

about heaven. It's about "Ground Zero" in New York and people grieving. It's about Afghanistan and people starving, living in fear, and learning to hate. It's about Bridgeton, New Jersey and people struggling to overcome conditions of poverty and low expectations that push them down. It's about young adults who see no purpose or future for themselves and so escape into entertainments and highs. It's about girls and women striving for dignity, purpose, and achievement in the midst of commercial bombardment telling them skinny is pretty and pretty is everything, and it's about women in countries that treat them as worth less than animals. It's about children in affluent neighborhoods learning from their parents that privilege is their right and money their source of life. Salvation is much more than we have let ourselves realize or have shared with the world.

Jesus told a parable so people would keep praying and "not lose heart." Can God really be pestered? Maybe, maybe not, but the point is that God does not need to be pestered into caring about people and wanting to permeate this world with justice. We, however, need to persist in praying for that justice, wanting it, caring about it, and doing what we can to foster it. So, Jesus wants us to persist in crying out to God for justice and salvation—what, just for ourselves? No, for each other and for all the people in our contexts of life: our families, neighborhoods, schools, work places, and towns. Our nation and the nations of the world. Such prayers are not meaningless. They put our minds into harmony with the mind of God, and so they help to write God's teaching on our hearts. They appeal to God for salvation throughout the human community, which is so much more interconnected than our individualistic concept of salvation has allowed us to realize. We are not to lose heart. We must not turn away from this world where evils and failures go in cycles from generation to generation. We have a promise and a God who will keep it. We must persist so the answer to Jesus' question will be, "Yes." After assuring us that God will give justice, he asks, "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Let the answer be, "Yes." Let us not lose heart. Amen.

Comment: Our Lives in Context

For the first time in this book, we have a sermon that does not seem to say much about the events of September 11, beyond mentioning New York's Ground Zero in one sentence about salvation. Still, we need to ask what it means that salvation is about Ground Zero? Isn't salvation about heaven?

Yes and no, or maybe we should reverse the order and say, "No and yes." No, salvation is not primarily about heaven but earth. Still, in the end, salvation is also about Jesus' conquest of death, literal death, and so about what we call heaven. The reason for saying, "No," first is that we need to start with salvation here on earth, *within the context of our life in this world*.

When Christianity explains life solely in terms of people's getting into heaven, the meaning of life on this earth is truncated into a single decision—that of accepting Jesus Christ as my Savior

so I can get into heaven. Nothing else in life matters very much, except my keeping to the faith so I don't lose my salvation (some Christians say I can lose it, while others say I can't). Within such a presentation of Christian faith, tragedies such as the events of September 11, 2001 really matter only insofar as the people who died that day are considered to have gone to heaven or not (setting aside from this discussion the question of hell). So, we may assume, if we follow this type of Christian thinking, that some who died that day were saved while others were not. The tragedy of the event is reduced to this: that some who died lost any further chance to "get saved" and go to heaven. To such a way of thinking, the events of September 11 meant very little in themselves because life in this world means very little when heaven is all that truly matters.

In the gospels, Jesus speaks very little, scarcely at all, about heaven. He says much about the kingdom of God, but the kingdom is a matter of earth—of God's coming into our world to act so decisively that God's love and mercy will overcome all opposition to them and make life on earth the kind of life God wants it to be. In the Gospel of Matthew, the phrase "kingdom of God" is rendered as "kingdom of heaven," but in that phrase the word "heaven" is simply a substitute for the word "God," and it means kingdom of God. For reasons of piety, the Jewish people refrained from naming God directly and so used substitutions such as "heaven." In the parable of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel of Luke, the young man says, "Father I have sinned against heaven (meaning God) and against you (his father). . . ." So, neither the kingdom of God nor its substitute expression, the kingdom of heaven, refers to any place but earth. God has come close to the people of earth, and the difference God's coming will make will be made on earth.

Here, we are walking a fine line in terms of the terrible losses of September 11, but we need to walk that line. Certainly, our hope in God's love and mercy is not for this life only, and people grieving the loss of their loved ones need to know (if they can bear to hear it) that those who died still belong to God and to God's everlasting love. The promise of resurrection in union with Jesus stands, and nothing in this discussion is meant to take anything away from it. Jesus says to those who have put their trust in him, "Because I live, you will live also." Love is always personal and particular; no one person loved can replace another. God loves, which is the greatest truth we know of God and our greatest hope. We can trust God to hold on to those we love, in life and in death.

The purpose of this discussion to challenge us to enlarge our understanding of salvation and bring it home to the times and places in which we actually live in this world. We are creatures in time and space, and God meets us within our particular contexts in time and space—which is to say, God meets us where we are in our own real time of life. The Incarnation of the Word of God ("and the Word became flesh and lived among us") means just that: in a living human being, Jesus of Nazareth, God has come to us to give us life, hope, and salvation.

Jesus met people where and as they actually were. He healed the sick, found and recovered the lost, forgave the sinful, restored dignity to the disgraced, and broke the social barriers that kept whole groups of people from life and freedom as God's people. He brought salvation in many forms into the lives of particular people with names and personal histories. He spoke to the problems of human relationships and social conflicts. He accepted women as disciples and full-fledged human

beings, and some of those women became the first witnesses to his resurrection. He touched lepers and ate with sinners. He welcomed children. He even challenged his people's most righteously held prejudices, such as their contempt for Samaritans. Jesus' message was good news for the poor—for all people denied life, dignity, empowerment, and freedom in this world.

September 11 was a day of personal tragedy and great loss for many people. It was also a day of social, national, and international tragedy and outrage. As we look for ways to respond to that terrible day, we need to talk about earth, not just heaven, and we need to seek God's salvation within the contexts of life on earth. How do we, as people who believe in God's love for this world, try to encourage a wounded and angry nation to seek justice and peace, not merely revenge? We must not expect answers to come easily or choices to be crystal clear. We need, however, to be able to expect God to care about the matters of justice and peace on earth and not just about getting people into heaven when they die.

Salvation comes to people—individuals and groups or nations—within the contexts of real life in this world. As followers of Jesus, we must not give up on this world and its peoples. Jeremiah buys a piece of land in a country about to be destroyed. He buys that land so everyone will know the LORD God still has an investment in the land of Israel and its future. Jesus healed, taught, broke barriers, forgave sinners, suffered, and died because God still has the greatest investment of love in this world. So, it is not for Christians to write off the world as lost cause or its people as expendables to be left behind. We need to enlarge our concept of salvation greatly—back to its full biblical size. Then, we need to care about this world God loves so much and to want its salvation.

Will our actions as a nation work toward healing the tragedy of September 11 or perpetuating and enlarging it? As citizens, we can choose to assist terrorism's work by terrorizing foreigners among us. As a nation, we can enlarge terrorism by playing the empire and acting as though only our national interests matter in the world. Or we posture ourselves more humbly and seek ways toward justice and peace, not only for ourselves, but for other nations and peoples, too. We can open our eyes to conditions in our world and realize that justice *against* terrorists is not enough by itself; we also need to seek justice *for* the world's peoples, many of whom live in nearly constant fear, insecurity, and deprivation.

There are two kinds of terrorism in our world. Usually, we use the word "terrorism" for only one kind: that which blows up property and people, sends anthrax through the mail, disrupts normal life, and kills indiscriminately. That kind might be called radical terrorism, and it needs to be stopped. The other kind might be called institutionalized terrorism because it works within normal life, legally and respectably, through established laws and institutions to keep certain groups of people marginalized and exploited. Here, we find no explosive disruptions because, in this form of terrorism, the powerful terrorize the weak on a daily and routine basis. Institutionalized terrorism runs sweat shops, enslaves girls and young women as prostitutes for wealthy businessmen, shuts doors of opportunity on people of minority groups, blocks poorer nations from solving their economic distress, and maintains the imbalance of power in favor of those who already hold power. Injustice and exploitation are the ways of institutionalized terrorism, which guards its power and

privilege with police forces, armies, and banks. Institutionalized terrorism is a well-dressed, respectable hypocrite that feeds off the poor of the earth, pollutes and ravages the natural world, and takes its profits.

Do the existence and power of institutionalized terrorism justify radical actions such as the attacks of September 11? No! The people who perpetrated 9-11 do not want justice or peace; they want power and prestige for themselves and do not care how many people or even which people they kill to achieve their goals. They must be stopped. But the institutionalized exploitation of the world's poor must also be stopped. As Christians we need to see and say that justice and peace are not only about preserving America's way of life but about seeking God's way of life and salvation for all the world.

