

“Arise, Shine!!”
Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-14, Ephesians 3:1-12
Epiphany of our Lord
2 January 2005
Richard W. Dunn, PhD.
Cornerstone Baptist, Enid

Monday morning the reports started rolling in – I take the headline report of the New York Times via e-mail – the first headline on Monday said, “Untold numbers are missing in 6 countries,” followed by the first line which read, “An estimated 13,000 people were killed in countries across South and Southeast Asia, with thousands more missing or unreachable.” We really had no idea – we had no idea the breadth and horror of this event. Whole families destroyed, entire villages wiped out, economies affected, histories altered, and our world forever changed. The body count this morning, one week after the event, stands at 141,000 and rising with each horrifying hour. We really had no idea . . .

By Monday evening, an overwhelming sense of sadness was beginning to engulf me. I watched – hour after hour – until I could watch no more, and had to flip over to *Frazier* just to get a little relief from the intense sadness. And then on Tuesday, when we began to realize that we had no idea about the scope of this tragedy, I began thinking about how I would respond to this – in a public way. Let me describe the chain of events that made me realize that I would be compelled to say something.

In the early afternoon on Tuesday, the water delivery people showed up for their every-two-week delivery. The regular guy was training a new person – really a kid. The kid carried the water back to the dispenser, and the regular guy and I stood right back there in the foyer. We

asked each other about Christmas, and then we spoke of the Tsunami – and just about then, the kid joined us and said, “Yeah, that’s a really bad deal. But I tell you, I’m getting pretty sick about our government bailing out everybody all around the world. We try to be the savior of the entire world, and I’m sick of it. We can’t save the world – that’s Jesus’ job anyway.” I must have looked dumbfounded, because he continued with the statement, “And yes, I am a Christian.”

They left – and I started to think of a response.

I started thinking that I should have said something like, “Well, you may have trusted Jesus for your salvation, but you sure don’t have His heart.” Or something like that.

My responses started to escalate. Now, I’m glad that our government has upped our offer of assistance to \$350 million. But on Tuesday, as

I sat down and contemplated our paltry initial response of \$35 million to the catastrophe – I started thinking - you know, there are nearly 280 million of us in this country, and \$35 million represents about 12.5 cents from every person in the United States. I got to thinking that we each of us could afford more than 12.5 cents. Heavens, the war in Iraq has cost each of us about \$800 to date. I was thinking we can each afford more than 12.5 cents, and I still think that we can afford more than \$1.25 from each of us.

Then I started wondering what other people were thinking – how they would respond. I went online to www.desperatepreacher.com, wondering what the preachers around the globe were thinking they would say. They were dumbfounded, and therefore rather silent. They didn’t know how to respond. They sure knew what to say after 911, but they didn’t know what to say this week. I think it’s the enormity

of the problem. I hope it's not just the distance or the nationality of those who have been affected.

So, Friday I began to write. I ran across an op-ed piece from the New York Times – let me read part of it to you.

As if the deaths and destruction caused by despotic rulers, hegemonic powers and religious zealots were not enough, the world now also has to bear the brunt of nature's unprecedented fury. Shakespeare was perhaps inspired by such natural calamities like Tsunami when he wrote the moving line "As flies to wanton boys so are we to Gods/ They kill us for their sport."

The world would surely like to see a quick end of 2004 which will go down in history as one of the most blood-drenched years. The beheading of hapless foreigners by Iraqi guerrillas or the killing of innocent Palestinian children by blood-thirsty Israeli troops; the slaughter of their own countrymen by Sudanese marauders in Darfur or the siege of a school by Chechen rebels which ended in a brutal massacre of innocent children in Beslan — this year has been one of the goriest and ghastliest.

The casualties of defenceless citizens in occupied Iraq has risen to over 100,000. The tragic irony is that the Iraqis find themselves at the receiving end of both the US troops and their own rebels. The world which is still desperately searching for ways to combat the growing scourge of terrorism is now reeling under a new threat: the tidal terror. Given the magnitude of the catastrophe which struck more than half a dozen countries, it will take some time to make a correct assessment of the extent of destruction.

