

**SEEKING RAINPUDDLES**  
**2 EPIPHANY 2011**

Where were you when you heard?

In 1963 I was a first-grader at Jamestown Elementary School in Arlington Virginia and we were in the classroom settling down after recess. An older student burst into the room with the news: Mrs. Weese in the cafeteria heard on the radio that the President has been shot! I remember then running across the front lawn of our house towards my mother, saying, “the President has been shot!” and found that my father was home from work. Home, and crying. I had never seen my father cry.

In April of 1968 I was watching television downstairs when the news broke that Martin Luther King had been shot down in Memphis. I ran upstairs yelling the news. For four days we watched Washington DC burn, just across the Potomac River.

On September 11, 2001 I was at my weekly preaching group with two of my colleagues from Somerset when the parish secretary burst into our room: “A plane has crashed into the World Trade Building in New York City!” The three of us took a deep breath, broke up the meeting and went to our churches. An hour later, as the horror unfolded, one of my colleagues called and said, “We’re using your church, I’m going to preach. Get the word out.” That evening my church was packed, as were all the churches in town. And some of us wept, and some of us prayed, and some of us just sat quietly with glassy eyes that stared into nothingness.

Last Saturday some of us were doing laundry and heard siren after siren pass by. Some of us were in traffic wondering what the hold-up was. (I was on Facebook.) Like you, I ran to be with my family and together we scanned the television channels for news, turned all the radios on to NPR, and kept our Facebook pages open.

I had met Gabby Giffords at one of her intentional gatherings of the faith community—when we met we made an instant connection—the kind of connection she was able to make with so many different people. We sat in a conference room in her offices and she listened to what we had to say about how the border and immigration problems were impacting our Christian witness. She took notes and at one point handed one off to a young man who I now realize was Gabe Zimmerman. At the end, Pam Simon told us all to please take home all the leftover bagels she’d ordered for the meeting.

These memories ran through me repeatedly as I spent the rest of the afternoon trying to pull away from the news and yet always drawn back as each segment promised breaking new developments that turned out to be neither breaking, nor new, nor much in the way of developments.

I was hurting, I was confused, and I was numb with horror and grief. Just like you. Just like you I wanted meaning. Just like I wanted meaning when I saw my father cry, a city burning with rage, and two smoking heaps of rubble in New York City.

What are you looking for? It seemed an innocent question—what are you looking for? What do you want? What are you seeking? Jesus put this question to the two men who had been following him around after his baptism. John had told them that Jesus was the one they had been looking for and so they answered this question with one of their own: where are you staying? Of course the English translation doesn't do the question justice. These two aren't simply asking where Jesus is putting up for the night—they are asking much more from the one about whom John said “after me comes the one who ranks ahead of me because he was before me”

Where are you staying? Where do you abide? Where do you rest? All of these are being asked by the two who follow Jesus. “Come and See,” was all he said. And they went and they saw where Jesus abided, and where he rested his body and soul, and from where he drew his strength. And they abided as well. Then they rejoiced: they had found the Messiah!

A week ago Saturday many of us found ourselves looking for something.

Some of us looked for comfort.

Some of us looked for reassurance, and

Some of us for an explanation of how something like this could happen.

How can a loving compassionate Creator allow such destructive chaos to be unleashed? This is what we do when terrible things break into our daily routine and upset the natural order of things.

It's tempting want to rush in and comfort, reassure, give answers and in fact for the past week we've heard nothing but quick and easy answers about inflammatory and divisive rhetoric, about the easy availability of handguns, about the lack of security given our elected officials, about mental illness.

Quick and easy answers and none of them give comfort, reassurance, or meaning to what happened. Good intentioned answers, perhaps, but wrong nonetheless.

Yes, we must admit that a society in which guns can be easily procured is a society in which guns can be easily discharged—in classic drama there's always the rule that a gun that is shown in Act 1 of a play always goes off in Act 3. However, in real life often that is not the case, there are many responsible gun owners who take care to safely store their weapons.

Yes we must acknowledge the power and impact of words. Words are not mere building blocks of social discourse, words can become brilliant streaks of color on a canvas of meaning—rousing us, enlivening us, inciting us...and also as we have seen inspiring and healing us.

Yes, unfortunately, we need to do a better job of protecting those of us who offer themselves for public service. But who would have thought we needed to extend this protection to cover the 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Student Council?

And yes, it almost goes without saying that the mentally ill are constantly vilified, constantly left hungry at the table when social services are cut and downsized. They need our care and protection from their demons, not be demonized themselves.

Yes, yes and yes to all these things.

What are you looking for?

Not an explanation! It would be obscene to *explain* the events that happened Saturday before last. There is nothing that fully and totally explains the violent death of a 9 year old, and that's not what we're here for. That is not what we're seeking.

We are seeking a place to rest to recover from the shock. We are seeking a place where we can wrap our arms around each other and our minds around the events and grieve, cry, wail at the sorrow of it all. We are seeking a place to abide where we can sit and recover our strength.

**We are seeking God. We want to stay with Jesus.**

This is where we return every time we are hit by the unexpected—and from here is where we are sent back into the world turned topsy turvey. Back to set things right, back to realign the poles of our moral compass. This is what it means to abide in God.

The fact is that the meaning of any event that occurs in our collective consciousness is not found in the event itself, but in our response. As Kierkegaard says: “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forward.”

It is in living forward that we will be able to attach meaning to what has occurred, as a nation, as a city, as a faith community, and as individuals. How we make our responses not only comes from where we abide, but it also further roots us in that place of grounding and rest. In living forward we will return to the past

and we will redeem it!

Victor Frankl says “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and potential.” We live in a world in which events of both terrible tragedy and abounding joy give us invitations to make our response. How do we accept these invitations? In this space it is as though heaven itself leans forward to hear our response:

Yes, we will redeem this event; or

No, we will go on as before: unchanged and unchallenged.

We can do better.

We can choose life over death,  
forgiveness over vengeance,  
compassion over condemnation,  
relationship over ideology.

We can make sure that there are rainpuddles in abundance for 9 year olds to jump in.  
We can be the role models that live up to their expectations.

We can choose the cross and carry it into the world. It is our response and it can never be destroyed by an assassin's bullet.

Where were you when you heard? What are you seeking?  
The meaning given to what happened last Saturday is what **you** carry forth today.

It doesn't matter **where** you **were**;  
what matters is **where** you choose to **stay**.

**AMEN.**