Community Interfaith Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving – November 22, 2001
Readings: Genesis 8:15-22 and Matthew 13:24-30

THANKSGIVING IN A HARD TIME

Where was God on September 11, 2001? For help and guidance in responding to that question, I call first upon the prophets of Israel and look to a work entitled, *The Prophets*, written by a philosopher and theologian who has greatly influenced me and many other people striving and struggling to know God in a world that so frequently and brutally contradicts all our affirmations of God's love and care. The author of *The Prophets* was the Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel, and when one of Congregation Beth Abraham's former rabbis and I were talking about him one day, the rabbi added to the first mention of Heschel, "may his name be blessed." In his book, Dr. Heschel draws us into the pathos or passion of God: the intense love, longing, anger, and even grief of the God of the prophets. Many sophisticated theologians have scorned the idea of God's pathos or passion, dismissing such displays of emotion in the Hebrew scriptures, especially the Prophets, as primitive and absurd "anthropomorphisms," which are "human-forms"—in other words, they say, mistaken and naive ways of attributing to God emotions which are merely human and creaturely. Heschel says, "No." A love that is willing to suffer rather than give up the ones who are loved is not a human-form falsely attributed to God but, instead, a God-form occasionally found in human beings. True justice, that rolls up its sleeves to set right what life and the brutal have made wrong, is a God-form, a "theomorphism."⁵ Integrity and compassion are both God-forms which God calls us to learn and share. The Christian scriptures also recognize the truth we hear from Abraham Heschel, when they tell us, "We love because (God) first loved us."

⁵ Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 2, pp. 40,51,52.

Where was God on September 11? I do not believe God was watching dispassionately, unmoved as the planes flew into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, crashed into the Pentagon, and did a nosedive to the earth in Pennsylvania, killing so many people. Nor do I believe God was guiding those planes along their murderous courses, as some celebrity religionists have proclaimed, because of America's sins—handpicked by the celebrities to fit their own particular biases. I am not suggesting that we are sinless or that the United States, being the most powerful and influential nation in world history, is without fault or wrongdoing in the world community. I am saying, however, we did not deserve what was done to us on September 11, nor do we deserve a human-made outbreak of anthrax. The police officers, firefighters, and emergency rescue workers who rushed into the inferno to save lives certainly did not deserve to die in the towers' collapse, either. Nor do mail carriers deserve anthrax for doing their jobs.

But, if God neither sent the attacks in judgment upon our sins nor sat high above them watching unmoved as the disasters unfolded, where was God? I am not going to pretend to give you or myself a perfect answer, but I believe we can find a direction for our faith and for our lives, and I believe we can find a way to be thankful this Thanksgiving without denying or rationalizing the evils and sufferings in our world. We Americans had our sense of security shattered on September 11 and were thrust suddenly into the real life of many of the earth's peoples. Our eyes were suddenly forced open, and I pray they will remain open.

At the end of the story of the Great Flood, Noah and his family step once again onto the soil of earth, and God takes another look at our world. Has anything changed? No. Does God come to any new or different conclusion about human nature and the state of the world? No. God promises not to destroy the world or wipe out its creatures because of the human beings, but what God says of us is the same as before: "the devisings of humanity's mind are evil from their youth." So, God makes a dreadful choice. God decides to keep the world and not destroy it and to care about the human beings and not turn away from us, despite our evils. So, God promises that the cycles of nature will continue and life will go on. God will preserve the world and work with it, leaving it free to its own ways and their consequences, but working through flawed, sinful human beings to call the world back and redeem it.

Why does God not simply destroy the evil and leave the good? The wheat and the darnel are sown together, and the workers cannot tear out the weeds without also uprooting the young wheat. Start personally, and it's easier to see. My life is a mixture of wheat and darnel—of productivity and waste, faithfulness and infidelity, love and resentment, faith and sin. Even when evil seems plain to us, God sees more deeply. Even when there are no excuses for the evils people do, there are still causes. Within human societies, the mixing of wheat and weeds grows even more complex. Love and hatred fuse. The kindest people still have their prejudices. Justice and injustice can wear the same face. There is no simple way to destroy the evil and leave the good. There is no quick way to cut out the cancer without losing the patient. Nor can God simply take over and change us all of a sudden by force or divine magic—not and still leave us free to love willingly. For love cannot be forced, not even by God. So, God must let the two grow up together, the wheat and the weeds, until the work is complete. Seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night must

continue until the slow work of redeeming this world is completed, because the world's redemption depends upon the turning and healing of the human heart and mind.

I picture God, not weepy or hand-wringing, but grief-stricken on September 11— grief-stricken and angry, because God is both compassionate and just. This part of my message grows difficult because, while we share many of the same concerns for life and the human community, we do not all share the same faith. We have been coming together in these Thanksgiving services here in Bridgeton's first house of worship with the mutual understanding that we will respect each other, that we will say together in prayer and thanksgiving what we can say together and agree to keep separate what we must keep separate, out of respect for each other. I do not wish to cross that line of mutual respect and welcome, but neither have we ever wished for these services—and, especially, not this year—to be merely generic and tepid so they express no one's faith and do nothing to deepen our understanding of each other and bring us closer together. So, I need to walk carefully here but go forward, nonetheless.

I believe God saw on September 11, in the mixture of hatred, fanaticism, terror, tragedy, and heroism, a form (or manifestation) of what God has seen many times throughout human history. The problem in an interfaith service comes in putting a name to that form, that association in our own minds and, I believe, in the mind and heart of God. Christians call it "cruciform"—the form of the cross—but before I say any more about that, let me assure everyone present that cruciform theology, cruciform faith, has never persecuted anyone or taught contempt for anyone and would never make anyone else the scapegoat for its own sin or humanity's. No, it is triumphalism, the theology of glory, which looks for scapegoats, because it uses God and religion for power, prestige, and dominance in the world and so betrays the very heart of God. Cruciform faith takes the way of love that is willing to suffer and walks the path of service, and so it sees the broken heart of God in all forms of human suffering and tragedy because, from the Christian faith perspective, we believe God sees in all human suffering the form of the cross. Don't misunderstand. God is never pathetic. There is anger in God's grief and renewed resolve for justice, but there is also compassion and a renewed will for healing and reconciliation. I believe God was present in the horrors of September 11 and saw in them just what God saw in the killing fields of Cambodia, in the slaughter of 2.5 million people in the Republic of Congo, in the institutionalized terrorism of the death squads in Central and South America, in the slave ships carrying their human cargo from Africa to America, and in the slaughter of Native Americans at Sand Creek. I believe God sees in all such outrage, terror, and suffering a form of the Holocaust—the murder of God's beloved.

At the end of the story of the Great Flood, God is still grieved and disgusted enough to destroy the world for the evil of human beings but too much in love with the world to do it. So the story goes on, and God continues to set love against hate, justice against brutality, peacemaking against the cycles of revenge, dignity against shame, and freedom against enslavement. The question now, on this Thanksgiving Day after 9-11, is what do we see and feel now that our big eyes have been forced open? Can we see the form of September 11 in the starvation of the people of Afghanistan? In the terror of an Arab cab driver pulled out and beaten by an angry mob? In the wariness of Americans who wear turbans to work and the fears of Muslim children in our schools?

Can we expand our thanksgiving beyond the prosperity we enjoy to include other people different from us? Can we ask God to be with them when they are hurt and made to suffer? And can we, then, back up our prayers with actions and even change our habits and styles of living if we somehow take part in their suffering or benefit from it? Can we go beyond charity and look for ways to share the earth's goodness rather than just giving a little from the excess we have accumulated for ourselves? Now that hatred and fanaticism have made us suffer as a nation, can we see the form of what has been done to us in the sufferings of others in our own communities and around the world? If so, the good that would come from the evil of September 11 would still not justify the attacks upon us—nothing can do that. We should not justify them in any way. But we can learn something of the way of God and so, to some extent, participate in the redemption of September 11.

Those who died, we commend to God's love and care. For those who live on without them, who have empty places at this year's Thanksgiving table, we pray God's care and comfort, and hope it is mediated to them through family, friends, and strangers who care. For a twisted, sin-sick, hate-torn, and suffering world, we pray for ways to find paths toward justice and peace. Those paths will not be found, however, until we learn to open our eyes and see our own suffering in that of other people and other nations. Then, we will know a little of the mind and heart of God. Amen.