But preliminary reports suggest that more than 12,000 people have perished and properties worth hundreds of crores have been devastated by the "wall of water" which suddenly engulfed coastlines in South and Southeast Asia a day after Christmas. The long list of countries which have been either considerably devastated or mildly affected includes Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India. Those who were unlucky to

face the full force of the Tsunami, are wondering how can Mother Nature turn so mercilessly murderous.

The enormity of the tragedy should serve as a humbling and sobering experience for mankind. Human knowledge has made giant strides in virtually every field and human mind has conquered many new worlds. Our progress in the fields of science and technology has been breathtaking.

The kinds of lethal weapons we have manufactured, have given us a sense of invincibility. But it is only when we are faced with a natural disaster like this that we realise the powerlessness of man in the universe. It is all very well to conquer the moon and other planets. But our priority should be to first save our own planet and people from the savagery of human beings and ravages of nature.¹

That quote from Shakespeare jumped out at me - "As flies to wanton boys so are we to Gods. They kill us for their sport." I felt the pain and disillusionment in those words, and began to realize that there are people in the world who respond with that kind of hopelessness – and my heart began to change.

I read another op-ed piece on Friday. I read it, because the author used the same Shakespeare quote, and I thought that kind of odd. The tenor of this person's response was barely more hopeful, although still rather devoid of a divinely oriented spiritual perspective.

One moment the kids were laughing and skylarking on the beach, yelling and chasing one another, sweating in the warm bright sun. The next moment they were gone.

The world is used to horror stories, but not on the stupefying scale of the macabre tales coming at us from the vast and disorienting zone of death in tsunami-stricken southern Asia. Einstein insisted that God does not play dice with the world, but that might be a difficult notion to sell to some of the agonized individuals who have seen everything they've lived for washed away in a pointless instant.

The death toll now is more than twice the number of American G.I.'s killed in all the years of the Vietnam War. Not just entire families, or extended families, but entire communities were consumed by waters that rose up without warning to destroy scores of thousands of people who were doing nothing but going about their ordinary lives.

On Tuesday The Times ran a big front-page picture taken in a makeshift morgue in southern India. It certainly captured the horror. It looked for all the world like a sandy playground covered with dead children.

Imagination pales beside the overwhelming reality of the tragedy. There were, for example, the grief-stricken throngs, clawing through mud and rubble, peering into the faces of the severely injured, wandering through piles of decaying corpses, in search of loved ones.

The Boston Globe quoted a young man whose college sweetheart was among the more than 800 people killed when a train carrying beachgoers in Sri Lanka was slammed by a 30-foot wall of water that lifted it from the tracks and hurled it into a marsh. "Is this the fate that we had planned for?" cried the young man. "My darling, you were the only hope for me."

Perhaps a third of those killed were children. Many were swept away before the eyes of horrified, helpless parents. "My children! My children!" screamed a woman in Sri Lanka. "Why didn't the water take me?"

The killer waves that moved with ferocious speed across an unprecedented expanse of global landscape flung their victims about with a randomness that was all but impossible to comprehend. People in beachfront dwellings ended up in trees, or entangled in electrical power lines, or embedded in the mud of hillsides. People died in buses, cars and trucks that were swept along by the waves like leaves in a strong wind. Sunbathers were swept out to sea.

In that environment, Einstein must stand aside for Shakespeare, whose Gloucester said: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport."

Any tragedy is awful for the relatives of those who perished. But this is a catastrophe of a different magnitude. "This," as one observer noted, "is like confronting the apocalypse."

"What makes it especially frightening is that whole communities have been annihilated," said Dr. John Clizbe, a psychologist in Alexandria, Va., who, until his retirement a couple of years ago, had served as vice president for disaster services at the American Red Cross. He said, "We've known for years now that the emotional devastation that survivors feel and experience is often greater than the physical devastation."

The recovery process is easier, he said, when there is a supportive community to bolster those in need. But in some of the most devastated regions of southern Asia, the regions most in need of support, those communities have vanished.

It's a peculiarity of modern technology that people anywhere in the world can sit back and watch in real time, like voyeurs, the life-and-death struggles of their fellow humans. The planet is growing smaller and its residents more interdependent by the day. We're fully aware that our planetary neighbors in southern Asia are desperately drawing upon the deepest reservoirs of fortitude and resilience that our troubled species has at its disposal.

