

*On 7 December 2011, at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City, Dr. Frank James III addressed a gathering of UN diplomats. It was a Christmas event and Dr. James, a historian and theologian, spoke eloquently of what it must have been like for Mary to bring a Son into our broken world.*

*The mixture of promise and pain, which characterizes every birth, surely accompanied Jesus' birth. But in our celebrations, we always focus on the hope, joy, and peace proclaimed by the angels so long ago.*

*In this article, Dr. James recounts a Christmas five years ago, when tragedy and loss shattered the hope and peace of a family's Christmas.*

*Christmas is the story of a God "who loved so much that He sent His Son" to rescue a broken humanity. In the Christmas of 2006, Frank James experienced afresh the gravitational pull of God's unfailing love.*

*We all experience times when God seems somehow hidden. Let these thoughtful reflections guide you to a faith that finds hope through heartache.*

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## **In the Shadow of Mount Hood**

*Meeting God in the mystery of grief.*

Frank A. James III | posted 10/05/2010 10:01AM

Midnight, it is said, is the portal between this world and the next and is somehow in league with chaos, death, and mystery. It is the moment of dark visitations. So it was for me in December 2006. My sleep was interrupted by a phone call, and I was instantly shocked into full consciousness: My younger brother was trapped in a snow cave on Mount Hood, and an unyielding blizzard prevented rescue.

The mountain proved to be Kelly's final adventure. Losing my brother on Mount Hood has been a painful reminder of my own spiritual fragility. None of us is immune to the heartaches and sorrows that inhabit this misbegotten world. Though I am a preacher, a professor of historical theology, and the provost of a theological seminary, I have found it agonizingly difficult to come to terms with my brother's death. It is one thing to talk about death in the abstract. It is entirely another to cope with the death of someone you love very, very much. The truth of the matter is that losing a loved one hurts down to the deepest parts of your soul.

I was the first to learn the news days later. Hearing those words announcing his death was like a blow to the solar plexus knocking the breath out of me, but telling the rest of my family was more dreadful. I had known heartache before, but this transcended every previous emotion I had ever experienced. My vision blurred. My feet were heavy and seemed to resist carrying me to the next room, where my family anxiously awaited the latest news of the rescue mission on Mount Hood. Kelly's wife, Karen, the children, our mother, three brothers and a sister—they took the news hard. I have never heard weeping like I heard that night in the village at the foot of the mountain. The Bible sometimes refers to "wailing" as an especially forlorn kind of weeping. That is what I heard that night—wailing. I hope I never hear that sound again.

Death is ugly, and we cannot—indeed, should not—try to make it palatable or explain it away with pious platitudes. Death is a cruel, brutal, and fearsome trespasser into this world. It is an intruder and a thief. It has severed an irreplaceable relationship with my brother. We shared the same story, and he knew me in a way no other person did. Kelly would no longer return my calls. Never again would I hear him cheerfully mock me as "Frankie Baby." Sometimes I see him in a dream, and I reach out to grasp him—but he is not there.

We are created for life, not death. Kelly had a shameless zest for living life to the fullest. When death strikes suddenly from the shadows or claws at us until the last breath, those left behind experience numbness and disorientation. Somehow we know in our hearts that it is not supposed to be this way.

## An Honest Question posed from a Broken Heart

One question haunts me: Where was God when Kelly was freezing to death on Mount Hood? For me, it is not whether I should ask such a question, but how I ask it. One can ask the question in a fit of rage, shaking one's fist at God. Many of us, if we are candid, have done that. But once the primal anger settles to a low boil, we can—and, I would submit, should—ask the question.

I am not suggesting that mere mortals can stand in judgment of God or call him to account. God does not report to me. But an honest question posed from a broken heart is to my mind a good and righteous thing.

To ask this hard question is an act of faith. It presupposes a genuine relationship in which the creature actually engages the Creator. If God is my Father, can't I humbly ask why he did not come to Kelly's rescue? For me, to not ask this question would be a failure to take God seriously.

So, where was God? I don't know. I may never know. Perhaps the biggest challenge for my faith is to come to terms with what Martin Luther called the hiddenness of God—*Deus absconditus*. Contemporary Christians are often uncomfortable admitting that God sometimes hides from us. But King David was unafraid to ask, "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Ps. 10:1).