Comment: Responding in an Interfaith Context

In two ways, this sermon had to be different from the others. Being preached in a community service on the Thanksgiving holiday, this sermon was public in a way the others, preached within the context of our own congregation's worship of God, were not. Moreover, this service was interfaith, specifically Jewish and Christian in its form and content. For years, the various parts of this interfaith service had been developed very carefully, with thoughtful negotiation, between its Christian leaders and the rabbis and congregants of a local synagogue. Without denying anything we believed separately, we had agreed to a service that people of different faiths could affirm and in which they could feel comfortable and trusting. We had endeavored over the years to lead Thanksgiving services to which all of the worshipers present could say, "Amen."

Such services are rife with problems, because the most difficult arena in which people of different faiths can attempt to come together is worship. Discussing issues is much simpler because in such discussions no one is asked to address God directly, and no one expects to be able to say, "Amen," to all the various opinions expressed. Certainly, even in worship, no thinking person expects to agree with everything said in the way it is said, but people do have the right in an interfaith service to expect their particular faith to be respected. We had agreed there would be no attempts at evangelization or argument against one another's beliefs.

In the early days of developing this Community Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving, some of the Christian ministers had assumed an interfaith service should be an event in which all participants were free to express their own faiths in whatever ways they wished. Not so. Such a misconception of an interfaith service works well for the majority, especially the Christian majority, but not well at all for the minority, especially not when the minority is Jewish. Judaism has no beliefs so theologically and historically offensive to Christians as are some of our Christian beliefs to Jews. Nothing in Judaism could jar Christians in a shared service the way Christian affirmations of the divinity of Jesus Christ would jar Jewish worshipers. No Jewish symbol has the long history of terror and contempt Christianity has made Jews see in the Christian cross. Christians have put the cross before Jews, not as a symbol of redemptive suffering love, but as a symbol of hatred for the so-called “Christ killers.” For Jews and Christians to come together in worship is no simple matter of tolerance but a much more difficult matter of profound and carefully negotiated mutual respect.

The community Thanksgiving service, though well-received by those who have attended over the years, has always been fragile behind the scenes—fragile but beneficial because of the discussions required to reach mutual understanding and keep the service going year after year. This year, however, was different because of the terrorist attacks of September 11 and because I believed I had to say something in the sermon that went beyond nice and proper for the shared service. We had never intended the services to be generic and so expressive of no one’s faith in particular. Nor did we want them to be merely pleasant but lacking in any message that might challenge us to think and live differently. For me, the question became that of how to say what I believed needed to be said without violating the trust the Jewish participants and worshipers had put in me by attending the service.

The particular problem was my belief that September 11 needs to be seen as a cruciform event. Cruciform is a Christian term deliberately relating life to the crucifixion of Jesus—not exactly a neutral subject for an interfaith service. As noted above, the crucifixion as an event and the cross as a symbol have been made especially offensive to Jews by centuries of persecution inflamed to hatred and violence against Jews by the horrible label, “Christ killer.” (See the Addendum beginning on page 62)

The sermon steps further onto thin and dangerous ice by bringing together the crucifixion and the Holocaust, but it does so in a way very different from the traditional. Some Christians have dared use the crucifixion and the false label, “Christ killer,” to justify the Holocaust as God’s punishment of the Jews for killing Jesus. The sermon does the opposite. From a Christian perspective, the crucifixion is the suffering and death—the murder—of God’s beloved Son. The Holocaust is also the suffering and death—the murder—of God’s beloved. “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” (Hosea 11:1) At the heart of the sermon is the belief that God sees and feels the death of the especially beloved in all the sufferings, atrocities, and murders in this world, because God loves the world and its people. So, what can be for Christians a cruciform event might also be for Jews an event in the image and likeness of the Holocaust. In this case, September 11 is a day of hatred and murderous cruelty perpetrated against innocent victims

sitting in their offices and heroes rushing into the inferno to rescue the victims of the attacks. September 11 belongs for us (and, I believe, in the mind and heart of God) with the killing fields of Cambodia, the selling and buying of Africans as slaves, the disappearance of countless people in South and Central America, the slaughter of Native Americans at Sand Creek and Wounded Knee, and, also, the Holocaust and the crucifixion of Jesus.

Now, as a Christian, am I relativizing the crucifixion of Jesus by making it just one more of many terrible and murderous events in human history? No, for me the crucifixion of Jesus is the event of hatred and love without equal because I believe the victim to be the Son of God and because I also believe the horrible event to be the fulfillment of God's love and redemptive purpose for the world and its people. I do not believe, however, the cross stands alone. Indeed, if we try to make the cross stand alone, we are pushing it toward meaninglessness. Jesus is one of us and one with us before God, just as he is one with God before us. His suffering is united with ours, his shame with ours, his bearing of sin (Paul goes so far as to say his becoming sin) with our being in sin. We are united with him in his death (and he with us in ours) in the hope of being united with him in his resurrection. To divorce his crucifixion from the sufferings of people in our world is to push him aside and deny his unity with us in God's love.

I believe God sees the suffering and death of Jesus in the events of September 11. I also believe God sees the suffering and death of the beloved in the Holocaust in those same events of September 11 and in many other events of murder, injustice, and suffering in our world. The question is, "When will we open our eyes and see?" When will Christians see the face and broken body of Jesus in the form of a person dying of AIDS? When will Jews see images of the Holocaust in the suffering of Palestinians? When will we open our eyes and see the other person's pain and not just our own? How long will it be before we feel the injustices done to others and not only those done to us?

Will Americans be able to see images of September 11 in the sufferings of people in Afghanistan, Africa, Palestine, and Israel? In the cries of mourners not knowing whether their loved ones are buried beneath the rubble of the fallen towers can we hear the cries of women and children in South and Central America who do not know if their husbands and fathers who have "disappeared" are dead or alive and in torment? Will our newly awakened fears since September 11 make us defensive toward outsiders or more understanding of people who live every day in fear?

The question is not, "How do we justify September 11?" The answer to that question is simple: we don't. The real question is, "How do we respond to September 11?" How do we process our anger, grief, fear, and determination not to let it happen again? Do we include others who suffer or only ourselves?

BEYOND FEAR

Short-term fear can be good for us. It serves as protection. It can keep us alive and in one piece. If we had no fear, we could be fools all day long. Most of us would not live long enough to grow up. The three-year-old who lacks the sense to be afraid of the busy street needs to be afraid of disobeying the mother who told him to stay out of it. When obedience itself is not a strong enough force, fear takes over to keep the child alive. We use the term “foolhardy” for someone who seems to lack the natural protection of reasonable fears. We do not want our sons or daughters to grow up timid, but we don’t want them to be foolhardy, either.

Long-term fear is another matter. Our minds seem unwilling to sustain raw fear over an extended period of time. So, we usually do not. Our minds process the fear into something else so we can go on living and do what we need to do. I am reading a book about the war in Vietnam written by a man who served as a CBS correspondent throughout much of the conflict. He tells how the young marines, the “grunts,” processed their fears during one particularly gruesome battle for the city of Hué. The fighting was street to street and house to house, more like fighting in the world wars than in Vietnam. Each day, the marines had to advance, mostly on their stomachs. In a day, they might gain fifty meters of ground, losing many men in the small advance. Day after bloody day, they went forward at this snail’s pace until the citadel of the town was finally taken. Nobody won the battle for Hué, because far too many people were killed on both sides for the word victory to make sense. What stayed with this reporter, however, was the bravery of these young marines who would go forth each day, running short distances from cover to sparse cover and crawling on their stomachs as their comrades died all around them. Were they unafraid? Of course not. They were brave, not stupid, but somehow they processed their fear into something else. They went forward as though there were no other possibility, simply nothing else that could be done. Such processing, however, can come with a heavy price: shell shock, we call it, or battle fatigue, where the mind and emotions become disabled.⁶

The civilians of Vietnam often did not even seem to hear the sound of nearby gunfire. They went about their daily business as though nothing unusual were happening, because nothing unusual was happening. They had accepted the danger of warfare as routine, as the normal context of their lives, because they had no other choice.

As a nation, we have been processing fear since September 11. Before that day, we seemed to think, consciously or subconsciously, we were exempt from many of the dangers in this world. Warfare and terrorism happened in other places to which we had to travel in order to be at risk. Even diseases that killed people in large numbers in other countries could not cross our borders. We were

⁶ John Laurence, *The Cat From Hué*, especially pp. 15-35,47.

safe. I remember being told by my high school biology teacher that the number one killer-disease in the world was malaria, but people did not get malaria in the United States because we had no Anopheles mosquitos to spread it. The disease did not exist here, and even people who returned with it from abroad could not pass it to the rest of us. For similar reasons, we stopped vaccinating our children against smallpox, a decision we now regret. America was a land of unusual safety in world of constant danger. Until September 11. On that day, to some extent, we joined the rest of the world. I remember how much the people in business suits running through the streets of Manhattan looked like the people in all the pictures I had seen of refugees fleeing warfare in Third World countries. Terror is terror and people are people, and their faces looked like the faces of any other people terrified, dazed, and moving by instinct away from danger they could not even comprehend.

