

My first reaction was shock and confusion. Nobody saw this coming. How could people see the world this way, how could they really go through with it? America was never going to be the same, I knew that much. I'm pretty sure I'll remember for the rest of my life where I was when I heard the news. In the days since, I've been angry, and hopeless, and sick, and angry again.

You may think I'm talking about the American election... and I could be. It's been a rough couple of weeks coming to terms with that reality as well.

But I'm actually describing what I felt in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the days after planes crashed into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon. I was living in Johnstown, Pennsylvania at that time, 45 minutes away from the farming town of Shanksville, where Flight 93 crashed into a field. That morning I was actually driving on a highway about fifteen minutes away from the crash site. I was oblivious to what was happening in the world until I turned on the car radio to try to figure out why nobody else was on the highway. Yeah.

Those days were scary, and filled with anger and wrestling with big questions about what happened and what we should do about it. I was in my third year in university in 2001, so I saw a very secular campus trying to deal with the tragedy through public rallies and lectures and professors trying to bring their expertise in history and religion and psychology into this brand new reality. And I was also a part-time youth pastor, so was playing that game myself, reassuring young people with half-formed theologies and desperate prayers. "Where was God on 9/11?" became a buzz-word question for that age-old mystery of the problem of pain. For a while, I was really lost. We all were.

I've been fortunate in my life so far to not have experienced death in a very close way. I haven't yet lost any close family members or friends, nothing that I would describe as significant grief. So on Eternity Sunday, as we mourn our losses and grieve with those who grieve, my point of reference is my experience of days like 9/11.

That doesn't compare to what some of you have been through and are in the middle of right now, but I do know a bit of what it is like to grieve, to be in denial and depression, to be angry and scared and lost. We all have pieces of that experience, in various ways and at various depths.

Christian writer Rob Bell shared some helpful language in his podcast this week to talk about these experiences of loss. He described life in terms of *orientation*, *disorientation*, and *reorientation*.

As we mature as humans, we develop various reference points in our lives. The things that tell us how the world works, which way is up, what is true and false, right and wrong. Those can be a set of ideas, or a relationship family, or meaningful routines. The things and people and spaces that we orbit, that define us and orient our lives.

When something happens to one of those reference points, our orientation is disrupted. That could be from a death, a divorce, a betrayal. Or a lost opportunity, a job doesn't work out, a dream is snuffed out. Or maybe this thing that you thought you knew for sure just wasn't true. That was what happened for me on 9/11--I thought I was secure, I thought religion was peaceful, I thought God was in control. The reality of 9/11 shattered that security and innocence. The pillar of "America" as my ideal society was toppled.

When that reference point disappears, it's disorienting. We experience vertigo, shaking, insecurity. We get angry at those that took it from us. We hate ourselves for allowing it to happen. We grasp for whatever shreds of hope we can latch onto, real or imagined. We question the other things we thought we could rely on; if this foundation can be taken from us, are the others equally unreliable? We feel lost and alone and sad for what was.

And that's normal. Those reactions are understandable and unavoidable. They speak to the value of the person or thing that was lost.

The trouble comes when we don't recognize or acknowledge that we're disoriented.

The buzzword in the US after 9/11 became "normalcy." President Bush encouraged people to get on with their regular lives, to go shopping, to travel to Disney World. The point was to not be afraid, to discourage future terrorism by not allowing this one to disrupt the American way of life. The effect was that it drew a very limited box around what was acceptable to do and think and feel about the disaster.

It's like trying to drive your car when the windows are covered in frost and you've only scraped off the six inch square directly in front of your face. You can see enough to drive straight ahead, maybe, but you really have no idea what's going on. (Admit it, Saskatchewan, at least some of you tried that this week...)

When you pretend that everything is normal, you devalue what was lost. You miss opportunities to learn things, to correct your course, to feel good emotions along with the bad ones. You risk crashing, hurting yourself and others out of blindness and insensitivity.

An important step in dealing with loss is to name the disorientation. To name that you're out of step, that you've been knocked off-balance, that you're flailing a little bit. To recognize that you're maybe a bit desperate, that you've got tunnel vision. To give yourself permission to slow down and take care of yourself, to feel whatever it is that you feel.

The Biblical word for this is Lament. To Lament is to name that we're lost, that all is not right with the world, and we're angry or tired or desperate because of it. This morning as we remember our losses on Eternity Sunday, Krista is going to lead us through an exercise of lament in the Biblical pattern.

