

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Sunday, September 11, 2011
Lessons: Exodus 2:15-25 and Luke 18:1-8

REMEMBERING HELPFULLY

A child in first grade on that day we were attacked and the twin towers fell in Manhattan is now likely a junior in high school. A toddler then is now probably in sixth or seventh grade and does not remember that day at all. Both have lived the years in a post-9/11 America continuously at war, but the wars have not been permitted to intrude into the children's daily life unless, of course, one happens to have a parent or other relative who has been "over there" fighting in them. During the warfare in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, we watched on our televisions, we saw images of combat, and we heard "body counts." These days, we hear more about the Phillies than the soldiers, and our children may know more about zombie wars than the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 or the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. We seem able even to forget that those wars cost amazing amounts of money besides their incalculable cost to people and families both here at home and "over there."

I will not forget that terrible day – my shock and disbelief, my fear for people caught in the towers, the Pentagon, and the airplane over Pennsylvania, or my anger at seeing images of women dancing in dusty streets in celebration of the carnage. Neither will I forget how my then recently enhanced understanding of the lives and constant fear of those dancing women rose up to wrap my anger, complicating my thoughts and feelings with the normally impossible mixture of empathy and contempt. It is bewildering to feel both at once for the same people. But, as I shared in my sermon on Sunday, September 16, 2001, I had just read an account of the daily terror of children and parents in Palestine, an account written by that time's only remaining child psychiatrist on the West Bank. The children, she said, walked to school when they were in front of buildings but ran through the gaps between buildings for fear of snipers. Every day. The children were suffering stress syndrome normally seen in soldiers, for which their parents blamed Israel and us. So, some Palestinian women danced in the street when the towers fell. For me, it was impossible not to be angry at the sight but impossible also not to feel empathy mingling like a gate-crasher with my anger.

As some of you know, I made a book of my "9/11" sermons with short essays in between, and the sermons are, of course, dated because I preached them in particular worship services right here in specific time and place. I was not then looking back as I am now but doing my best to look out, around, forward . . . and up. Yes, "up" as we say when we refer to God. The book was never published except online by me on my own Web site, but from

time to time I go back and reread a sermon or an essay and recall to mind my attempts to look and perceive with faith what was happening and what might happen next. I say, with no satisfaction, that much of what I feared and tried to warn against – though, of course, with no national platform – is what has happened over the ten years from that day to this one.

Within the tragic and horrible context, our first responses were wonderful. The New Jersey Turnpike northbound looked like a huge parade of emergency vehicles streaming toward New York. In the city itself, police officers, firefighters, and others rushed into danger and some into waiting death to rescue any people who could be rescued. One woman on the street in lower Manhattan, watching in horror, said she could not see buildings falling because the people inside them were all her mind could envision.

I remember thinking, maybe saying aloud (I don't know), "God, make it stop so we can at least get back on our feet!" When it finally did stop, we spoke of the responders with deep respect and gratitude, of the victims and their families with grief and compassion as though we knew them, and of the perpetrators with outrage (and rightly so!) but with a call for justice. Then, however, wounded pride rose up to overpower justice and compassion both, and wounded pride followed what is called "the macho script," which seeks to restore pride by attacking someone, perhaps not even the people who had attacked us, just so somebody pays, which is supposed to bring satisfaction and restore pride. And so we came to that event the news/entertainment media kept calling "shock and awe," the bombing of Baghdad. I remember feeling sick to my stomach. Maybe what that woman on the Manhattan street said on September 11 helped me see through the weirdly pretty lighting up of the night sky to the terror of the invisible people on the ground in the city. It is the macho script that fuels the cycles of revenge to make for never-ending war and terror.

Where are we now in our post-9/11 world, and how shall we remember that terrible day, September 11, 2001? We remember the victims and their families, as well we should. We remember the responders and their families, as well we should. And we remember the soldiers and Marines, as well we should, but we do not think of them enough because their struggles and even their deaths remain mostly hidden from us, lest we feel for them and the wars become unpopular at home, and so, I'm afraid, they struggle on with few watching.

