

## **THE INFREQUENCY OF GOD'S RESCUE TEAMS**

**Exodus 14: 10-16, 21-29; I Kings 17:1-16**

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**Union Church of Cupertino**

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*Stand firm and you will see the deliverance God will bring....*

**- Exodus 14:14**

**I imagine that if we pooled our collective memories we would be able to come up with a list of 20, perhaps 30 stories from the Bible in which God rescues people at risk.**

**This morning we heard the story of God parting the Red Sea waters so that the Israelites might escape from Pharaoh.**

**We heard the story in which God commissions ravens to bring food to Elijah who was in hiding east of the Jordan River, and God's creating bottomless jars of flour and oil for a boy and his mother.**

**We could just as well have heard how Joseph escaped from the pit where his brothers threw him and how, later on the brothers were saved from starvation by Joseph's having a position of authority in Egypt. Joseph specifically noted God's hand in both events:**

*You plotted evil against me, but God turned it to good.*

**- Genesis 50:20**

**"Stand firm and you will see deliverance...."**

**Twenty, 30 rescue stories..., but they are not enough.**

**Not enough to erase the memory that there was no last minute rescue of the Armenians killed in Turkey; or of the Jews, Gypsies, and Homosexuals murdered in the Holocaust.**

**Not enough to keep us from wondering where God was when Japanese soldiers acted like beasts toward the people of Nanking, China, or why God failed to assign ravens to starving children in Somalia. God did not step in to save Paul at Rome nor did God intervene at Golgotha. There seems to be a spottiness in God's mercy delivery system, an infrequency to God's rescue teams.**

**In his autobiography, the author Alexander Dumas (1802-1870) wrote about one of his earliest memories, that of attending his father's funeral. Once he and the rest of his family had returned home he went to his father's office, found one of his father's pistols and started marching up the front hall stairs. "Where are you going?" his mother asked him.**

**"I'm going to the sky!"**

**“And what are you going to do in the sky, my child?”**

**“I’m going to kill God who killed my father.”**  
**- *My Memoirs, cit. Oxford Book of Death, pg. 275***

**If God can rescue a prophet, is it not cruel to just let a father go? The little boy felt he had the right to be angry. God had let him down.**

**“Stand firm and you will see the deliverance.... Yet again, you might not.**

**Legion have been the people who have tried to explain this seeming inconsistency. Some have said that God rescues only the good, and ignores the evil. This just doesn’t work. Who will argue that Abraham Lincoln did not merit God’s mercy, or Mahatma Ghandi, or Anwar Sadat?**

**Some try to explain the spottiness of God’s intervention by suggesting that, sometimes, God will allow tragedy in order to enable a higher good. They point out that by Jesus’ death the Christian Church came into being; that Jesus’s death was a prelude to our learning about God’s eternal care. They point out that it was the assassination of Martin Luther King that turned the tide for civil rights.**

**But this has always felt to me like armchair omniscience. Mostly my heart rebels. There can be no higher good that justifies genocide, no result that can excuse mass starvation, no future good that will balance the abduction and death of an innocent child.**

**My heart agrees with the Psalmist who looks upon tragedy and utters the cry:**

***Wake up God! Are you sleeping?***  
***Rouse yourself! Why do you hide? - Psalm 44: 23,24***

**Can we make any sense out of the infrequency of God’s rescue teams?**

**One thing that occurs to me is that the tragedy is often that life is lost and that the gulf between life and death might not seem such a great gulf to God. God says, “I have loved you every day of your living. I will love you every minute after life. You may measure my love by the length of your life but that’s not my measure.”**

**Tragedy may not be quite so tragic for a God who just keeps on loving, who still supports beyond the grave.**

**Another thing that occurs to me is that no one has an immune card. All of our lives are limited. There’s only so about us that can be mended and there comes a time when mending is no longer a kindness. As John Masefield said in his poem, “The Widow of Bye Street,” the greater mercy can be to provide “a rest for things too broke to mend.” There are bodies... individual bodies, national bodies, corporate bodies that become so riddled**

with brokenness that the kindness is to let them go.

Tragedy, is sometimes, not quite so tragic, for a God who works within the constraints of mortality.

And there is our love of freedom. I remember once hearing an ad on the radio that began “There is a deadly menace in our midst: a menace that kills our children.... This menace kills more of our children than tobacco, alcohol and drugs combined. More people will lose their lives to this menace than from all diseases put together; and what’s more insidious, we don’t really fear this menace, we crave it, we can’t wait to get our hands on it. It is not until the end of the ad that we learn the “it” is the automobile. If we are very quiet we can hear hundreds of them zooming by right now. Do we intend to do anything about it? Probably not. Not in California. Imagine the outcry if God delivered Californians by taking their cars away!

Isaac Bashevis Singer was once giving a lecture. A man interrupted him and demanded that the author define the God who was mentioned in his books... define God in the light of the holocaust. Singer obliged:

*If God gives man a knife to cut bread, to peel and apple, it is not god’s fault if the knife is used to cut people. God is not an Indian giver. God hopes against hope. - Paul Kresh, Issac Bashevis Singer: The Magician of West 86<sup>th</sup> Street, pg. 65.*

Tragedy, sometimes, is not quite so tragic to a God who takes human freedom seriously.

And there is one other thing. If rescue teams were always at the ready, as swift as today’s superbly trained Emergency Medical Technicians, we might miss some of God’s greatest gifts.

*A man once asked (a Methodist preacher, the Rev.) Peter Green how he could preach of a God who loved while a war was going on. Rev. Green said, “You are very hard on God. Just fancy you are God and tell us what you would do. You must not say you would not allow sin, for that would destroy our character as free beings. But what else would you do?” The man thought for a while and then said, “I would not let anyone suffer for anyone’s fault but his own.” And Green said, “What a dreadful world that would be. What do you propose to do with mothers? With fathers? When their son lands in jail will they go down the street laughing, “I don’t care. It does not trouble me.” The world (you describe) would be one without parental compassion, without the support of friends, without saints or heros.” - Gerald Kennedy, Have This Mind, pg. 106-107.*

Of course none of this matters very much if the tragedy is our tragedy and we are the ones

**in need of God's rescue squad right now. Let us be clear, tragedy stinks, and there is no theology that makes it nice.**

**But could God be doing better?**

**Carl Weist once wrote:**

*If I were God and man made a mire of things:  
war, hatred, murder, lust,  
Cob webs of infamy entangling the heart and soul -  
I would sweep him to one side and start anew.  
(I think I would)  
If I did this, would I be God?*

**We live in a world where bad things happen and God does not always step in to prevent.**

**What God does do is even better....**

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
God is with me....*

**God says: "My love is stronger than the hits. My love lasts longer than the tragedy. My love never fails, and there's nothing that can rescue you from that!"**