

When Aimless Violence Takes Those We Love

Joy F. Patterson

A letter from Brian Wren reflecting on several recent tragedies in the town where he then lived gave rise to this attempt to understand how God deals with us in times of sorrow. The tragic loss suggested in stanza one could come from the nightly newscast: the drive-by shooting, the car crash that snuffs out the lives of promising young people, the cancer that strikes a child. The griefs of stanza two are personal ones, of watching my husband's mother slowly die of congestive heart failure, of seeing my father's agonizing decline over four years of Alzheimer's disease.

The psalmists' assurance of God's protective care clearly do not guarantee immunity from suffering. In times of anguish we may question our faith in the goodness of God; we may lose hope that life can ever be good

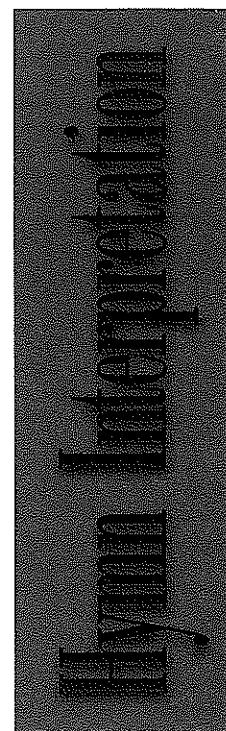
again. However strong our doubts, the God who lost a son for us does not desert us, but shares our sorrows and remains with us through all our questioning and raging and despair. God's presence is always with us.

In the shock and grief following the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah building in April 1995, Daniel B. Merrick, the editor of the *Chalice Hymnal*, was asked to suggest an appropriate hymn for an Oklahoma City memorial service for victims of the disaster. Familiar with "When Aimless Violence" because of its slated inclusion in the forthcoming *Chalice Hymnal*, he adapted the text to suit those tragic circumstances. "Aimless violence" became "senseless violence" to describe the calculated cruelty of the bombing; lines 5 and 6 were completely rewritten, and there were a few minor word changes. I was grateful that a hymn of mine could, in however small a way, help to comfort people living through the dreadful aftermath

of the explosion, and I was happy to authorize the publication of the altered version.

Written at the suggestion of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod hymnal committee, the fifth stanza (1997) is a prayer for help in opening ourselves to the love, support, and comfort which God eternally holds out to us.

TOULON was the tune used for the Oklahoma City service because of its familiarity. A recent hymnal marries the original version of the text to MORECAMBE. Both of these tunes invariably begin the phrase with a measure of dactylic rhythm, which my hymn does not. My own strong preference is for SURSUM CORDA (Smith) since its iambic meter and the flexibility created by the consistent use of quarter notes match the iambic meter of the poem and accommodate the occasional shifted stress. Alfred Morton Smith's fine tune, though somewhat unfamiliar at present, deserves to be more widely known.



When senseless violence takes those we love,
when cruel death strikes childhood's promise down,
when wrenching loss becomes our bitter bread,
we know, O God, you leave us not alone.

When unexpected crises shatter life,
when those with loathing all their hate impart,
and grief becomes the fabric of our days,
dear God, you do not stand from us apart.

Our faith may flicker low and hope grow dim,
yet you, O God, are with us in our pain;
you grieve with us and for us day by day,
and with us, sharing sorrow, will remain.

Because your Child knew agony and loss,
catastrophe and grief and scorn and shame,
we know you will be with us, come what may,
your loving presence near, always the same.

10.10.10.10.

—Joy F. Patterson, 1992; alt. Daniel B. Merrick, 1995.

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When aimless violence takes those we love,
when random death strikes childhood's promise down,
when wrenching loss becomes our daily bread,
we know, O God, you leave us not alone.

When passing years rob sight and strength and mind
yet fail to still a strongly beating heart,
and grief becomes the fabric of our days,
dear Lord, you do not stand from us apart.

Our faith may flicker low, and hope grow dim,
yet you, O God, are with us in our pain;
you grieve with us and for us day by day,
and with us, sharing sorrow, will remain.

Because your Son knew agony and loss,
felt desolation, grief and scorn and shame,
we know you will be with us, come what may,
your loving presence near, always the same.

Through long grief-darkened days help us, dear Lord,
to trust your grace for courage to endure,
to rest our souls in your supporting love,
and find our hope within your mercy sure.

10.10.10.10.

—Joy F. Patterson, 1992, 1997.

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Joy F. Patterson is a hymnwriter and composer from Wausau, Wisconsin, whose texts and tunes have appeared in eight denominational hymnals. She is also an elder of the Presbyterian Church/USA.