Krista:

*Practising biblical lament allows us to communicate to God in an honest way. We bring our emotions, frustrations, and ambivalence in the face of ambiguities and doubts. This morning we will practise writing our own prayers of lament as we remember the losses in our lives.*

*You are invited to consider 3 acts of prayer: arguing, remembering, and praising. This pattern comes from the Biblical prayers of laments. In your bulletin you'll find a half page with space for your own writing and prayer process. Use poetry, images, brainstorming, hashtags, or bullet points to help you process your thoughts. The ushers will walk through the aisle with pencils in case you need a writing utensil.*

*We will pause for a few minutes in each act. I will invite you to consider the next act with a ringing of the chimes. Writing our prayers of lament in this way may make loss and grief seem fairly simple and closed off. I acknowledge that some of you might feel stuck in Act 1, angry with God for the losses in your life.*

*And that's ok. Use all of your time to lay out your frustration with God! For others, you will be able to move through all 3 acts. And that's ok. We all come with different things that we want to grieve this Sunday. Grief and anger is messy and if your prayer doesn't fit into these 3 Acts, feel free to use the time however is most helpful for you.*

*Know that this type of prayer exercise opens us up to a God who is ever listening and receptive to our honest prayers. God desires the real us, not the photoshopped and edited versions of ourselves that we so often try to pass off as our true identity. Let us strive to talk to God bringing everything to the table, rather than the fake copy that denies, hides and oppresses who we are. God is listening, loving, accepting and caring for you even in our moments of deep lament.*

*Krista Lights candle (peace candle perhaps?)*

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*On the paper:*

*You are invited to consider 3 acts of prayer: arguing, remembering, and praising. This pattern comes from the Biblical prayers of laments. In your bulletin you'll find a half page with space for your own writing and prayer process and some questions. Use poetry, images, brainstorming, hashtags, or bullet points to help you process your prayer.*

*Act 1: Argue with God*

*- Use this space to express your anger and frustration. What are you upset with God about? What feels unjust in your world? When you think about what you have lost this past year, what raw emotions arise?*

*Act 2: Remember God's goodness*

*- Use this space to remember that God has helped you in the past.  
- When have you felt that God has helped you? What are some images that come to mind when you think of God listening? When has God heard you?*

*Act 3: Praise God*

*- Use this space to say Thanks to God.  
- What are you thankful for that God has done in your life? What emotions arise in you when you thank God?*

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Joe:

Five years after the events of September 11, a movie was released called *United 93*, the story of what happened on the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania. I was living in Vancouver at the time, and went to see it in the theatre with some Canadian friends. And I bawled my eyes out for an hour and a half in that theatre. I freaked my friends out. I couldn't talk afterwards. It was five years later, and I still had all that emotion that I hadn't dealt with, just waiting to burst out.

For some of us, that prayer of lament was too hard. As Krista said, maybe we can't go further than the anger of Act 1. Maybe we couldn't even manage that much. That's okay. Grief happens at its own pace, and maybe all you can do is name that you're disoriented, that all is not as it should be.

At some point, disorientation brings an opportunity to engage in Re-orientation. In addition to grief, loss also invites us to re-examine what we know, to test new ideas and relationships and ways of being, to find new solid ground on which to stand.

After 9/11, I saw the world differently. It raised all kinds of questions that hadn't existed before. Why was the president encouraging Americans to get back to producing and spending money right away--why was that central to America's identity? How did that fit with my experiences and faith? And when the US responded to violence by upping the violence, with the "War on Terror" and "the Axis of Evil," how did that fit with the complex understanding of the world I was learning in university?

9/11 was disillusioning for me, in a good way. Things I thought I knew about myself and my world and my faith dissolved, fractured into a much deeper, more nuanced, more humble understanding. I let go of the unquestioned patriotism I was raised with, and dove more deeply into my faith values of pacifism and the Kingdom of God.

Naming my disorientation brought an opportunity for a course correction, to attach myself to deeper truths, to re-examine the roots of my faith, to put my hope in more reliable things.

Reorientation can be about letting go, and it's also about holding on. When one point of reference is lost, the others are tested. And most often, the things that you thought were true and right and good remain true and right and good, throughout the storm. Maybe in losing a parent, you lean on your remaining family and friends and find that they are indeed strong enough to support you and lift you back up. Maybe as you question your faith in God, God meets you in your pain and anger and provides comfort--maybe not in the ways you expected, but in something deeper or more honest. In the chaos of 9/11, I found that I could rely on my spiritual community, that their vision of living the way of Jesus was much stronger than the "American dream."

