

## Learning from the Past

Dear friends in Christ!

There is saying that goes something like this, "We learn from history that we learn nothing from history"

Last Sunday was the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of 9/11. The day in which towers of the "World Trade Center" in New York City were destroyed.

It was such a calamity for the country and most certainly for the people who were directly affected by such destruction. What a calamity that five days later, smoke could still be seen rising from the ruins. Clouds of smoke rose from the rubble and spread over the surrounding areas.

I remember that day. I was heading to the Vancouver Airport, to pick up a couple of pastors from the East, that were coming for a National Ethnic conference of pastors in our synod. As I was driving Night Street, listening to the radio, the news came on, that the towers were being destroyed, airports being closed, even the Vancouver one. I could hear in the news reporters' pain and sorrow at the developing scene. One of the news reporters stated, "Think about this: our two symbols of power and prosperity have been hit in an hour." A bible text comes to mind at that scene, from Revelation 18:10: "Alas! Alas! You great city, you mighty city, Babylon! For in a single hour your judgement has come."

While most of the radios a tuned in too had the a sad tone, except a Hispanic program being broadcasted locally. In fact, they were cheering. "It was about time!" A commentator said. For the United States it was indeed a hard blow, and now they are feeling in their own flesh what we in Latin America have felt for years, by the US exterior policy or because of the greed of some that manipulated they US's policy and caused so much strife in several countries Latin America.

Days later, many Christians begged God to have mercy, on the families grieving the loss of their loved ones, mercy on the rescue workers who wept openly at the indescribable horrors they saw.

Now, I'm sure as it happens with any calamity, the question was asked: "What is this all about? What's going on?" And others still wondering "Where is God in all this?" Is this really God's punishing the country for their actions else were?

Where is God in al of this? Is a hard question that people ask, and it is a good, hard question. It has been asked throughout history. And more so today. Where was God when Covid hit, where was God when personal tragedy hit us. Some ended up closer to God, others totally denying him. And not only Covid, but anything thing in life that could be described as a tragedy.

Britney Spears says she doesn't 'believe in God' anymore because of the way her family has treated her, "God would not allow that to happen to me if a God existed," she said. Now she claims to be an atheist. Where is God in all of this?

But the saying "We learn from history that we learn nothing from history" comes alive. In other words, for us to understand where God is in any calamity, we need to trust only in His Word for answers and for comfort.

For years after 9/11, and as we have seen through covid, there have been hundreds of opinions from media pundits and politicians. But all their rhetoric sound basically the same. They do not understand the real meaning of a sudden destruction.

I don't think that 9/11 and Covid, even our personal calamities, took God by surprise. He knows all our thoughts and actions whether in power, whether a peace maker, a dictator, or a terrorist. The Lord watches over our movements, he knows when we sit or get up. God has everything under his control. Nothing happens in the world without God knowing, without Him allowing it to happen, and in some cases as in our Old Testament lesson for today, the book of Amos, he was directly involved in those calamities.

Here in our Old Testament reading we hear God passing judgment and what is about to happen because of their sins. Now, this is not the first time God warned them, but they didn't listen, they didn't learn from history either, what could happen to a rebellious nation. Now comes a time when enough was enough. God called Amos to pronounce his judgment against his people because of their sins. Their guilts was only a few things really, the perversion of justice, oppression of the poor and needy, so they can get what they wanted. And a pretentious false worship. They thought that being following the religious prescriptions of their time would give them a free pass to whatever they wanted to do. But before God enough was enough: here once again what the prophet said: <sup>4</sup>Hear this, you who trample on the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end, <sup>5</sup>saying, "When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great and deal deceitfully with false balances, <sup>6</sup>that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and sell the chaff of the wheat?" <sup>7</sup>The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: "Surely I will never forget any of their deeds."

Sure enough, about 35 years later Israel was taken into captivity, calamity fell on them. I'm sure they too asked where is God in all of this? But the saying comes true, they didn't learn from history, they didn't really hear God's word and do what God expected of them.. "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." Hosea 6:6

Where is God when calamities befall you? He is there, asking us to know and love him. To walk in his way and trust him.

