In the face of tragedy and death

What happened to Malaysia Airlines Flight 370? The passenger flight disappeared on March 8 en route from Kuala Lumpur International Airport to Beijing Capital International Airport. On board were 227 passengers and 12 crew members. The majority were Chinese, but at least 15 nations were represented on the flight.

For days our attention has been riveted to this. Did the plane crash in the ocean? Was this an act of terrorism? Is there any possibility that the flight was hijacked and the passengers might in fact still be alive? As time passes, the mystery deepens. How can a plane “fall off the radar” and go missing? How far could the plane have traveled after communication was lost? Could the plane have been landed in some remote airport? Or, will the wreckage of the flight be soon discovered on the surface of the Indian Ocean?

We know that life has its share of mystery and tragedy. For people of faith, such challenges have become part of the great pilgrimage. Religion must address the ultimate issues—life and death, evil, the randomness and precariousness of life.

I would like to think that my faith provides adequate answers. As a Christian, I take comfort in the story of the cross and the saving, sacrificial death of Jesus. I believe in the power of God’s Holy Spirit and I seek to discern His Presence in my life.

But I also know as a pastor that such words and phrases will for many seem like pious platitudes. These traditional faith statements might sound fine in a creed or during worship. But in the face of undeniable, unexplainable tragedy, these words can ring hollow. They don’t easily comfort a parent who has lost a child. They don’t reassure someone who has been violated or abused. They don’t give courage to those waiting for news of loved ones missing on a lost airplane.

Yes, I can and do hold on to my Bible and I find immense power to cope in the gathering of the church in worship and in community. But truth be told, I don’t have answers. In fact, I have lots of questions.

If you want to read an honest account of a people’s struggle with their faith, read the Book of Psalms. “The snares of death entangled me, and the grip of the grave took hold of me; I came to grief and sorrow” declares the psalmist so long ago (Psalm 116: 2) But the writer continues, falling back on his trust in a loving God, “Then I called upon the Name of the Lord; ‘O Lord, I pray you, save my life’”. I suspect that more than one person on flight 370 uttered such prayers. Whether people of faith or no faith, the victims of this flight, in the face of death, turned to God for help.

Where their prayers answered? We still don’t know the outcome of all of this. I can only offer a pastor’s reflection: we are dearly loved and when tragedy strikes, I believe that God grieves with us. I find comfort in remembering that Jesus took upon himself the fullness of human suffering and death itself. The symbol of Christianity is the cross, a reminder of both suffering and death, yet also a statement about the love of God conquering evil.
Baptism is no vaccination from the power of evil and the fragility of humanity. Or to put it another way, ‘None of us is getting out of this alive’. Yet, I find comfort in my faith and can’t imagine facing the challenges of life without the support of God and my church community.

In the coming month Christians will once again walk the way of the cross. And we will once again ponder the great mysteries of death and life. For now, we also wait for news of those on the airplane. But my mind and heart rest in peace. I know that God has the final word. I know that airplanes don’t fly forever. I know all will be well; if not in this life, then “merrily in the next,” to quote Thomas More. That’s all we have. It is enough.

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