This is a sermon, and I've been talking about the human mind's insistence upon processing long-term fear. We want fear to protect us not paralyze us, and so we process long-term fear into something else. Since this is a sermon, you might expect me to say the right mechanism for processing fear is faith. That's true, but more needs to be said. In situations of immediate danger, people of faith certainly use their trust in God to calm their fears and regain control of their minds, bodies, and lives. "Even though I walk through the valley of shadow, I will not fear, because you (my God) are with me." My question this morning, because of the long-term fear that has come upon us, is, "into what?" by which I mean, "Into what do we process our fears?" What do we use our faith to make of our fears, and what would we make of them without faith?

Fear can be processed into a general timidity about life, but the results are not satisfactory. *I won't go to New York City or Washington, DC. What about Philadelphia, is it safer? I won't fly any more or take a train or go any place where a crowd will gather. I'll make my world smaller and smaller so I can feel safer.* In my little world, faith won't need to work very hard because I won't allow my life to give faith much work to do.

Faith can also be corrupted and then used to process fear into a falsely righteous spirit of revenge and a sort of sanctified hatred. *We are good, and they are bad. God loves us but not them. Our way is true; theirs is false. Our religion is the right one, and theirs is all wrong. They started it, but we'll finish it.* "God bless America," but not the world.

I have said from this pulpit several times and I say again, we did not deserve what was done to us on September 11, and nothing justifies the attacks upon us. Even if we are able to bring good out of them, even as God brings good out of them, they are not thereby justified but, rather, to some extent redeemed. It will never be good that they happened, and we should not want them justified or even rationalized. What was done to us was horribly wrong and evil.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus says, "for they shall be called children of God." Thankfully, the Bible does not separate peace from justice. Indeed, there can be no peace without justice. Jesus does, however, separate justice from revenge, and where the spirit of revenge controls people, there can be neither justice nor peace.

The aftermath of September 11 is not only about fear, but also about grief. We need to process fear and grief into something we can offer to God and use in the pursuit of justice and peace. As Christians, we need to offer our nation and the world a way of processing fear and grief into something other than revenge, callousness toward suffering, suspicion of foreigners, and hatred. The terrorists want us to process September 11 into just such destructive and self-destructive forces, but Jesus and the prophets call us to do otherwise. We are not to answer evil with evil.

Whenever we suffer loss and grief, we have a choice. We can grow bitter, self-pitying, and unfeeling toward other people (as though we were the only ones grieving), or we can grow stronger and learn compassion for other people who are grieved. When we suffer injustice ourselves, we can choose to look at the world with suspicion and to sustain anger until it deepens into bitterness and cynicism; or, knowing now how it feels to suffer injustice, we can seek healing and justice for other people who suffer.

Having been delivered by God from the sustained injustice, oppression, and hopelessness of slavery, the Israelites were supposed to learn to want justice, freedom, and human dignity, not only for themselves, but for all people. Some of them did learn. Others chose to become like their former oppressors and oppress others in turn, taking what they could take now that they had gained the upper hand. Likewise, Christians who see the agony of God and of humanity in the crucifixion of Jesus are, also, supposed to see the agony of Jesus in other people's suffering and shame. We are meant to see the crucifixion wherever its form occurs in this world, wherever people are made to suffer and die, because God loves this world and all its people. Or, we can blame the crucifixion of Jesus on someone else and tell ourselves that people who don't believe in him are only getting what they deserve when they suffer, but if we do so, we will have denied and betrayed Jesus.

"A scout is brave." Brave is good, as long as it's not foolhardy, but there's something more we need to understand. Bravery is not good if courage makes us cruel, hurtful, or vengeful. Bravery is not good if it remains self-centered, caring only about its own interests. Bravery is not good if it calls us to disregard the lives of other people, outside our group or nation, and if it cares nothing for their worth to the God who loves them. Bravery becomes good when it seeks and promotes justice, when it loves kindness and mercy, when it walks humbly with God. Bravery is not supposed to be arrogance pushing forward to get its own way in the troop, in the church, in the school, in the neighborhood, or in the world. And arrogance is as bad and self-destructive for a nation as for an individual.

September 11 taught us to fear and plunged us into grief. That fear is not short-term, like the sudden fright that gave people in New York the life-saving instinct to run from the danger. And we must acknowledge the courage of those who overcame their natural fears to rush into the inferno to save lives. This new fear in America is long-term, and so our minds will not allow us to keep it as raw fear. We will process it into something, and we are already doing so. Let it not be timidity which would rob us of life. Let it not be revenge, which would take away our humanity and reduce us to the level of those who attacked us. Let it not be panic that would give up the freedoms, the liberties, and the human rights for which our ancestors fought and died just so we can feel a little

more secure in an unsafe world. Let it not be bitterness and hatred, for then the terrorists will have won. Rather, let it be faith that enables us to process our fears and our grief into a new resolve for justice and peace for all people. Let it be faith in the God who loves us and all this world, in the Christ who suffered and died so all may live, that helps us expand “God bless America” into “God bless the earth, and all its children.” Amen.

Comment: God Bless the World

It was Boy Scout Sunday, and our church sponsors both a Boy Scout troop and a Cub Scout pack. So, in a sense, this service was also more public than usual, although not so public as the Community Interfaith Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving. Even though the Boy Scouts of America is not a Christian organization, the service was our own Sunday morning worship service and, as such, was decidedly Christian and Presbyterian. The Boy Scouts is historically a very patriotic movement, uniting “God and country” in a way sometimes difficult for Christians who think through their faith and its relation to their citizenship. In recent years, the scout organization seems to have become aware of the diversity of beliefs and even of the difficulties in too easily associating a faith with a particular society as understood by the scouting program itself, and so the “God and Country” award programs have been redeveloped in conjunction with religious educators. Still, the association of God and country is not without difficulties. There remains always room for conflict if people seek to make patriotism (as they understand it) primary and expect Christian faith to be subservient to and automatically supportive of what they see as loyalty to the nation and its interests. For Christians, “Jesus Christ is Lord of all and head of the church,” and citizenship in any nation (or patriotism) must be subordinate to faith in him and obedient to his commands. God and country are not partners, and our loyalty to our nation must always be guided and corrected by our loyalty to Christ and so to God. True faith, however, does pray for the nation and seek its welfare on God’s terms, and so faith and citizenship are not opponents, either—not unless patriotism becomes jingoism and demands the surrender and subordination of faith to its pride and aspirations on its own terms, without regard for the ways of God. Jesus did not come to support the ambitions and self-interests of any nation, but God is concerned for “the healing of the nations.” (Revelation 22:2)

Because, according to the *Scout Law*, “A scout is brave,” and because the events of September 11, 2001 had left the United States dealing with new fears and uncertainties, and because sustained fear produces backlashes in the attitudes of people made to endure it, I chose fear as the topic for the sermon. How will we, as American Christians, process the fears thrust upon us, not only by the events of September 11, but also by the anthrax mailings and the continuing threats of terrorist attacks upon us in one form or another. The unknown fear is the hardest to manage, and terrorism thrives on creating unknown fears in its chosen enemies and so making them live in a general state of fear.

Although fear can be our natural protection from harm, it can also become a crippling disability to life and even to faith. Our faith in Jesus Christ has more to do than just calm our fears, and so we need to learn to live with life's new uncertainties and inconveniences without undo fear. To do so, we must process our fears into something else. The question is, "Into what?" One possible answer is timidity, but the results are unsatisfactory because timidity restricts life too much. Caution is necessary in our new world after 9-11, but timidity will neither keep us safe nor let us live life as we need to.

We might also choose to process fear into belligerence, which may be effective but not healthful for us, our nation, or our world. One of the marks of a growing belligerence is the temptation to name more and more people our enemies and label them "evil." Certainly, terrorism is evil, but we are not wholly good nor are other nations wholly evil. That kind of light-dark, good-evil, godly-satanic, categorizing of ourselves and others leads to self-righteous arrogance and to war in which we become the aggressors. Never tell a nation it is wholly good and righteous and has God on its side no matter what. That attitude belongs to the terrorists themselves who see their acts of brutality as sacred because they imagine themselves fighting a holy war for God. May God deliver us from holy wars, because there is nothing more unholy in human history.