What this means is that we're the supportive community. All of us. This catastrophe would at least have a silver lining if it moved the people of the United States and other nations toward a wiser, more genuinely cooperative international posture.

William Faulkner, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, said: "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."

That's what Faulkner believed. We'll see. ²

All around our globe, people are responding to this crisis. My "Christian Quote of the Day" from Thursday read, "Belief in God through Christ is the most important of all aids to the following of Christ, but (let us never forget) the

following is the great thing. To those who, by whatever means they are attracted to Him, really seek to do God's will as He revealed it, Christ will prove a Savior - a Savior from sin, a Savior from the power of sin here, and from the misery which sin brings with it here and hereafter."³

One more short story, and then I'm gonna start preaching. Tracy said that I needed to read the "RealLivePreacher" this week. He has a tremendous Weblog by that same title. His name is Gordon Atkinson, and he had this to say.

Bene Diction is right. In the face of such unthinkable tragedy, we fall silent. But silence will not help. Those of us who choose to believe in a deity are stunned and troubled. Those who believe that life has meaning are stunned and troubled. Stunned and troubled is what we feel, but the essential question is, "What will we do?"

Rayne notes that we have pledged 15 million to help with one of the greatest natural disasters in history, while we make plans to spend 30 to 40 million (not counting security costs) on George Bush's inauguration. To be fair, all modern presidents spend a lot on their inauguration ceremonies. I imagine this is pretty much in line with the norm.

Still, one wonders what would happen if George Bush were to cancel everything, have instead a simple ceremony in the oval office which could be televised,

and at the end, turned to the camera and pledged to send all the money that would have been spent on ceremonies to relief agencies working in the countries around the Indian Ocean.

Wouldn't that be a wonderful thing to do? So simple and so easy. Who needs ceremonies at a time like this anyway? And wouldn't that send a wonderful and needed message to the world?

One is tempted to wish for something like that, but such wishing is also a way of shirking the real question. The real question is, "what will **I** do?" What will Gordon Atkinson do?

I'm still thinking about that one.⁴

It sounds like Gordon has been on the same roller coaster that I have been on this week – that we all have been on this week. All week long, up until Friday, I wanted to point the finger at everyone else or at our government, but I never wanted to point a finger at myself. And when there is a tragedy of this proportion, that really has to be the starting point for the finger pointing. I told the Wednesday night crowd, that this time around, strangely enough, I didn't point any fingers at God. I think there are enough people pointing a finger at God, but my mind didn't turn that direction this time around. Until I looked at the scriptures.

Let me show you something. I don't know that I've ever shown you how I get started each week. I take the lectionary scriptures for the week, and put them in this format – side by side, three columns, two pages if I have to. I knew this week that I wasn't going to use the gospel lesson for my sermon, but I liked something about each of the other passages. But on Friday, just as I started writing, I noticed something. I noticed how seamlessly the flow of the Christian's thought can move from Isaiah, with his "Arise, shine; for your light has come," to his "Lift up your eyes round about, and see, they all gather together," to the statement in the Psalm, "For he will deliver the needy when he cries for help, the afflicted also, and him who has no helper. He will have compassion on the poor and needy, and the lives of the needy he will save. He will rescue their life from oppression and violence; and their blood will be precious in his sight;" to the Ephesians passage which says, "if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace

which was given to me for you;" and "of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of his power. To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light . . ."

Do you see the flow of thought? The Christian's response to something like this, after the original shock has worn off and we get our feet under us, should start with praise to God for all blessings. On Friday morning, I heard on CNN part of a sermon from a Muslim cleric who said exactly the same thing – that God is deserving of our praise, and he talked about a posture of humility when we approach God in times like this. We begin with praise, and we move from there to a statement of God's revelation of Godself to us. "Arise, shine; for your light has come." We have seen the Father, or at least, we have seen God's

power, and we have been introduced to God's Son, and the Spirit of God resides in our very hearts. So we move along in the progression of thought to the beginning of our active response – "Lift up your eyes round about, and see." We have to lift up our eyes, you and I – we have to lift up our eyes and see the people around us. Isaiah said that they would be coming to us – that they would gather near us. I'd like to know how many people pass by our little building here every day. I'd like to know just how many people we, as a congregation, come into contact with every day. I'd like to know . . .

