed questions to rush through my mind and my mouth. Time became suspended as I sought to get home, tell the people who were there. Time became suspended as I wept and tried to comprehend what had happened, even though few answers were coming.

Beginning on that day and following through much of the week, I felt like I was walking through knee deep mud. Barely able to move, even though there were places to go and things to get done.

Over the course of the next days we heard from hundreds and hundreds of people letting us know they were thinking of us and praying for us. One of the e-mails I received was from a person wondering, "Scott, How are you doing? How is this affecting you? Has it shaken your faith?"

Those are great questions. *How am I?* I have decided that this isn't an easy question to answer. But I know you are asking it because you care about me. So keep asking it. I promise that I will be honest. Most days I am okay. I have certainly had days that are horrible.

In these days, I count success as being able to raise my head off the pillow after a night of sleep, and swing my legs over the side of the bed, and begin taking one step at a time.

How has this affected me? It is certainly affecting me. I have started the grieving process. How could I not? One of my children is dead. Another is incarcerated.

In a word, it is devastating. At one level I feel as if I have stepped into a nightmare. In an instant, everything has changed and the earth is crashing around.

I have much work to do, at least the work of grief of facing the pain, of facing the loss, of dealing with the hurt and the anger that I feel. I know that the path to healing for me and for our family is to face this pain, honestly. I know that the path to healing is to face my anger honestly. And I am working at this, one day at a time, through turning to God, through counseling and taking care of myself.

Has it shaken my faith? In all honesty, I don't know how to answer that.

At one level I know that God did not want to have happen what happen. I know that. I am comforted by knowing that. I am also comforted by the belief that in my daughter Whitney's darkest, most fearful hour of her life, that God was there with her to hold her and welcome her into God's presence.

On the morning of Whitney's Funeral, July 19, 2007, I woke early, unable to sleep. In my time of devotion, prayer and journaling, I read the scripture that we have for today. And the words of this psalm gave expression to what I was feeling.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. In an instant, everything had changed in my world. My earth was moving and shaking, and the waters around me were foaming, but God was there to hold on to me. To be my refuge and my strength, to be my help in times of trouble.

In the midst of this most devastating experience, I have felt the presence of God in a wide variety of places. I have felt the presence of God through the people who have reached out to our family through e-mail, through cards and gifts to say, "We care about you, we are praying for you."

I have felt the presence of God in the staff and the members of this and other congregations I have served who traveled from various parts of the United States to come to Fargo for the funeral service, or to come to Sun Prairie for the Memorial service.

I have felt the presence of God through the prayers of countless people and the more than 200 congregations in Wisconsin and North Dakota who have let our family know that we are being remembered in prayers.

I have felt the presence of God as we have eaten food that has been delivered to our house or to our hotel room.

I have felt the presence of God in telling the stories of what has made Whitney special. I have felt the presence of God as I have cried tears alone and with others over this tragedy.

I have felt the presence of God, holding me in this time of hurt and pain. And I am grateful to know that I am not alone.

Once, was early in ministry, I was meeting with a young couple. We were talking about baptizing their first child. The mother was a faithful Christian. The father didn't think much of faith, of God, or of the church.

At one point he looked at me and said, "Why should I believe anyway? What good does it do? What good does going to church do?"

I looked at him and I said something like, "Well, those are good questions. I don't really know what to tell you that will help you begin a relationship with God. But I will tell you what I am discovering. I am discovering that spending time with God makes a difference for me. It helps me to understand that life isn't all about me getting what I want. When I place God at the center of my life, it helps me to be a better person, a better parent, a better spouse. Spending time with the people of God (or the church) actually helps me to live faithfully, focusing on God.

"But here is what I know. I know that at some point in my life and some point in your life, we will each be faced with an overwhelming crisis. And I believe that I will be equipped to face that crisis, not because I am good or strong, but because I have been developing a relationship with God. So when the crisis comes, I won't compound the problem of the crisis by having a crisis of faith.

"If you don't develop a relationship with God when things are going well, then, my fear for you, is that you (like many others) make the crisis worse, because in addition to dealing with the crisis at hand, you will also be dealing with your own crisis of faith too."

Friends, I did not want this tragedy to happen. If there is anything I could have done to change it, I would. I wish I could magically turn back the clock to July 13th to change the circumstances. So I would be able to go home today and give my daughter Whitney all phone call, like I did most Sunday afternoons. So I could be helping my son get ready for football and school this year. Unfortunately I can't turn back the clock. But what I can tell you is that even though this tragedy has come upon us, and our family, I know that God is present with us, helping us through that.

The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge.

This is what I know. Thank you for being the church. Thank you for being the people of God. Because of your love and your witness, you are reminding me that God is here. God is with us. God remains our hope.

Thanks be to God.

Amen