

## Getting Past Tilt Revelation 7:9-17

If you can, try to remember how you felt when you heard the news about each of the following events:

- The massacre of 12 students and a teacher at Columbine High School in Colorado by two students in April 1999;
- The killing of five young girls and the wounding of five others in an Amish school by a lone gunman in Pennsylvania in October 2006;
- The slaying of 32 students and teachers at Virginia Tech by a deranged student in April 2007;
- The killing of three women and the wounding of nine others by a lone gunman at a fitness center near Pittsburgh in August 2009;
- The murder of 13 soldiers on the grounds of Fort Hood in Texas in November 2009.

If you're like most people, you experienced a sense of deep shock and dismay on hearing the news of the first of those events. But unless you were personally connected to a victim of one of the subsequent tragedies, it's likely that each one had progressively less emotional impact on you. In fact, by the time the last of these was reported, your reaction may have been little more than a sad shake of the head and a weary utterance of, "Oh, no. Not again." And you probably turned your attention away from the news much more quickly than you did after Columbine.

That isn't surprising. We've lived through 9/11. We frequently hear body counts from terrorist activity. By way of television and the Internet, we've witnessed such awful stuff that our shock threshold has been raised. Now when we hear of such tragedies as the most recent slaughter of innocents, our reaction is more controlled.

Following the Virginia Tech shootings, columnist Daniel Henninger, writing in the Wall Street Journal, commented on this growing numbness to bad news. He said that "it may be that as a nation we've reached tilt with tragedy.

'Tilt' is the famous metaphor drawn from the old pinball machines, which shut down if one banged on them too hard. Pinballs could survive plenty of random shocks to the system. But there were limits. Of late, we have been banged on hard." Later in the same column, he wrote, "Our capacity for shock at genuine violence has been recalibrated."

This is not criticism. When tragedies become commonplace, it just isn't humanly possible for us who are at a distance from them to experience the same level of emotional distress as those who are close at hand. And our lessened reaction has nothing to do with not caring or a lack of empathy.

It's that we have a survival function that causes us to become protective of our emotional energy. We cannot continue to dump it out day after day on extreme events and have any left for daily living.

And so a kind of numbness creeps in, and to some degree, it needs to. It's a defense mechanism that keeps us from reaching our personal tilt point.

Such numbness also gives us a jaded view of life, a pervasive pessimism that whispers to us that the cards really are stacked against us, and that no matter how much we think we've organized our lives, the forces of chaos and destruction will ultimately prevail.

We hear some of those whispers after almost every one of these shootings. Some commentator says the incident should reignite the debate about gun control, but those of us who've been around awhile find ourselves thinking something such as, "Yeah, this latest tragedy might cause some debate, but even if some changes are made, it won't make the kind of difference we need. People who are determined to kill others will always find a way to do so." But do you hear in that admission deep pessimism — that nothing could have prevented it, or something like it — that neither arming everybody nor disarming everybody would make much difference?

That's a fatalism we don't wish to surrender to, but it nibbles at the edge of our minds when we contemplate awful things. Fully developed, it can cause us to doubt God's existence, or at least his goodness.

Against that, there's the vision that John of Patmos had of the eternal age to come, where a multitude of people — so great it cannot be counted — with representatives from every nation, tribe, peoples, and language group, stand worshiping before the throne of the Lamb of God.

And they cry out good news: "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" When John seeks to know who these people of this multitude are, he is told, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

In the context of John's time, the "great ordeal" likely referred to the bitter experiences — the bad news — that befell the followers of Jesus at the onset of the Jerusalem war in A.D. 66. But we can read it in our own context and apply it to the bad-news ordeals of our own time.

In contrast to the pessimism that first-century ordeal might have engendered, however, this Revelation passage sees the brightness, the good news, beyond it. These people, who have come through that great ordeal faithfully, "will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life ...."

They are the ones who were numbed by the battering of bad news in their day, but in the realm to come, they are "un-numbed." In fact, they have no need for defensive numbing, because "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

But what about us? If this passage is to fit into our existence somewhere, it has to be read as belonging to some future that we cannot see and can only envision. And then we can only hold

on to that vision with the most slender of threads, those of promise and hope, and perhaps even wish.

We do note, however, that the multitude in Revelation sees this brightness because they are gathered around the throne of God in worship together. Perhaps, in that time to come, that throne is the place where they get their questions about life answered. But what John's vision shows us is that in that place of worship, they jointly perceive what they need to know, that the Lamb is their shepherd

As we who live on this side of eternity, what we need to know is that God is still here in this life, that he hasn't left us, that he is our shepherd, too. And corporate worship can bring us that assurance; it can give us a glimpse of the divine perspective.

It's significant that we don't go to church for private devotions. We go there as part of a congregation, and we get some of the uplift we need from fellow worshipers.

We shouldn't discount the power of corporate worship to help us when numbing news bombards us. A 2003 study gives us some evidence in that direction. Researchers started with records of 5,124 male and female subjects from a heart study done in 1948, looking for risk factors for heart trouble, that was done in Framingham. The original researchers had noted each participant's close friends, colleagues, and family members simply so that if the participant moved away, the researchers could contact the friends to locate the participant.

Looking at that information, the 2003 researchers realized it could be transformed into a detailed map of the human relationships of those folks. Almost the entire social network of the community was chronicled in these old records. The researchers were able to construct detailed diagrams of the social networks of the Framingham residents.

As they began tracking those people as an interconnected network rather than as a mass of individuals, they discovered that the social networks influenced the behavior of the people involved, even as the participants spread out over a larger geographic area.

They first analyzed obesity trends, and found they were the same as national trends. But looking at it from the social-network angle, the researchers realized that while the whole group discovered fast food at the same time, the social-network effect was what caused the change. In other words, when your friends change their eating habits, it's likely that you will, too.

They found a similar trajectory with smoking. The researchers found that friends and family had a positive influence, and that people quit together.

Both eating habits and smoking are behaviors, but the researchers went further and found that such things as happiness are also influenced by our social networks. Because the original study asked people to describe their moods, the latter research showed that essentially, happy people have happy friends and unhappy people have unhappy friends. In other words, gloom is

contagious, but so is joy.

It doesn't take much thought to apply that same dynamic to people who worship together. One thing that helps us maintain hope when soul-numbing bad news is all around us is that we're coming before God in company with others who share that hope.

So it's no wonder that in the eternal age to come, those gathered around God's throne aren't described one by one but as an uncountable multitude. They grew to be so many because they were already following Jesus in company with each other when they were on this side of eternity.

There have been enough awful tragedies caused by somebody with a grudge, or paranoia, or evil in their heart, or a desire to get even or whatever, that we assume similar things will continue to happen from time to time in some place in our society. Evil is real, sin rages in people's hearts, madness descends, despair begets chaos.

What's more, there's no guarantee that we or our loved ones might not someday be among the victims.

But standing here among the people of God, in the place of worship, we can sense the truth: that good is stronger than evil, that there is something — something — that cannot be taken from us because God has given it to us. And furthermore, we together know that nothing — nothing — can separate us from the love of God.

It's that knowledge that helps us not tilt when bad things happen. Amen