Sustained fear becomes dangerous also when it prompts us to value safety above all else. Then, we will agree to almost anything that promises to keep us safer, which makes us extremely easy to manipulate and rob of our freedoms. No government should ever be given the license to do whatever it thinks it needs to do to make the land secure, because those in power will always yield to the temptation to do whatever they think they must do make themselves and their power secure. What works against one group (suspected terrorists) will also work against another (people with different political opinions). If the rights of one unpopular group can be compromised, so can the rights of another.

We need to beware of anyone trying to make us sound too good to be true. The United States of America is a great country with more freedoms and a fairer political process than any other country I can name in the world or in history, but people are people, and power does to people what it has always done. America is kept great and free by checks and balances on power and by the right of citizens to criticize the government (and by a free press, however annoying its reporters and commentators may become at times). Take away those checks and balances, silence criticism, and keep the press in the dark, and we risk losing America and our freedom. Uncritical loyalty to any leader is folly which invites tyranny. We need to support our leaders enough so they can lead, but we also need to keep them straight (and as humble as possible). Always, we need to beware of the danger that leaders tend to use the nation's fear or hatred of its enemies to maintain and enhance their own power and popularity. The more we let our fears rule us, the more susceptible we become to having our rights and freedoms taken from us.

If we process our fears into bitterness and hatred, then all is lost. Then, our enemies will have won. Terrorism is designed to keep the fires burning, to destabilize relations among allies and aggravate animosities between enemies. Labeling and name calling play along with the objectives

of the terrorists. Prejudice against Arabs or Muslims not only corrupts those who become prejudiced but also tempts Arabs and Muslims to go on the defensive and begin to sympathize with the terrorists. Nothing helps the terrorists more than abusing Arab and Muslim Americans or labeling all Arabs and Muslims as terrorists and enemies of America. Surely, that is the terrorists' goal: to make people into enemies of America and of Arab governments willing to cooperate with America. If the terrorists can turn people against each other, they win.

Into what, then, should we process our fears? If we are willing to work on them in faith, and if we will allow God to open our minds to the world around us, we can turn our own reactions to the outrage and tragedy of September 11 and to the ongoing threats of terrorism into a new resolve for justice and peace in our world. Instead of just getting angry at our enemies, real and imagined, we can turn our anger against injustice and terror as such— against all the injustices people suffer in our world and all the terrors inflicted upon them. We can become more aware of the daily fears and dangers with which many people live, and we can begin to understand more deeply the need to break the cycles of fear and revenge. Neither hiding nor just striking back will ever put a stop to hostilities. Each time one side strikes, the other feels more justified in its hatred. We need to find ways to break those cycles without just rolling over and inviting enemies to take advantage of us.

When all else fails, we can look at the children. They are the ones who will inherit our fears, suspicions, and prejudices if we pass them on. We also need to look at our enemies' children, because they are the ones who will inherit hatred of us if it is passed on. Jesus said the kingdom of God is for the children. We need to process our fears into something positive for them.

How do we best serve our country, best love it? We do not love or serve it well by yielding to a defensiveness or an aroused belligerence that would set America against the world. No, as followers of Jesus, we need to urge our nation to be strong but not belligerent, to seek its own interests within the context of justice and peace for all nations and peoples, and to care about all the world's children. Then, we can extend "God bless America" to God bless the world.

Sermon for the Maundy Thursday Communion Service – March 28, 2002
Lessons: Psalm 22:1-8,14-21a and Matthew 27:32-50

WHY, GOD?

In the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest, Jesus prays to God in the very personal terms of their close relationship. He addresses God as Abba, which means Father and, in Jesus' native language, was the name children used to speak to their own fathers. So, Abba almost means Dad. In Gethsemane, Jesus is distressed, and he prays that God will somehow remove the suffering that lies before him. "Abba, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I

want, but what you want.” Even though he is calling out in distress, Jesus is praying to the Father he knows and trusts beyond all doubt.

In his book, *The Death of the Messiah*, Raymond Brown calls our attention to the contrast between Jesus’ two prayers of distress, the one in Gethsemane and the other on the cross. From the cross, Jesus does not call God “Abba” (“My Father”) but, instead, cries out to God, not as the special Son, but just as a human being enduring the horror of God’s silence.⁷ True, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” comes from Psalm 22, and some scholars have used that association with the psalm to play down any real feeling of abandonment on Jesus’ part. Brown, however, was able to hear in Jesus’ cry a genuine God-forsakenness that speaks for all people who experience it in their own lives. In recent years, we have gained a much deeper and more personal understanding of Jesus’ suffering and of God’s love by seeing Jesus’ solidarity in his death with all the God-forsaken people in this world and by recognizing God the Father’s own grief in the agony and death of Jesus, the Son.

We must not jump too quickly to Easter so we can resolve the conflict, skim over the disturbing cry of Jesus in his abandonment, and make it all feel right again. It should not feel right, because it is not right. Jesus’ crucifixion is not a passion play, and if we make it one, then it has nothing to do with us anymore. As his church, his people, we need to see and hear him experiencing what countless people in our world experience: the silence of God. We must not drown out the silence of God with Easter Hallelujahs nor stifle the cry of abandonment from the human being dying on the cross. He cries out for us. Because he cries out for himself, as a person feeling desperately abandoned by God, he cries out for us. If he were doing it just for us, but not feeling it himself, then his cry would be phony and useless to us; it would not echo our own cries but only mimic them.

But Easter is coming, isn’t it? He will be raised. Yes, but Jesus can no longer see his resurrection coming from his position of agony as he dies on that cross. Where is God? Why is God letting this happen to him?

The pain of crucifixion was so intense and so prolonged that the victims grew extremely angry, and they commonly screamed and cursed at those who crucified them and then stood watching as they writhed in torment.⁸ Jesus is surrounded by people who mock him as his body and mind are torn by pain. *What’s the matter, can’t you save yourself?* Yet, he does not curse at them; instead, he directs his anger and desperation to God in a final prayer, “My God, my God, why. . .? Why have you forsaken me?”

I suggest to you tonight that, until we let ourselves hear and really hear that cry of abandonment from Jesus, we cannot truly talk about God to the people of this world, because, in that cry, Jesus is one of them. He is one with the parent whose child is killed in a random, senseless act. He is united with all who cannot find God in their suffering. This week, we received a college news

⁷ Brown, Raymond, *The Death of the Messiah*, pp. 1046-1051.

⁸ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, p. 1044

magazine that included an article entitled, “In Memoriam,” for another alumna lost in the attack on the World Trade Center. Her name was Dorota. She came to America at age 17, taught herself English, and worked her way through college waiting tables and cleaning offices. After college, she went to work for an accounting firm in New Jersey and was studying for her C.P.A. exam. When her firm was acquired by another, she was relocated to the 100th floor of the Trade Center. Why, God?

My purpose this evening is not to indict God, although we need to listen to the people who—not intellectually, but personally, out of grief and desperation—do indict God. We need to stop calling them unbelievers, even blasphemers, and hear them, no matter how uncomfortable they make us, because Jesus died as one of them. We need to hear people’s anger at God and stop trying to give them easy answers that, despite the best of our intentions, serve only to silence them or deepen their anger. We need to let people ask, “Why, God?” and not try to stifle their question with our defense of God and our assurances that everything will work out for the best.

My purpose is to say that God’s answer to the cries of abandonment that rise to heaven from all parts of this earth is not to answer them at all but to join them. Paul writes that, when we cry out to God, “Abba, Father,” God’s own Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are indeed children of God. But what about people who are not feeling any sense of belonging to God, any assurance of God’s loving presence with them? When they cry out in anger or fear or desperation at the silence of God, the apparent absence of God—whether or not they address their cries to God as Jesus does—they are joined in their anger, their fear, and their resentment by God’s dying Son.

Understanding this cry matters very much to our discipleship and what we call our witness to Jesus Christ and to the love and mercy of God. Raymond Brown wrote something else about Jesus’ cry that I found disturbing. Historically, the church has regarded despair as a great sin, which, no doubt, led to the abominable doctrine that people who commit suicide go, irrevocably, straight to hell—beyond redemption. What a cruel doctrine it is that tells grief-stricken people God has rejected their loved one at the very point of greatest need, and, thankfully, we have rejected that doctrine. Then, as I continued reading Brown’s work, a phrase came right off the page at me. The cry of abandonment, Brown says, did not make the gospel writer think “that Jesus was guilty of despair or had lost hope.”⁹ Guilty of despair? Why do we try to shield Jesus (and thereby shield God) from people’s pain and hopelessness? That makes no sense. Is Jesus the redeemer only of those who can manage to hold on to their faith no matter what—only those so strong life cannot break them down? I don’t think so.

