

Have You Tried Praying About It?

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
Brookdale Christian Church, New Jersey, an Interfaith Service
Preached on September 11, 2011.

Text: Psalm 46: “*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble.*”

There is more to what happened on Sept 11th ten years ago than the political division it created in our country. Unfortunately very few know this because, unless we know someone in the armed services, it was largely absent from the news. But with the enormity of the tragedy and sacrifice 10 years ago, many young people who had heretofore been consumed with computer games, cellphones, instant messaging and shopping malls signed up to be part of something bigger than all that.

If I had been in lower Manhattan that morning, perhaps I could tell you stories of goodness that horrible day in the Towers. But I wasn't. I was over the river in Glen Ridge. Yes, I found the next few months horrible, trying to preach to a congregation that expected me to have something uplifting to say, something that would explain the evil we'd all witnessed. But the way I was really changed, had to do with the young people I knew in the Navy and Marine Corps. And it's they I will tell you about.

In the midst of all the evils and horror of war, there are moments of real grace. Each of us on this chancel struggled this weekend to find something hopeful to say about what has happened in last decade. Here's one, only one, but one of many more. In the midst of war, there are always great acts of courage and heroism but also of goodness, pure and simple.

The story concerns something that happened in Iraq. In years to come the Battle for Fallujah will go down in history as one of the greatest moments of the US Marine Corps, as heroic as Iwo Jima. This is one of the hidden stories from those dark days of 2005-06. I learned the story because I know the chaplain, Fr. Marc Bishop of Chelmsford, MA, not far from where my wife Cyndi grew up in Andover. He was mobilized with the 25th Marines during that time.¹ Fallujah is in Al Anbar Province, where I was just last December. By 2008 it had been pacified but two years before, Fallujah was one horrible place, where people did things to one another best not mentioned in a pulpit. But in the midst of wars there are also acts of incredible human kindness and miracles of God. This is such a story.

The first person you need to know is Chris Walsh—he was a Navy Corpsman serving with Chaplain Bishop in 2006. Walsh grew up in St. Louis in an Irish Catholic family. After high school, unlike his other friends, Walsh didn't go to college. Instead he took a trip across the country until he ran out of money in San Francisco. From there he called his mother Maureen and came back home. In the fall that year he enrolled in an EMT course and began working on

¹ To read the entire story, see the article by Kevin Cullen in the [Boston Globe](http://boston.com/news/world/articles/2006/12/04/saving_baby_mariam).
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the streets of St. Louis, enjoying his work in an ambulance, but lamenting to his mother that there were too many wasted hours between the real emergency calls. After the Sept. 11th attacks, Walsh joined the Navy. His father had been a Marine in Vietnam and his brother Patrick was already in Iraq. Walsh at thirty years old, like many reservists, was older than most in his unit. Because of his experience as an EMT, he was often the go-to guy for special cases. Frequently on patrol in Fallujah in the big Humvees, Walsh would see an injured Iraqi on the street and get the Marines to stop. Several had to set up perimeter security while Walsh set up impromptu street clinics to treat the injured.

On a routine patrol in June, an IED exploded in the road in front of the vehicle Walsh was in. The Marines jumped out and looked for the triggerman, a terrorist with a cell phone to set off the explosion. They saw him on a rooftop, then on the ground making his escape through the warren of ramshackle houses in the city. They went door to door searching for the fellow. Walsh, though a medical corpsman, was also armed. At the door of one house a woman emerged from a room with her baby saying, over and over, "*Baby! Baby sick!*" Walsh put his rifle down and took a look. Though he had seen horrible sights on the streets of St. Louis and in Al Anbar, he had never seen anything like this. The child only months old had been born with her bladder outside her body. He took photos to show his unit's medical officer, CAPT Sean Donovan from Boston. When Dr. Donovan saw the photos he told Walsh that she had bladder exstrophy, a condition that would be fatal to the baby without medical attention, something unavailable in a million years in Fallujah. Walsh immediately launched a campaign to get the child out. The baby's name was Mariam, the Arabic cognate of the Hebrew Miriam, and the English, Mary.

At the time 5,000 other Iraqis wanted out, and Mariam's case stalled in a mountain of red tape. But the Marines were hopeful. Walsh found another Marine, Mike Henderson from Maine, whose nephew had had the same condition and was treated by Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. Dr. Donovan found that Dr. Rafael Pieretti was there and one of the few in the US who specialized in the corrective surgery for this condition. Fr. Bishop contacted Christopher Anderson at his St. Mary's Church back in Chelmsford who was president of the Massachusetts High Technology Council. Anderson started collecting pledges to pay for baby Mariam and her family to come to Boston. The hospital and surgeon agreed to take the case pro bono. "We had everything lined up," Dr. Donovan said, "but couldn't get the permission to get her out of Iraq."

In the meantime Walsh and Donovan and several Marines would make a weekly and nightly trip to Mariam's house to treat her, to try to protect her from infection. To do this they traveled different routes each week. And, again, several Marines provided security around the house while Mariam was seen by Walsh and Donovan.

Then on Labor Day, September 4th, on a routine patrol not far from Mariam's house, another IED took out a Humvee, killing three Marines. One of them was Chris Walsh. A few weeks later, this unit Marines would leave theater. During their deployment the 25th had lost 11 members of the battalion and 83 had been wounded. They decided the best thing to do to honor Walsh was to get baby Mariam to Boston for her surgery. They pushed some more but still the case was bogged down.

Other Marines took Walsh's place in the nightly trips to the baby's house to care for her, not telling Mariam's family what happened to Walsh. In the last week of their time in Al Anbar, Dr. Donovan despaired that they would get the baby out. He stopped by for a visit to Fr. Bishop. The priest asked the doctor, "Have you prayed about it?" Donovan admitted he had not, so the two went to the small dusty chapel next to the chaplain's office and said the *Memorare*, a prayer to Mary, the mother of Jesus, which in part reads, "Never was it known that anyone who fled to you for protection, implored your help or sought your intercession, was left unaided." Sean Donovan and Marc Bishop knelt down and said a Christian prayer for a Muslim girl. The next day, Donovan opened an e-mail notifying him that Mariam had been cleared for medical evacuation to Boston.

When Mariam and her grandparents got to Mass General, everything worked wonderfully that the Marines had arranged. Dr. Pieretti's surgery was successful and immediately the little girl began to gain weight and thrive. Dr. Donovan called Walsh's mother to tell her about what her son had accomplished and how his friends had chosen to honor his memory. Maureen Walsh decided then and there to fly to Boston so she could see Mariam.



Chris Walsh (left) and his mother Maureen (right) with nurse Katie Dinare holding Mariam at Mass General Hospital. Photos courtesy of the *Boston Globe*, Dec. 4, 2006.

When Mariam's grandfather met Maureen Walsh at the hospital he said to her, in Arabic, "Thank you for your son. This was an act of God. *Allah* sent Chris. To Mariam. So she will live." Walsh's mother agreed as she held the baby. "There are too many coincidences for it to be a coincidence," she said. "Chris was waiting all his whole life for something like this." Then as the Marine's mother gazed into Mariam's eyes and stroked the baby's hair, she said, "Look at her. Isn't she beautiful?"

Miracles, even in supposedly God-forsaken places like Fallujah in 2006. If God can find Mariam, and Walsh, and Donovan, and Chaplain Bishop there, God can work miracles everywhere. I don't know what impossible situations and choices we'll make in the next decade as a country, as individuals. But Padre Bishop's question is still the right one as we confront this confusing, complicated, heart-rending time we live in. "Have you tried praying about it?"

End

Have You Tried Praying Advent 4.DOC