

EDITORIAL: Osama, unpredictability & The End

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We recently experienced one of those rare, almost-universal “Where-were-you-when?” moments, didn’t we? “Osama bin Laden killed by U.S. Navy SEALs.” I’ll remember that statement forever. A friend read the headline from a news feed on his cell phone as we sat under the stars in Winston-Salem, N.C., where we attended a board meeting of the *Standard’s* news partner Associated Baptist Press.

For most people, the report of bin Laden’s death triggered memories of an infinitely painful moment. Where were you when you heard about 9/11?

Editor Marv Knox

Sudden cataclysmic events sear themselves into the public psyche, collectively and individually. Practically everyone of a certain age remembers where they were and what they were doing when they received news of President Kennedy’s assassination, the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. and both space shuttle explosions. Other events—less wide-scale but no less intense—drill down and fasten to the core of smaller communities. The tornadoes of ’11 will provide a dating-marker in Alabama for a generation, just as sanctuary fires mark congregational epochs.

In addition to counterbalancing 9/11 and providing a pivot point in the war on terror, the sudden elimination of bin Laden offered abundant food for theological thought.

Almost as quickly as jubilant crowds poured into city streets across America, Facebook friends and Twitter tweeters began asking: How should Christians respond to the death of someone who, for millions of people the world over and particularly in the West, symbolized raw evil?

Thoughtful, faithful Christians affirm feelings of relief, if not outright jubilation. Based upon principles of justice, bin Laden deserved to die for his role in 9/11, as well as other terrorist activity. And given his ongoing leadership of al Qaeda, principles of utility support his death now, before he could direct his forces to kill even more people. If the world is a safer place and fewer people will be victimized because he is gone, then relief is justified.

But faithful Christians who experienced a measure of grief over bin Laden's death are no less patriotic than those who danced in the streets. He seemed to personify malevolence, yet he was a human being, created in the image of God. That almost sounds blasphemous, doesn't it? But orthodox Christianity maintains all humans bear the creative mark of their Creator. Moreover, bin Laden no doubt died without a relationship to Jesus Christ. Evangelical Christians appropriately grieve at the death of all people who do not know their Savior. As our friend and fellow Texas Baptist Jim Denison reminds us, the best response to the gravest danger in our world today is prayer for the conversion of Muslims. Even horrific Muslims like bin Laden.

Although the Navy SEALs practiced their mission for months, Osama's death came as a complete surprise to most of the world. This has been quite a year for surprises. The earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis in Japan. Political revolution and the fall of dictators in the Middle East. Tornadoes and floods across the South. And, inevitably, more personal shocks, such as the diagnosis of advanced cancer and the debilitating fall of friends.

If you look for them, surprises supply serendipitous spiritual blessings. They remind us life is not entirely predictable and we're not in control. Of course, this comes as a shock. Often, it's also a disappointment. We tend to think we can control our destinies. And while God allows us to cooperate in creation, we are not ultimate. Even in our grief and rage, we remember the

solid, soothing truth of Romans 8:28—God is in this life with us, working to bring good out of even the worst we can imagine.

And speaking of imagination, California broadcaster Harold Camping and his followers are predicting Judgment Day will take place May 21, and the end of the world will occur Oct. 21. I wouldn't go out and buy your Rapture robe, since Jesus said we won't know the day of his coming. But if they're right, I hope my next column appears in the *Pearly Gates Gazette*.

Marv Knox is editor of the Baptist Standard. Visit his blog at baptiststandard.com.

[Editor's Note: This story was corrected 05/06/11 changing Obama to Osama in "Although the Navy SEALs practiced their mission for months, Obama's death came as a complete surprise to most of the world."]