God does not answer Jesus before he dies. There is no answer, just as there is no answer to much that is senselessly cruel and destructive in this world. Can we give Dorota back her life and return her alive to her family and friends? No, we cannot. Then, let us not rationalize her death or their loss. Or anyone else’s. Even if, indeed, Jesus did not go all the way into despair, I believe he is present for those who have. We must not make false sense of the senseless in life. We must not

⁹ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, p. 1050.

insulate ourselves from people who have lived in the silence of God. Only when we hear Jesus validate their anger, their grief, and their desperation with his own, can we learn what Easter really means. The people who cry out, “Why, God?” to a silent sky are not alone. Whether they know it or not, whether they could even bear to hear it or not, Jesus is one of them and is with them, and he will have no answer until it comes from God.

The only thing we truly have to share with this world is a love that has suffered, that has given itself into the power of the senseless and destructive, that has endured the mockery, that has entered into the place of desperation where no word comes from God. Jesus died without an answer, and we must not cheapen Easter by letting it nullify his suffering, because he is still joined in suffering with a world of people who have not yet known their Easter. Yes, it is our promise—that his resurrection will become our own—and in that hope we live and serve; but we still live and serve on the dark side of the cross where Easter has not yet come for the world’s people. There we serve the Christ whose body is broken for us and for them. Amen.

Comment: My God, My God, Why?

This is the sermon for which the book is named, and it speaks of the young woman to whom the book is dedicated. Here we have come to the heart of the matter: Jesus’ union with all who cry out in grief, anger, or even despair, “Why?” and hear no answer that will ease their pain or give them life.

September 11, 2001 stands as both a symbol and a real-life experience of the questions which must not be answered neatly and glibly with words that pretend to make perfect, reasonable sense, because we cannot answer such questions with what they truly require: the life and love that have been taken away. Why were we attacked? Why were the attacks successful? Why did this person die but not that one? Why did heroes who ran into the burning nightmare to rescue victims also perish? Why didn’t God stop it? Where was God that day? God, God, why did they have to die?

We can say (and we believe) God did not forsake the victims but took them to heaven, which helps but does not. We can say (and I believe) God was with them in the inferno, which helps but does not. We can say we live in a world that has been, at least to a great extent, turned over to itself with its own natural laws and historic realities (which I also believe—see Romans 8:18-25), but that helps only to explain but not to answer the griefs we suffer in this world. What answers the grief of parents who lost a son or daughter, of a wife or husband who lost a partner in life, of children who lost a father or mother who will not come home to them again? Nothing. Words of comfort, promises of resurrection or heaven, remembrances of all that was good, support from family and friends, the sympathy and empathy of strangers—all these things help people go on with life and carry out their responsibilities to others who still live and depend on them, but they do not give back what was taken away. Nothing in this world can do that. After thirty years of counseling people

through funerals and encountering their grief expressed in many different ways, I often think, when I hear heaven given as the easy answer to another person's pain, of Emily Dickenson's line, "Parting is all we know of heaven, And all we need of hell."¹⁰

We are problem solvers and question answerers. What do you do with a question? You answer it. You don't leave it as a question and live with it. But sometimes you must, if you are going to be honest with life, yourself, and other people. Sometimes a question hurts too much and means too much to allow for any answer that is just an explanation or a consolation.

The other problem with answers is that they tend to blame someone. For some reason, we seem to feel a little better about a tragedy or loss if we can just blame someone for it, as though having someone to blame somehow made sense of it all. It does not.

Were those who survived the attacks of September 11 better people than those who perished? No, they were not. Did God love them more? No, God did not. Were their lives spared because God still had something more for them to do? Be careful here. I have no doubt God still has something or many things for them to do in life, but that realization does not mean God had no further use for the people who died. God loves, and love does not value people for their usefulness but for themselves.

On the cross, an innocent man suffered and died. In the Pentagon, the Twin Towers and the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania, innocent people died. No, theologically they were not innocent in the same, full sense Christians believe Jesus to have been innocent (sinless), but as far as the question of deserving what happened to them that day, they were innocent. They did not deserve to die in those terrorist attacks, nor do those who loved them deserve the grief and emptiness with which they have been left by acts of violent hatred.

Are their deaths, then, to be considered meaningless? No! Their deaths cannot be meaningless, because their lives were not meaningless, nor is love ever meaningless. Three things in this world are made to last forever and never pass away (I Corinthians 13:13), and the greatest of the three is love. So, with no apology for our grief or our anger either, we can only, as people of faith, trust God to keep our loved ones we commit to God's care until that day comes—that day when death is removed and love has its own restored, healed and made whole. (II Timothy 1:12) We do not commit our loved ones to the earth (even though we bury them) nor only to memory, as important and healing as remembering them and sharing the memories can be. We commit them to the care of the God who loves them, but even that ongoing act of faith and hope does not settle all our questions. The only full answer love can accept is the one loved. If we cannot give back the loved one who was taken away (and we cannot), then we must not think to dismiss grief or settle it with any other kind of answer. We cannot renew the life cut short, give back all the experiences that will never be experienced, or bring to fruition the talents, abilities, and special gifts never to be

¹⁰ Dickinson, Emily, "My Life Closed Twice," in *Literature, Structure, Sound and Sense*, by Laurence Perrine, Fourth Edition, p. 610.

developed and shared in this world. We may be able to help those who mourn live through the tragedies they have suffered, but we must not pretend to be able to make those tragedies anything but tragic. We do not like living with the tragic, but we must. We have no right to try to make the tragic somehow right or even just okay. It is not right, and it is not meant to be okay with us.

We need to see here an important distinction. If the people who have suffered the loss find comfort and strength in promises, beliefs, and assurances (what they might consider answers), we can be grateful with them for the help they have found. The purpose of this discussion is not to debunk such helps or try to take them from people who need them. God has promised to be with those who suffer, who mourn, who grieve, and surely God is with them. Comfort is also gained from the presence and support of other people who care, who remember the loved one with appreciation and respect, or who indeed gained something good from that loved one's life or death. No such help is to be scorned or taken away. Thank God for the helps and comforts that get people through the darkness. That which heals is good, but that which denies another's need for healing is not good. The objection comes when other people try to force upon those who mourn some external rationalization of their loss, some clever or pious explanation of why the evil they have suffered is actually good and is even the will of God. We do not have the right to take the tragic out of tragedy, especially not for someone else who suffers.

Christians have taken to calling much that is evil the "will of God." I do not believe God wills evil. I do believe God can and does bring good out of evils that have happened to people, but that action, which redeems the evils we suffer, does not mean God willed, sent, or even agreed to the evils themselves. There is a world of difference between redemption and mere rationalization. Redemption brings good out of suffering and loss, even out of sin and shame. Rationalization only tries to explain away suffering, as though the loss that is suffered did not really matter much, after all. The deaths of the people killed on September 11, 2001 matter very much. When we take seriously how much God loves people and how unique and special each person is to God, we begin to appreciate the magnitude of the loss. When we go a step further in faith and begin to see that each person who cries out in grief or pain is related directly to God's dying Son on his cross, then we begin to have some idea of the bond Jesus has formed with all who suffer. If we can make ourselves go so far as to understand (even a little) that God hears in the cries of those who feel God-forsaken the terrible cry of abandonment from that cross, then we know something of the broken heart of God and of the true horror in what people do to each other in hatred.

God's answer to Jesus' cry of abandonment came on Easter, in his resurrection. We, however, still live on the Good Friday side of the cross. For those who have lost their loved ones, Easter exists in promise and in hope, but not yet in sight and touch. So, hope and grief remain bound together for people who trust the God who raised Jesus from the dead and who entrust their own loved ones to God's promise of life.

While this world endures and its history continues, there will be tragedies, outrages, and the senseless loss of lives, both to nature and to human cruelty. At best, life is short, and sometimes life is cut much too short. We cannot make September 11 okay. It should never be okay with us that

such things happen, to us or anyone else. We can learn from it, and we will. The important question is what we learn. Will it be fear and defensiveness? Will it be anger that deepens into bitterness and hatred and expresses itself in a lust for revenge? Or will it be a deeper understanding of the worth of life and the unique and (because of God's love) infinite value of each person? Will we learn callousness or compassion? Will we seek revenge or justice? With what thoughts and actions will we remember and honor our dead? How will we relate our own losses to the sufferings of seemingly God-forsaken people all over this earth which is our homeland? Such questions and more will never be answered by any rationalization or justification (theological or otherwise) of what happened on that eleventh day of September, but they can become questions that lead us to forms of redemption. *That these dead shall not have died in vain.*

Sermon for Easter, March 31, 2002
Lessons: Isaiah 44:1-8 and Matthew 2:1-10,16-20

THE KINGDOM OF LIFE

We must not cheapen Easter. I am not talking about the bunny, the colored eggs, or the jellybeans and chocolate rabbits—diversions for our children making family times that are fun. I have nothing against the fun people put into Easter. Fun does not cheapen the day of resurrection. Jesus enjoyed children, and I'm sure he still does. What cheapens Easter is our celebrating his resurrection without facing his crucifixion. Easter cannot be for us or for the world the triumph of life unless it is the vindication of suffering love. Easter is not our most important day, not by itself. Easter matters to us and to the world because it makes Good Friday the most important day in human history. Because of Jesus' resurrection, we cannot put his cross behind us – not today, not ever. God has established Jesus crucified as the suffering Redeemer of life in this world of death.