We move from praise to God, and a realization that God's light has indeed shined already, to a statement of the goodness of God. The psalmist spoke of the compassion of God – "He will deliver the needy, the afflicted, the one who has no helper." "He will have compassion on the poor and needy." "He will rescue their life from oppression." Those are the statements

to which we cling when the torrents of life become too much to bear.

But then the other shoe drops. We glance across the page, and we see Paul writing about his own experience. We hear him say, "the stewardship of God's grace which was give to me for you;" and then later in the same passage he says, "of which I was made a minister," "the very least of all saints." The compassion that God has to bestow on all people flows through our hands and our words, and our ministries, and our pocketbooks, and our love. We are God's hands when the waters rise as a prelude to the rising body count. We are God's hands.

I had a conversation with someone this week about how helpless we both felt in this present situation. He said, Well there's really nothing I can do about it. And I said, "Yeah, there really is something we all can do." The world is beginning to respond, even as we meet this

morning. The world is starting to come

together with a response, and you and I can and should be a part of that response.

I don't know what you think needs to be done.

On so many levels, there are things that we can do. Our Coordinator for national CBF, Daniel Vestal, offered some thoughts. I have them posted on the back window. He suggests the following:

- 1) Set aside Sunday, January 9, 2005 (or a future Sunday), as a day of intercession, mourning, and reflection.
- 2) Pray daily for those affected by the devastation and for those who are providing relief and aid.
- 3) Communicate personally with elected officials (the President, members of Congress, governors, and state officials) to urge generous government assistance and involvement.
- 4) Contribute personally to the relief efforts.

All gifts to CBF, designated for Asian Response, will be disbursed by Global Missions staff and field personnel in collaboration with CBF's missions partners <http://www.thefellowship.info/Global%20Missions/gmpartner ships/> including World Vision, Habitat for Humanity, Buckner Orphan Care International, Christian Churches of Thailand, Baptist World Aid, Baptist Medical & Dental Fellowship and others. Visit <http://www.thefellowship.info/> for a continuing updated list. Gifts should be earmarked #17016, Asian Response and can be mailed to:

ASIAN RESPONSE
CBF
PO Box 101699
Atlanta, GA 30392

Gifts can be made by credit card online at:
<http://www.thefellowship.info/Landing/Giving.icm>

- 5) Form small groups for continuing conversation and action ("networks of concern"). These networks might be in your family, your church, at work, or online.
- 6) Consider short-term volunteering for relief involvement. Those interested in more information about volunteer opportunities/needs, contact Timothy Wood at 800-782-2451, twood@thefellowship.info or visit <http://www.thefellowship.info/Global%20Missions/Volunteer%20Missions/Tsunami%20Relief.icm>.

He's right – and there is so very much we can do. At the very least, we can pray, and we can give. Others will do more, with cards and letters and e-mail. Some will write to governmental officials. Others will organize groups to remind us that this disaster will not be over with in a couple of months. Some will consider taking several weeks off and going to another country, and some might even take a year off and relocate to Sri Lanka. But whatever you decide to do, you must do something. We must all do something. Our government is responding, but that isn't all that we should do. Relief agencies around the globe are responding, but that isn't all that we should do. Individuals, and churches, and

denominations are responding, but we should
and we must do more.

John Calvin, theologian from the 16th century,
said, “All the blessings we enjoy are Divine
deposits, committed to our trust on this
condition, that they should be dispensed for the
benefit of our neighbors.”⁵ This week, we’ve
all been reminded of our blessings, and we’ve
all been reminded of our responsibilities. Let
us show our love for God by offering the love
that is in our hearts to those who need it.

¹ <http://www.deccan.com/TueEditorial/Editorial.asp>

² <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/31/opinion/31herbert.html?th>

³ James Hastings Rashdall (1858-1924), Principles and Precepts [1927]

⁴ <http://blogs.salon.com/0001772/>

⁵ John Calvin (1509-1564), The Institutes of the Christian Religion [1559]