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# Crisis, Community, and Lament: Living During Chaotic Times

By David M. Johnstone | September 23, 2020 | No Comments

The day I am writing this post is September 11. In 2001, I was still a rookie administrator living with 200 freshmen on a Christian college campus in Southern California. The horror of that morning rippled into shock, confusion, and perplexity as the day continued. The community gathered together with care, empathy, and resolve. As stories permeated through campus and living areas, students stood together in solidarity. The anecdotes were full of emotion, challenge, and poignancy: An uncle was having breakfast on the first floor of the North Tower. A neighbor was caught in the collapse of the South Tower. Air Force family members were unreachable due to radio silence as they had been scrambled to fly over the US to enforce its vast “no-fly” zone. West

coast family members were dispatched as teams were sent to assist in rescue and recovery efforts. The community rallied and cared for each other.

Currently the West coast is on fire. Smoke covers most of the geography from California to Washington. Millions of acres are burning. Vast numbers are displaced. Towns are in ash. Reports are coming that some fires are so unpredictable and out of control, that first responders are pulling back to reassess conditions.

Earlier this week gale force winds whipped through our campus. Damage was limited to broken tree limbs, lots of dust, and difficulty breathing. The next morning, the dryness of the wind caught embers and started a wildland fire ten miles out of town.

By midday campus was surrounded by fires. The closest was on the Northwest side of town. 20 miles south was a larger forest fire sending apocalyptic black plumes that transformed daylight into orange dusk. To the east, were parks on fire that mixed with the other smoke making for an eerie experience.

By that evening the fire was on the outskirts of town (4 miles from campus). The civil authorities declared a level 2 evacuation readiness for the entire town. In the middle of the night, rural homeowners started moving to safer locations with their families and livestock. Our university crisis management team was monitoring, planning, and working towards a possible evacuation.

Walking on campus that night, I came across students sitting together watching the glowing flames on the hills. Internally they were anxiously wrestling with the information they had gathered from campus alerts, social media, parental phone calls, and rumors. We did not evacuate that night, or the next.

On the third day the closest fire was 50% contained.

The sky over campus is still overcast with smoke. The temperature is cooler and the sun is getting through the smoke (but barely); ash covers every outdoor surface. Air quality is terrible (I am sure our lungs would be nasty without the benefit of our COVID-19 masks.). Metrics for the air quality in town has reached 289 out of 400 -unhealthy air quality (the average of 45 is good).

As followers of Jesus how do we respond? Many of us are not trained first responders. But most of us are in communities. Working with students living in community, two things come to mind.

Many of our students struggle with the fear, sadness, anger, and perplexity of crisis and traumatic events. Realizing that scripture is full of these emotions is important for them. Soong-Chan Rah notes in his *Prophetic Lament* that “lament is honesty before God and others.” Our students are good at celebration; they do not know how to lament or be comfortable with other’s lamenting. As followers of Jesus, being sad, despairing, losing hope, or even being angry with God is viewed as being unfaithful.

Part of my role is to note that repeatedly scripture demonstrates women and men in the midst of their pain expressing confusion and anger to a patient and present God. I need to model allowing sadness and anger to run its course without minimizing or dismissing it. Platitudes and clichés about meaning, greater purposes, or any number of other responses we might have to the unsettling things we are hearing and observing do not work. God's rebuke of Job's friends demonstrates how this strategy does not work.

In conversation, Bryce Coefield introduced me to the idea of *community-care*. He addresses it within the context of justice, but it is also transferable to crisis and trauma. Community-care moves beyond self-care. It involves multiple people watching out for each other, extending compassion, leveraging their resources for others. It gives the freedom to remain vigilant, act and speak words of grace into each other's lives. It ensures that an individual is not isolated and alone in their grief and pain.

The emphasis on community and relationships is pervasive in Scripture. This is a model for our students. In a time of physical distancing this is particularly vital. Daily I am asking, how I encourage the development of community? What are the obstacles that I might be able to dismantle to facilitate relationships? What we encourage and facilitate in times of uncertainty can bring tremendous healing and solidity for a campus community.

In unsettling, chaotic, and disorienting times, there are many complexities and responses. I have often

observed that if we allow students to lament deeply and understand how to be with one another during these times, the resiliency of a campus community can be strengthened. Not surprisingly, this is repeatedly demonstrated in Scripture, such as the Psalms. God does not promise that life will always go well, but consistently promises his presence, his faithfulness, and steadfast love. We are never abandoned, he is always “God with us” – *Emmanuel*. He pulls communities together to lament, care for one another, and hope for a future time of celebration. This is good news for our students.



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