The world exists in the kingdom of death. Lord Death watches over this world every day, letting people go about their business, struggle to survive (in some regions) or prosper (in others), fall in love, have children, fall out of love, toil to earn money, and do all the things people do under the sun. But death is never far away. And, more than being just inevitable at end of our lives, death intrudes into every part of life even as we live it. In his book, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, the biblical scholar Raymond Brown explains death's power over the living. In his analysis of Paul's Letter to the Romans, Brown writes, "For Paul, death is not simply the cessation of life but, because it came through sin, the negation of life."¹³

In our Maundy Thursday service, I told of a young woman who came to America at age 17, taught herself English, and worked her way through college waiting tables and cleaning offices. After college, she went to work for an accounting firm here in New Jersey and was studying for her

¹³ Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 567,568.

C.P.A. exam. When her firm was acquired by another, she was relocated to the 100th floor of the World Trade Center. It has now been learned that on September 11, 2001, she perished. Was there significance in what she did in her brief time, or did her seemingly senseless death by terrorist attack negate her life? What we ask of her because death took her while she was so young, alive, and filled with promise, we may just as well ask of all who live in this world and of ourselves. Did her life really matter? Does mine? Does anyone's?

The poet, T.S. Eliot speaks of what lies beyond our dying as “death’s other kingdom,”¹⁴ implying that what we call life is death’s present kingdom. Jesus’ resurrection takes our life in this world away from Lord Death. It’s not just that we will live again after we die, but that we are set free to live for real the life God gives us today and tomorrow. A rock song says, “I just want to live while I’m alive.”¹⁵ In the most profound sense of living while we are alive, that line from the rock song tells what Easter is all about. But Easter is about life only because it establishes Jesus’ suffering and dying crucified as the redemption of life. By raising Jesus who was crucified, God has made suffering love the negation of death in both of death’s kingdoms. Because he lives, we shall live, also. And because he lives, we can live while we’re alive. He has taken away from Lord Death the power to negate our lives and make them meaningless on either side of the grave. Jesus suffered and died as one whose life was made pointless and futile by what was done to him. Everything he had promised was cut off. His teaching, healing, and giving hope to the poor and rejected were rendered null and void by the judgment upon him and by his execution. He died alone without hope, without dignity, and (so it seemed) without God. All his promises were lost. All his hopes and all the hopes of the people who followed him and believed in him failed. At the end, he had nothing left but his suffering and shame, and yet his suffering and his shame are the redemption of the world. Easter does not negate Jesus’ suffering or put his death behind us as an unpleasant moment in history. No, Easter makes his suffering the source of our salvation and establishes his death as the triumph of his life and of God’s love.

After September 11, I said we needed to see in what happened to us that day a cruciform event—an event in the form of Jesus’ crucifixion, an event united with him in his suffering and death. The sudden death of the young woman on her way to realizing the American dream and fulfilling her time of life is a cruciform event. It makes no sense, and we must not make false sense of it to soothe ourselves or offer false comfort to grief-stricken people. It cannot be explained away or rationalized; it can only be redeemed, and that only because God’s Son has entered into the kingdom of death and taken upon himself death’s negation of his own life and his own hopes. Shortly after September 11, a picture went around the internet showing a huge Jesus standing above the twin towers receiving the people who died there. That’s not bad, but it’s not quite good enough, either. When the young woman got caught on the 100th floor and perished, he was not standing above her. He perished with her and she with him—that’s what his crucifixion was and is. He suffered and died as one left abandoned by God, one whose life was cut short and whose hopes perished. We need to

¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men” and elsewhere.

¹⁵ Sung by Bon Jovi, “It’s My Life,” from the album, “Crush.”

learn to see in the suffering and shame of people in this world and in their dying their union with Jesus. We need to understand all of death's workings in our world as cruciform events. We must stop making false sense of people's pain and loss. To represent Jesus and his suffering love, we must see him in the injustices and indignities done to his brothers and sisters all over this world—and I mean all people, not just Christians.

When I quoted the rock song, I left something out. A more complete quote is, "I ain't gonna live forever. I just want to live while I'm alive." If, as Jesus' church, we are going to speak the gospel of his suffering love to a generation that finds meaning in that song, we are going to have to shut our mouths about the first statement and listen to the demand in the second. We need to hear, "I just want to live while I'm alive." If we can, and if we can meet that insistence with Jesus' suffering love, then the first statement about not living forever will take care of itself. If we cannot speak to the desire for life now, nothing we say about living forever will matter at all.

"Do not fear," God tells the exiles, "for I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground." By his own suffering and death, Jesus brings life into the kingdom of death for all who live and suffer under its power, because he is one of us. Because of him, the meaningless will not be rationalized with false comfort to make it acceptable. Because of him, the negation of life is not acceptable to God, and it must not be acceptable to us, either. We must protest death and negate its power. Because we live for him, we must live while we're alive—but not in the isolation of a faith community gathered within itself. Jesus suffered and died for a world of people who don't know him at all, who do not name his name, who do not come into a church unless they have to, and who, even if they do come into a church, quietly tune out what is being said. Many of them, because of what they have heard about Jesus or think they have heard, frankly don't care to know any more. Many have rejected him without ever knowing him because the Jesus of whom they have heard has turned them off completely.

By raising Jesus from the dead, God has taken the first and decisive step in turning the kingdom of death into the kingdom of life. But that's no easy statement to make. It needs to be backed up and not just with more words. To celebrate Easter as more than a pretty holiday, we must take a love that is willing to suffer into the realms of death in this world. That's what God has given us to work with: a love that is willing to suffer, that will not abandon people to their own sufferings or their own shame or their own desperation or their anger at God or their resentments of religion. That's all we have. And it's all we need. Easter, the Day of Resurrection, is the day God made love that is willing to suffer into the hope and salvation of the world. Amen.

Comment: What We Have to Share

What we Christians think we have to share with the world matters very much, at least to us, but varies greatly from one Christian or group of Christians to another. At one extreme, we can still find Christians who actually believe people must become members of their church (their local

church!) in order to be saved, meaning accepted into heaven. Against all common sense and biblical truth, they maintain the naive belief that God loves only the members of their little church. Some people still live in very tiny worlds that seem not to extend beyond their immediate experiences and the neighborhoods with which they are familiar. As absurd as such belief in limited salvation may seem to us, such smallness in God's love, the attitude is really not different from its more sophisticated versions held by Christians who firmly and militantly believe God loves and saves only Christians who believe exactly as they do, in their words, and have experienced God's saving power in the same ways they have. Correct belief and prescribed religious experience seem, for them, the sure marks of salvation, and their churches (or their favorite evangelists) make the rules for which beliefs are correct and which experiences are prescribed.

What has Jesus given us to share with each other and the world? He has given us much: profound teaching, a tradition of healing which gives great value to human life and well-being, a personal and almost intimate way of speaking to and about God, a socially radical way of understanding God's love and mercy that breaks barriers and lifts up people the world has put down, an ethic of love and forgiveness, a promise of eternal life, and more.

But what stands at the center of all he has given us? What holds everything together? For some Christians, the answer is *correct beliefs*. That answer is false. Christian faith is not belief in its own correctness. Our faith is supposed to be in Jesus, not in the faith itself. The Word of God became flesh—a living person—not doctrine or evangelistic formula. The appeal of this correct-beliefs faith is authority—supposedly that of God, but actually the Christian's own authority. This kind of faith greets the world with, "I'm telling you what's right, and I'm unquestionably right because I have absolute rightness (the Bible) here in my hand, and so I speak to you with its authority, which means you had better listen to me, do as I say, and believe what I tell you to believe, or you're going to hell." Jesus, however, made it very clear (in the pages of that same Bible) that what he has given us is not dictatorial authority. I am to speak to other people as though I were the youngest present, which is his society meant speaking with respect and humility. The great among us are those who serve, not those who dictate. We are not pass judgment upon each other, because the judgment we pass will be that by which we are judged. Moreover, we now live in a time when absolute statements are rejected by people who see different sides and other ways, and when authority is no longer accepted simply because it claims the right to be, even the divine right to be.

