

Wedgwood declares God is faithful 20 years after tragedy

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FORT WORTH (BP)—For Tralissa Griffin, whose daughter Cassie was among those who lost their lives at Wedgwood Baptist Church 20 years ago, healing began with God's comforting voice.

For Cassie's father David, his shaken faith was strengthened when he saw a vision of his 14-year-old daughter praising God at his heavenly throne.

Kathy Jo Rogers, who lost her then-husband at the Wednesday night youth concert Sept. 15, 1999, became newly aware of God's glory and faithfulness.

"I know that there's a special grace on the ones who are right in the center," Rogers said, "because I remember how God carried us when I would have looked ... at me and thought, 'She won't make it.' And God was with us, because we experienced his glory during that time. We experienced his closeness. ... His glory is the most real thing of all."

The three were among many who proclaimed God's faithfulness at a Sept. 15 service, 20 years after Larry Gene Ashbrook killed seven and injured seven others before killing himself at the Fort Worth church.

'God is faithful'

Dale Braswell, senior pastor of the congregation since 2015, called the shooting a defining moment that doesn't define the church's future.

"The events of Sept. 15, 1999, will forever be a defining moment of this church," he told hundreds gathered at the three-hour service. "What I think

the defining moment for Wedgwood needs to be moving forward is in celebrating and remembering the moments not in which people went from life to death, but from which people go from death to life, spiritually speaking."

Al Meredith, pastor of the congregation at the time of the shooting, spoke at the event and is still a member of the church. He retired as pastor in 2015.

"People ask will we get over it. Of course not, but we got through it ... even if we never understand why," Meredith said in an interview. "The primary thing is that God is faithful. He was with us on that night.

"So many were protected that night, even though eight lives were taken, including the shooter. In the end we win, because of the hope of heaven."

The anniversary theme, "God Wastes Nothing," is true, Meredith said, referencing the promise in Romans 8:28.

"Pastor Dale's message was we have celebrated and remembered how God translated our loved ones from life into death," Meredith said. "But looking forward, we want to be able to celebrate how God translates lost people from death into life."

Wedgwood Associate Pastor Jeff Laster reportedly was the first person the 48-year-old gunman shot. Wounded in the stomach and arm, Laster survived the shots the gunman fired shortly after entering the church.

"We don't want to just be recognized for this incident in our history," Laster said in a Wedgwood video inviting the public to the anniversary service. "We want to be recognized for the other good things we've done, like school supplies, helping with the police locally, missions, the different ministries that we do that reach our community."

Desire to be ‘known for more’ than tragedy



Dale Braswell, lead pastor of Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, preached from Exodus 3 as the congregation marked the 20th anniversary of a mass shooting in its sanctuary. (Wedgwood Baptist Church video screen capture)

Braswell stated a similar hope for the church where Sunday worship attendance averages 615.

“My heart is that when people Google Wedgwood Baptist Church, that word (shooting) doesn’t pop up at the top of Google search bar,” Braswell said. “We’ll never forget it, but may we also be known for more.”

Braswell’s sermon based on God’s deliverance of the Hebrews in Exodus 3 offered salvation and encouraged personal evangelism, anchored in God’s deliverance of the Hebrews from enslavement in Egypt.

“I have heard the cries of my people. I’m aware of their suffering. I’m

aware of their tears. I'm aware of their hardship," said Braswell, characterizing God's approach toward the Hebrews.

"I'm aware of the persecution and the trials that they're going through, and so I'm going to answer their prayers. I'm going to come in, and I'm going to deliver them. I'm going to free them.

"I'm going to rescue them. I'm going to take them out of the land of persecution and slavery and suffering, and I'm going to take them to a beautiful Promised Land."