

**Sermon preached by Pastor Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES

Psalm 11

It was, in the words of Virginia Tech President Charles Steger, a tragedy of “monumental proportions.” Last Monday morning, the tranquility of Blacksburg was shattered by a shooting rampage carried out by Cho Seung-Hui, a 23-year-old Virginia Tech student from Centreville, right here in Fairfax County. Before taking his own life, Cho shot and killed 32 people and wounded several more. This, the worst shooting spree in American history, came just a few days before the 8th anniversary of the bloody 1999 massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado.

It has understandably left the entire Virginia Tech community reeling in shock, disbelief, anger, grief, and fear. And it has had a huge impact here in northern Virginia, where so many of us have personal connections to the “Hokie Nation.” Some 35,000 alumni of Virginia Tech live here in the metro D.C. area, most of them in northern Virginia. Approximately 8,000 students currently enrolled at Virginia Tech are from this area.

Instead of “six degrees of separation,” for many of us it is more like one degree – or even zero degrees – of separation from this unthinkable tragedy. Some of you are Virginia Tech grads and love the school dearly. Others of you have family members who have gone to Tech, whether it is a spouse, a parent, a child, a brother or sister, a member of your extended family, or more than one of the above. Four students from our church currently attend Virginia Tech: Casey Belzer, Kevin Green, Josh Seager and Torrey Smith. And we give thanks and praise to God for their protection and safety.

In addition to the shooter himself, five of the students killed on Monday were from right here in Fairfax County. One of them, Leslie Sherman, graduated from West Springfield a year behind my daughter Lindsay, and ran track and cross country at West Springfield with the sons of our neighbors.

We could wish that the tragedy at Virginia Tech was all just a bad dream from which we will awake at any moment. Sadly, it was not a dream. It was and is real. Like the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 and the bombing of the Federal building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, like the Columbine shootings on April 20, 1999 and the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, April 16, 2007 is another day that will live in infamy.

The enormity of the tragedy is staggering. It is hard to get our minds around such a horrible event. And it can be hard to know just what to say at a time like this. But there are some things I think God wants to say to us in the midst of our shock and grief and all the other emotions swirling around within us.

1. THE CAPACITY OF THE HUMAN HEART FOR EVIL

The first thing I think God wants us to understand and come to grips with is the capacity of the human heart to plan and carry out acts of horrible evil. There is a sense in which, instead of being shocked and surprised when something like this happens, we should be surprised it doesn't happen more often.

Different groups and individuals have attempted to assign blame for the shootings by offering all sorts of secondary causes. But the root cause of this tragedy is the evil that lurks and resides in the human heart. It is not a particularly flattering idea, but it is the truth.

The Bible describes our heart condition this way. Jeremiah 17:9 says: "The heart is deceitful above all things" (NIV). Some translations describe the human heart as "desperately wicked" (NKJV, NLT). *The Message* paraphrase says:

The heart is hopelessly dark and deceitful, a puzzle that no one can figure out.

It is beyond our capacity to understand it fully. But God understands it. The next verse, Jeremiah 17:10, says:

But I, GOD (the LORD), search the heart and examine the mind.
I get to the heart of the human.
I get to the root of things.
I treat them as they really are, not as they pretend to be.
(The Message)

Jesus explains the situation this way in Mark 7:21-23:

From within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a (person) "unclean."

The source of all these evils, says Jesus, is the human heart. All of these, in the words of Eugene Peterson, are "vomit from the heart."

In theological jargon, the term used to describe our heart condition is *total depravity* or *radical depravity*. It is a doctrine that recognizes the innate sinfulness of every human being, and our capacity, if left unrestrained, to commit unspeakable acts of evil. It is not that we are as bad or evil as we could possibly be, but that we are infected with the sin virus, every one of us, to the very core of our beings, so that apart from the transforming power of God's grace at work in our lives, everything we do is tainted with sin and evil, even what we call "good deeds" or "acts of kindness." Sin has infected us all to the root of our beings.

While many people this week have searched for some external cause to explain the Virginia Tech shootings – and there are undoubtedly external factors which contributed to the tragedy to a certain extent – the root cause of it was internal. It was brought on by “heart disease,” by the diseased condition of the human heart which can only be changed by the saving grace of Jesus Christ and the life-transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

Apart from the grace and power of God at work in our lives, you and I are potentially no different from Cho Seung-Hui, Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, or the two boys responsible for the Columbine shootings.

Violence, as radio commentator Paul Harvey pointed out this week, is a virus, and a highly contagious one. It is a virus, I would add, that is lodged in the heart.