Preachers and theologians are divided on the issue of calamities. "God has nothing to do with these disasters. He would not allow such terrible things to happen as

these." Or, God is punishing people because of their sin, after all it is in his nature one preachers says, to punish sin and sinful people. And so, eradicate the decadency of society. Whatever way of thinking causes in us, and in the world, to miss the message that God wants to speak to us through tragedy, through calamity.

Tragedy and calamity are in essence the result of sin, not the direct action of God. God is in essence, his nature, is indeed mercy and love, of compassion and life. Yes, God hates sin does something about it, but not in the way we think God is doing through calamities and tragedies. Those point us to something bigger.

Our nature on the other hand is not just and it is prone to harm others and ourselves, buy our desires, our thoughts, our words, and actions. That's how the Israelites ended up being condemned as Amos pronounces judgment over them.

God allows bad things to happen for a reason. To change our ways, our thoughts our actions, to focus our attention on him, to depend on him, to live in him and for him.

Yes, we have to have a word from God, since many have experienced suffering that is deeper than the pain we feel over the deaths of innocent people. It is a suffering that says that if we do not grasp God's message, if we close our ears to what God is loudly proclaiming, then we have something much worse in store for us. A worse calamity, an eternal calamity.

In the Holy Scriptures, there are many examples of warnings, and precautions, through the messages preached by their prophets. After what Amos prophesied came to pass, you would think that the following generations would learn. But no, "We learn from history that we learn nothing from history."

Prophet after prophet, was sent by God to try to make them fall in love with God, pulling them out of their wrong ways, and bringing them back to his blessing and favor, basically to life itself. So the message the prophets preached was basically the same: "Humble yourself." ... "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the Law that I commanded your fathers, and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets." v(2 Kings 17:12-13).

But this chosen nation rejected God's call to repentance. "But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the Lord their God." (17:14).

It is obvious that the future generations, didn't learn from history, instead they did what it pleased them. The Word tells us that those people mocked the prophets who called them to humility. Instead of listening to them, "They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them." (2 Kings 17:15)

Where was God when calamities befall on them? He was there, but they didn't want to recognize his presence. And yet they blamed God for what they were going through.

Where is God when things go bad for us? God is there, with us, but are we listening? Where was God in the September 11 invasion? Where was God when Covid started? God has been always here. But people don't want to hear or see him. Yet we blame him for the bad we suffer.

God always sends His word. God has never left His people without giving them hints in time of calamity. He has never abandoned us and has never forced us to understand things for ourselves. He always provides a word of understanding.

And through that all, God allows things to happen so we, so you, so man, may return to God, take God seriously, trust him, love him and worship him.

Of course, many, hearing these kinds of sermons, will not want to receive the word. They think it's disheartened and still cruel. But I tell you, that unless we hear God's word and his warning, and confront our reality, our generation is doomed to eternal condemnation.

After witnessing the disasters of 9/11, we can imagine what the ancient Israelites felt. But did Israel repent after the Assyrians' terrible attack? Was there a nationwide recognition that God was sending them a warning? Did the rulers hear God speak through the terrible calamity? No. Israel's reaction was the exact opposite. The Bible says that they became prideful and arrogant, thinking that they could rebuild their nation, and make it great again. God was having none of that!

We can have the same way of thinking too. I'm smart, I can overcome, I don't need God, he doesn't exist any ways! I'll do my own way, my own thinking!

Doesn't this sound familiar? But God is patient, continually speaking his word to us, to the powers of the world indeed, and to each one.

And here is the sweetness of his Word. That Christ has come to die on the cross for us, and calls us to repentance. In fact, there on Calvary God punished sins, there on Good Friday is our punishment delivered. That's listening to the wake-up call.

Certainly the powers of the world do not want to listen, but that does not mean that we cannot interpret the signals, and we will listen.

May the message of Christ be alive in our hearts, today and forever.

Amen