As the people of a community of faith in Jesus Christ, we must remember by looking back through the lenses of faith, hope, and love, because those three things are the truths God makes to endure. We have and we make choices about our remembering. Even commonly, on ordinary days, we make those choices. Did I have a good day or a bad one? Unless I had a really good or really bad day, the answer may depend upon what I choose to remember and keep in mind. Do I hold on to the causes for thankfulness or resentment and bitterness? Redemption of our past involves how we choose to remember it and what our choices enable

us to offer God in the way we live in the present and future. I believe that the Spirit of God works within us and through us for others as we are enabled by our trust in God to choose in faith, hope, and love rather than in fear, cynicism, and bitterness.

Should we not be angry at terrorist attacks? Of course we should! What kind of people would we be if terrorism did not even make us angry? But we need to realize that terrorism comes in a variety of forms, not all of which are explosive. The explosive forms of terrorism generally come from people who lack power to get their way by more direct and outwardly civil means. The sweatshops in which women and girls make much of our clothing on the cheap perpetrate a form of sustained terrorism. The famines which could be prevented if governments would allow their prevention are a systematic and deadly type of terrorism. I would argue that the current massive trend toward eliminating job stability and benefits in favor of easily replaceable, temporary, un-benefitted workers at almost all levels is a devastating form of systemic terrorism that is crushing the spirits of our younger generations, removing hope for their future and pushing them down toward despair.

The brief clause that concludes our reading from Exodus is very hard to translate but speaks volumes about our God and the biblical message of hope and salvation. Our version mistranslates the sentence, in my opinion, as, “God looked upon the Israelites, and God *took notice of them.*” Took notice of them? The message is merely that God is observant? No way. It says, in Hebrew, that God “knew,” but that word is packed with meaning because such knowing is relational, engaged, and sympathetic. We are being told that God felt the people’s sufferings with them. God was there in the twin towers. God was in the plane over Pennsylvania. God was in those obscure offices in the Pentagon. September 11, 2001 was a cruciform event in God’s eyes, and we need, I believe, to remember it as such and keep it as a cruciform event in our minds and hearts. What that means is that God, I truly believe, experienced 9/11 as a day bound together with Jesus’ crucifixion. God’s Son was dying in union with God’s children dying in the towers and in the plane crash. And lest we forget how it must feel to be a parent whose children are doing terrible things, let us remember that the terrorists themselves were created to be children of God, and so God’s rage – yes, rage, not “righteous indignation” – at the terrible evils people do must always be mixed with grief at the worst way to lose sons or daughters – not to death but to evil. The parent’s child is being killed, and the parent’s child is doing the killing. God was a slave in ancient Egypt, and God also knew and loved, with however much anger and grief, the taskmaster with whip in hand and even the arrogant pharaoh on the throne calling himself a god.

Jesus’ parable is delivered with tongue in cheek. Even the worst of human judges who neither regards God nor cares about people can be moved to provide the needed justice if pestered enough. The point is the contrast with God who loves us infinitely, hates injustices and cruelties, and longs for a world set right and healed. But setting the

circumstances right is not good enough; we ourselves need to be set right, and relationships need to be set right and not only personal relationships but those of community, nation, and world. So, Jesus concludes with the question, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith in the land” (or “upon the earth”)? Safety is not enough. Prosperity is not enough. We need to become responsive to God’s love and mercy. Then life can be set right so that justice prevails because then we will want justice to prevail – for the other person as well as for us.

Today we remember. Do the memories rekindle anger? Good, but anger remembered with faith is guided by God’s Spirit, not toward lust for revenge or pride in power that can strike back harder, but toward solidarity with people made to suffer by whatever means terrorism employs in our world. Do the memories make us sad? They should, but grieving with hope lifts us out of bitterness and depression, recommitting us to Jesus’ way of seeking healing, wholeness, and life for all people. Do we honor those who acted with honor, putting others above their own safety? Indeed, we do and we should, year-round! And faith, hope, and love should keep us from merely borrowing pride from their heroism as though we could be spectators in life soaking up the team’s victories without getting into the game ourselves. If we recognize honor when we see it in a firefighter, a medic, a police officer, or an office worker who stops in flight from death to help the person in the wheelchair down the stairs, then must we not seek faith’s courage to choose likewise, putting others before self?

God cares more personally and more deeply than we can understand, but we can keep putting our trust in God’s compassion and longing for human redemption. Then our remembering will help us look upward, outward, and forward in the life-embracing, self-giving, redemptive way of Jesus. Amen.