Some things last through the storm, proving their strength and worth. Reorientation is about holding onto those pieces, not that everything goes back to the way it was, but new ways of living emerge around those same points of reference.

Again, the Bible has a word for this experience of reorientation. Trust. Not a shallow "just trust in God and everything will be okay" kind of trust. A Lament/Trust, a trust that holds onto Lament in one hand and Faith in the other.

The hymn we read from Psalm 46 speaks of this kind of Trust.

Psalm 46:

*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.*

Some of us find those two pieces incompatible. That God could be present and yet the mountains continue to shake and the seas storm. This poet holds those two together--shaking does not mean that God is absent; God is present *in* trouble. Loss is part of life; life does not stop being Good and God does not stop being present. The earth can change, yet we will not fear.

*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy habitation of the Most High.  
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;  
God will help it when the morning dawns.  
The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;  
he utters his voice, the earth melts.  
The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

Now the opposite perspective. God is not stopping the earth from shaking, but there is a refuge, a piece that shall not be moved. This Psalm was sung by people who were constantly under threat, dominated by Empires, exiled and scattered. And yet, as God is our refuge, there is always some piece that shall not be moved. There is no loss that is total. No grief that is all-consuming. There is always something good, something solid to hold onto. That doesn't diminish the shaking, it doesn't erase the loss, but something always remains.

*Come, behold the works of the Lord;  
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.  
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;  
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;  
he burns the shields with fire.  
"Be still, and know that I am God!  
I am exalted among the nations,  
I am exalted in the earth."  
The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

Again, God is with us, present in our loss. And so we can be still, we can rest. Though the earth is shaking, though we are disoriented, there is a sacred core to which we cling, by which we know ourselves and can reorient ourselves.

What are you holding onto? What is solid, even when everything else is shaking? God is there. Orbit that, get close to that, trust in that, because God is there.  
And also in the disorientation, in the pain and loss, God is there.

That is the ancient promise, of countless generations of people who have walked the path we're walking. *Who will separate us from the love of God? Will hardship or distress or persecution or nakedness or peril or sword?... No,*

*in all these things we are more than conquerors through God who loves us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Let's sing that promise together, #98 in the green book, "All Will Be Well."

*Eternity Sunday liturgy*

On Eternity Sunday we take time to reflect on the past year. Part of that is remembering and mourning the things we have lost and had taken from us. Some of us have lost loved ones this year, and our grief is still fresh. For others, the death of a loved one might be long ago, but today we still want to remember them, to feel the bittersweet sorrow of those memories.

*Death isn't the only loss. As I've said, all kinds of significant changes bring grief as well. Change and loss are a part of life, but it's appropriate to pause and acknowledge them, to admit our pain and confusion and fears.*

Over the next fifteen minutes we're going to take time to reflect on our losses, to listen for God's voice in the midst of pain, to speak words of comfort to those who mourn. I also invite you to consider signs of beauty and hope, the things that endure, the promises that sustain us.

*In a minute, you'll welcome to come to the front to light a candle in remembrance of a loss, recent or long ago. The microphone will be here at the front if you'd like to say the name of the person you're remembering, or say a few words about your reason for lighting a candle. Or, if you have something else you'd like to share, a memory or a prayer or a word of encouragement or hope, the microphone is open for that as well.*

Let's pray as we enter this time of remembering:

*Everlasting God, you are our refuge and strength,  
a helper close at hand, a shelter in time of need.*

*Help us, O God, to hear your words of comfort in our loss,  
so that by faith our fears might be dispelled,  
our loneliness eased, and our hope revived.*

*May your Holy Spirit carry us through our sorrow  
into the comfort of your presence which endures for all eternity.*

*Amen.*

We'll begin this time of reflection by remembering our loved ones who have passed away in this year. As I read the names, I'll invite a representative to come forward to light a candle in their memory.

(reflection time)

Leader:

Hear the promise of the Immanuel, the God who is With Us:

Isaiah 61:

*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me, because the LORD has appointed me to bring good news to the downtrodden, to comfort the broken-hearted and to announce that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed. God has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of the LORD's favor has come. To all of God's People who mourn, God will give beauty for ashes, joy instead of mourning, praise instead of despair. For the LORD has planted them like strong and graceful oaks, bringing glory to God.*

Closing Song: "The peace of the earth be with you" - STJ #77