You and I are not good by nature. Human nature is not inherently good, as much as we might want to think it is. Our natural bent is toward sin. We are, in the aftermath of the fall, “natural-born” sinners. If our natural bent is not curbed or restrained by either external or internal forces, or transformed by the redeeming and renewing power of God’s grace, we are all capable, just like Cho Seung-Hui, of committing unthinkable atrocities.

This is not a flattering truth. It is a humbling truth. A sobering truth. But it is the truth. It is a truth that can set us free once we come to terms with it and run to God to receive His mercy and grace.

2. THE SHORTNESS AND UNCERTAINTY OF THIS LIFE

A second thing I believe God wants us to see today is the shortness and uncertainty of life on this earth.

Monday morning on the Virginia Tech campus started out like any other day. No one anticipated what was about to take place as the morning unfolded. Not students. Not professors. Not university administrators or campus police. And not the families and friends of all those who were shot and killed or wounded in the massacre. No one expected it.

The world is not a safe place. As hard as we try, we cannot insulate ourselves or those we love from pain or suffering or hardship or heartache. This world is a place where bad things happen every single day. And all too often, these bad things happen when and where we least expect it. Sometimes they happen to us. Or to someone we know or love.

Life is unpredictable. It can change – or come to an end – in a flash. In an instant. In the twinkling of an eye. None of us is guaranteed a long life. There is no guarantee that we will live 70 or 80 or 90 years. We don’t know how long or short our lives will be. We don’t know how much or how little time remains for us. We don’t know what tomorrow or even this afternoon will bring. We simply don’t know.

That is why it is so crucial for each of us to examine the condition of our hearts and make sure we have settled the question of our eternal destiny. Important as it may be, the question that matters most is not: When will you or I die?

The more important question is: Are we ready to die?

Have you settled the question of your eternal destiny?
Do you know what will happen to you when you die?
Are you ready to meet God face-to-face?
Have you made your peace with Him?

The only way to be at peace with God is through His Son Jesus Christ. The only way to be ready to die is to open your heart to Him and by faith to receive Him as Savior and Lord of your life. Jesus is the only hope of heaven there is for any of us. And the message of the gospel – the message in which I and the people of this church have staked our lives – is that you matter so much to Him and He loves you so much that Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice by laying down His life for you, to pay the penalty for your sins, so that by faith in Him you could receive forgiveness for all your sins and the gift of eternal life.

Life is precious. And short. And unpredictable. The Bible says that our lives are but a mist that appears for a little while and then disappears (James 4:14). All we are, says David in Psalm 144, is “a puff of air, we’re like shadows in a campfire” (144:4, *The Message*). Here one moment, gone the next.

If you have not settled the question of your eternal destiny by turning to the Lord Jesus in a spirit of true repentance and trusting faith, I urge you to do so today. Don’t put it off, because the day will come, perhaps sooner than you think, when it will be too late. If you have gotten off track in your life, if you have wandered from God and you want to get back on track and renew your relationship with Christ, I urge you to do it today. Don’t put it off, because you and I have no guarantee of tomorrow.

3. GOD IS OUR REFUGE

The third thing God wants us to see and understand is that when tragedy strikes, whatever form the tragedy may take, God is not absent. He is, in the words of Psalm 46, our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble (46:1).

A retired Episcopal bishop named William Frey tells about how, as a younger man, he had volunteered to read to a university student named John who was blind. One day he asked John: “How did you lose your sight?”

“A chemical explosion,” said John, “at the age of thirteen.”

“How did that make you feel?” Frey asked.

John replied: “Life was over. I felt helpless. I hated God. For the first six months I did nothing to improve my lot in life. I would eat all my meals alone in my room. One day my father came into my room and said: ‘John, winter’s coming and the storm windows need to be up. That’s your job. I want them hung by the time I get back this evening or else.’

“Then he turned, walked out of the room and slammed the door. I got so angry. I thought: Who does he think I am? I’m blind!

“I was so angry I decided to do it. I felt my way to the garage, found the windows, located the necessary tools, found the ladder, all the while muttering under my breath: ‘I’ll show them. I’ll fall, and then they’ll have a blind and paralyzed son.’”

John continued: “I got the windows up. I found out later that never at any moment was my father more than four or five feet away from my side.”

That, my friends, is how it is with God. No matter what in His providence He may call us to endure, He is right there with us at every moment.

In times of tragedy, people want to know:

Where was God when this happened?
Why didn’t God do something to prevent it?

We don’t know the answer to the “Why” question. We don’t know why God allowed Cho to go on his murderous rampage at Tech last Monday. We don’t know why God allowed him to take so many lives and to bring such grief and heartache to so many families – in fact, to the entire Hokie Nation.