As far as I know, God never answered David. Even more bewildering—God was not only silent, he also commemorated his silence for posterity. By including the Psalms in the Holy Book, God made his hiddenness a part of Israel's worship and preserved it for all humanity to ponder. It boggles my mind to imagine throngs of Israelites singing the chorus, "Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"—year after year, century after century, millennium after millennium. This must have been a gut-wrenching experience, and I suspect it was often sung with tears.

I am still trying to make sense of Kelly's death. I don't know why God did not rescue Kelly from the cold grip of the mountain. What I do know is that my relationship with God has entered another dimension—one more mystifying and more honest.

## The Divine Gravitational Pull

Grief is a relentless predator. Those who have lost loved ones tell me that one never completely escapes it. Strangely, a part of me does not want the grief to stop, because the grief itself is a connection to Kelly. Yet another part of me is so weary from carrying the burden of a broken heart.

In the midst of our family tragedy, I made a peculiar discovery. One would think that grief and disappointment with God would lead to bitterness against him. In my nightmare, I not only prayed intensely in private but also publicly declared my faith and confidence in God on CNN—but Kelly froze to death anyway.

There is disappointment, sadness, and confusion, but oddly, there is no retreat from God. Instead, I find myself drawn to God. To be sure, he is more enigmatic than I thought, but I still can't shake loose from him. There seems to be a kind of gravitational pull toward God.

I am not the first to notice this gravitational pull amid the angst of divine silence. In Psalm 13, David calls out, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (v.

1). A few verses later, the same distressed David is declaring, "But I trust in your unfailing love" (v. 5). Even as he pleads with God to come to his rescue, David finds himself inexorably drawn to him.

It seems paradoxical that David would trust a God who hides himself when David needs him most. But as I have meditated on David's Psalms, I sense he had a different kind of relationship with God—one not many Christians understand. It is more mysterious than I had been led to believe. It is a relationship where simplistic spiritual formulas and religious clichés have no place. David's relationship with God combines brutal honesty with what Luther called a grasping faith. It is a relationship where disappointment is juxtaposed with hope.

One of the profoundly difficult lessons is that amid all the spiritual consternation in the shadow of Mount Hood, God has manifested himself in my grief. Somehow he is found in the disappointment, the confusion, and the raw emotions. This does not exactly make sense to me, and I'm quite sure I don't like it. But I have felt the divine gravity pull me back toward God, even while I am dumbstruck by his hiddenness. My conception of faith has become Abrahamic—which is to say, I must trust God even though I do not understand him.

Many Christians read the Nicene Creed with its marvelous stanza, "On the third day he rose again." They know the story of Christ's dead body being placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea on Friday and pulsing with new life on Sunday. In violation of natural laws, Jesus was again breathing and walking among his astonished disciples. One doubtful disciple even felt compelled to put his finger into Jesus' wound to convince himself that the crucified Jesus was indeed alive. It was hard to believe, but there before them all stood Jesus.

What does the empty tomb of Jesus have to do with the snowy tomb of Kelly James? Everything. Kelly confessed, as I do and as Christians have for nearly 1,700 years, that "we look for the resurrection of the dead." Nicene Christians were not immune to the despondency of despair and grief. Over the centuries, and amid enough tears to fill an ocean, many of us have had to bury our loved ones. But we bury them with a promise: "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ... For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:20, 22).

## The Story Behind the Story

In December 2006, Kelly James and his climbing partners, Brian Hall and Jerry "Nikko" Cooke, died on Mount Hood in northern Oregon. Their expedition was intended to prepare them for their lifelong dream of climbing Mount Everest. The climb began on December 8, but they encountered a rogue blizzard of enormous intensity and duration. They burrowed into a snow cave to wait out the storm. But the storm was unrelenting. Apparently Kelly had been injured, so the hard decision was made that Brian and Nikko should go for help. Sensing the gravity of their situation, Kelly must have released Brian from their long-standing pact never to leave one another. Alone in the snow cave, Kelly made desperate calls on his cell phone. On Sunday, December 10, against all odds, one call mysteriously connected, and he was able to speak to his wife and two of his sons for six minutes. It was the last time they would hear Kelly's voice.

From the outset, the story captivated the national news media, and the three families asked if I would serve as the public spokesperson. A massive search was launched, and finally, on December 17, we were notified that a body had been discovered. The fateful call came that evening, informing us that the recovered body had a signet ring with the initials JKJ—Jeffrey Kelly James. The search for Brian and Nikko continued, but their bodies were never found. I preached at my brother's funeral on December 27, 2006.

—*Frank James*