We may never know why. God doesn’t always tell us why He allows what He does. One thing we learn from tragedy is that God’s ways and purposes are not our own. His ways and purposes are often hidden from us.

But this we know and cling to by faith: God is not absent. And He is neither weak nor helpless in the face of tragedy. The Bible assures us that God *is* with us. Psalm 46 reminds us that the Lord Almighty is with us (46:7, 11). He is an ever-present help in times of trouble (46:1).

And He is still on the throne. He is still sovereign. He is still working out His purposes for our good and His glory. Never forget that. Never doubt it.

Remember the words of the old familiar hymn:

This is my Father’s world,
O let me ne’er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,

God is the Ruler yet.

Even when a tragedy of monumental proportions occurs, God is still on the throne. He is still sovereign. Though we sometimes fail to see it, He is still in control.

On the first Sunday after the September 11 terrorist attacks, I shared with you the words from a song by Twila Paris. I think those words bear repeating today:

This is no time for fear
 This is a time for faith and determination
 Don't lose the vision here
 Carried away by the motion
 Hold on to all that you hide in your heart
 There is one thing that has always been true
 It holds the world together

God is in control
 We believe that His children will not be forsaken
 God is in control
 We will choose to remember and never be shaken
 There is no power above or beside Him
 We know... God is in control
 God is in control

History marches on
 There is a bottom line drawn across the ages
 Culture can make its plan
 (Even murderers or terrorists may make their plans)
 Oh but the line never changes
 No matter how the deception may fly
 There is one thing that has always been true
 It will be true forever

God is in control
 We believe that His children will not be forsaken
 God is in control
 We will choose to remember and never be shaken
 There is no power above or beside Him
 We know... God is in control
 God is in control

David knew that God is in control. He knew that God is an ever-present help in times of trouble. When his world seemed to be falling apart, when his life was threatened and his friends urged him to flee for his life, he said: "In the Lord I take refuge" (Psalm 11:1). He found comfort and strength in knowing that God was still in charge. Still on the

throne in His temple (11:4). Nothing could change that. Nothing in his circumstances could thwart God's sovereign purposes.

Eric Liddell, the Scottish Olympic champion and missionary to China, whose life was immortalized in the film *Chariots of Fire*, once wrote: "God is not helpless among the ruins." He is not helpless. He is still sovereign. His love is still working. His grace still abounds. And it is sufficient.

Dear friends, because God is not helpless, because He is sovereign in both life and death, we are not without hope when tragedy strikes. Just two weeks ago we celebrated the resurrection triumph of the Lord Jesus Christ. Because of His resurrection victory and power, we have the assurance that a mass murderer like Cho Seung-Hui did not, does not and will not have the last word. There is a power greater and stronger than death – the power of Christ. And all who trust in Him can face not only death but the uncertainties of life with confidence and a sure and certain hope of life on the other side of death. In Christ we find our refuge and hope, no matter what life throws at us. He is our firm foundation. In Him we can stand secure. And we will, by the grace of God.

4. WHAT THE RIGHTEOUS CAN DO

Finally, there is the question David asks in Psalm 11:3: "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?"

When the world seems to be falling apart, when the foundations of society are shaken, when senseless violence and death shatter our sense of security and well-being, what can God's people do? What does God want *us* to do?

Let me suggest several answers to this question very briefly.

First, we can pray. Many of us have been doing just that, individually and in concert with others, since we heard about the shootings at Virginia Tech on Monday. Keep on praying. As President Bush said at the convocation service last Tuesday, there is a power in prayer. The power is God's power, and His power is unleashed in remarkable ways when His people pray. Don't underestimate the power of prayer. And don't stop praying.

Second, we can and must hold fast to our faith and hope in God, even when what happens in life doesn't seem to make sense. In your own life, run to God and find in Him your security and hope, your refuge and strength.

Third, we can reach out in love and compassion to those we know who may be hurting or confused or dealing with grief or doubt or fear as a result of this tragedy or some other tragic event in their lives. The Bible tells us to "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2). Make yourself available to God, and be sensitive to the questions and hurts and needs of those God brings into your path.

Fourth, those of us who have come to know Christ as Savior and Lord of our lives can share the hope and peace and freedom from sin we have found in Him with those who don't know Him. It can be as simple as saying: "This is what Jesus has done in my life. He can do the same for you, if you will trust Him as your Savior and let Him take charge of your life."

When tragedy strikes, and in all of the circumstances of life, these are things we can do as the people of God with an unwavering trust in the goodness and power and sovereign purposes of God.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.