For other Christians, the answer to our question of what stands at the center holding everything together is *experience*, specifically religious experience of Jesus' love, God's presence, or the Holy Spirit's power. That answer, too, is false. We live by trust, not experience. If experiences of God's presence strengthen our faith without making us proud, then we can be thankful for them because they may well sustain us through dry times when God seems distant and life dark. Jesus, however, did not come so we can high on him. The Spirit is not a drug or a rush. At the very heart of our hope and salvation, hangs a man experiencing what seems to him the absence of God. Our invitation to the world is not, "Come, get high on Jesus with us!" Nor can religious experience be used to validate one person's faith or invalidate another's. Correct belief is not the measure, nor is prescribed experience of God's presence, the Spirit's power, or Jesus' love.

For many Christians these days, the answer is *assurances*. They want and believe they have in their possession a full set of cradle-to-grave-and-beyond assurances that settle all of life's uncertainties as long as they keep believing. Here again, just hearing Jesus' cry of abandonment from the cross should be enough to tell us this answer, also, is false. If faith had a full set of absolute assurances, it would not need to be faith at all, would it? Anybody can follow a leader when the path is brightly lit and pleasant to travel. Who will not believe when faith seems to have no serious contradictions in life, when everything is going well, and God's love seems to be present all around us every day? But how does the full-set-of-assurances faith deal with days like September 11, 2001? To maintain its assurances it must either blame the victims, sentimentalize their salvation within the inferno of death, or mumble something pious and walk away from the whole scene back into its pleasant world of assurances. Otherwise, the completely assured Christian loses faith in the face of uncertainties and contradictions and becomes bitter.

What have we been given that holds together all that Jesus has given us and promised us? We have been given *a love that is willing to suffer*. That's the heart and soul of our life and salvation, and that love is what we have been given to share each other and the world. Not authority, not correctness, not experiences of ecstasy (highs), and not assurances we can hold without question, but a love that is willing to suffer if necessary rather than give up on the world and its people. Jesus has not given us a martyr complex that seeks suffering as though it were a virtue or a ticket to heaven. He has given a love that won't let go.

God made human beings with the capacity to respond positively to God's own love and mercy. In so doing, God made us with the capacity, also, to respond negatively. Love cannot be forced and truly be love, not even forced by God. So, God's authority will not redeem the world. Full authority might enslave the world by forcing obedience and conformity (something churches continue to try from time to time), but the result would not be the world God wants. The biblical dilemma is that God will neither give us up nor enslave us to forced obedience and a goodness without choice. Love is willing and free, or it is not love. God loves us and wants to be loved back. God also wants us to love each other—to respect each other, care for each other (without enslaving or dominating anyone), and desire each other's well-being. So, the God whom I believe has always been angered and grieved by the evils people have done to each other, became vulnerable to us in person. We crucified him. That's what we have been given to share: a love that will neither let go nor enslave, a love that must, therefore, be willing to suffer. Living by trusting that love and seeking to share it with a world determined to go its own way is what Christians *call the way of the cross*.

The way of the cross is hard and not always very gratifying to the human ego. People prefer authority and correctness. They love experiences that make them feel more alive and closer to God. They like to be part of something successful, such as great evangelistic movements with impressive figures to make them feel powerful and powerfully blessed by God. And we all like assurances. We crave certainties. Christianity has been sold to many people as a set of certainties for this world and the next. The uncertain way of the cross, the path of love willing to suffer if necessary, has far less appeal. But it leads through the darkness to life. Jesus took and went into the darkness. It was the only way to Easter and still is.

Can we take that path? Can we really go into the world without our authority, our correctness, our validating experiences, our assurances and certainties, and love that world? I wonder. It's difficult even to imagine what such a church would be like. I don't know. I do, however, have a pretty good idea *whom* it would be like. Imagine that.

Such a church would be able to go to Ground Zero without a set of answers, without prescriptions for those who were grieving their losses, and without judgment upon those who had suffered and died. Indeed, such a church has gone there—at least, such people of faith have gone there and endured the questions, the emotions, and the doubts without having to satisfy themselves at the expense of those left in the dark. We don't all need to go to Ground Zero to find people with anger, fear, doubt, and questions—many hard and painful questions—because they are all around us. They don't need unquestionable authority, religious highs, salvation formulas, or neatly packaged assurances. They need a God who is vulnerable, a Messiah (or whatever they might call him) who can be hurt as they have been hurt. Can we, the church grown soft through centuries of establishment and prestige, represent such a God to them? Can we who demand to be believed accept their disbelief and stay with them? Can we take the heat? If not, we have nothing to offer to them, because truly all we have is our own vulnerable humanity with more questions than answers, helpless before such a nightmare of suffering and death, and yet somehow held by the Christ who has himself gone into the heart of our darkness.

For a sin-sick and suffering world growing bitter, cynical, and callously violent, Easter has not yet come. We must not rush it, because such a world requires much more than lilies and hallelujahs. “For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth” is not at all apparent at Ground Zero nor in homes with empty seats at the table on Easter Sunday. It is not apparent in Pakistan's camps for Afghan refugees. The reign of God is hard to find in Gaza, the West Bank, or Jerusalem. Where is the resurrection, the triumph of life, in Sudan? The “fellowship of Christian love” is difficult to locate in Northern Ireland. “The three sad days” have not “quickly sped”¹⁶ from children who are not succeeding in school, have no effective support at home, are not learning to read with anything like comprehension, are hungry and angry when they go to school, and are not helped one bit by standardized tests that tell them they are deficient (which they hear as “stupid” and “hopeless”).

Is there no love in the world, no light, no joy, no wonderful life to experience? Yes, of course there is. Thanks be to God! But God's eye of compassion is always on the people left out of the light, denied the joy, and suffering experiences that are anything but wonderful.

Perhaps the hardest thing to remember is that God also loves people who hate each other. When we demonize our enemies and rejoice in their destruction, we have left the way of God. If we write people off as hopeless or worthless, we have turned away from Jesus.

If I were to be asked what the Christian churches need to be faithful to Jesus in our times, I think I would put at the top of the list that they need to become humble and vulnerable to people.

¹⁶ From the Easter hymn, “The Strife Is O'er, the Battle Done.”

I suppose all I'm really saying here is that we need to become like Jesus and not like successful, powerful, and impressive Christian churches or movements.

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 5, 2002
Lessons: Psalm 66:1-4,8-12,16 and John 14:15-21,25-28

LIVING IN BETWEEN

Throughout these Sundays of Easter, I have been trying to relate our resurrection hope, God's resurrection promise, to our life right now in this world. Will there be life beyond death for the people who belong with Jesus to God? Yes, there will. He has promised us, "Because I live, you shall live also," but our message to the world's people is not, "Make your reservation now for a place in heaven. You could die tomorrow; so you had better accept Jesus Christ today before it's too late" We must not reduce our mission to: *Get them saved before they die*. No, that is not our gospel. That kind of preaching sends the wrong message to the world's people and to Christians themselves by reducing all of life to a decision you or I make that supposedly governs where we will go when we die. What happens to this time when we live? Where is God's love for the world if heaven is all that matters? Where is God's demand for justice in this world or God's promise of peace on earth? What happened to the love people have for each other? This kind of preaching takes all meaning from human society and so tends to see the world as a secular trap from which people must be rescued and then kept in a safe, hermetically sealed Christian environment so they will stay saved until they die, because that's all that supposedly matters—staying saved until we die.

I am not saying this life is all we have; it is not. I am not saying our faith doesn't matter; it certainly does matter, but not just for admission to heaven. It matters for life on earth this day. As a Presbyterian, I must add, however, that my decision to accept Jesus as my Savior is not primary for my salvation. I have not chosen him; he has chosen me. Without going into the whole matter of what God may have decided before creating the world, let me say that the human decision for your salvation and mine is the one we hear in Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane when he accepted suffering and death because God loves this world so much. What faith I have is not really my decision at all but my response to his decision. So, I'm not trying to take anything away from anyone's faith that those who belong with Jesus to God will indeed be raised to eternal life. That promise stands, and we can count on it. What I believe we must do to be true to Jesus and his gospel is to bring that promise of life home to where we live right now. Jesus taught us to pray to God, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." He did not teach us to scorn the life of earth or attempt to escape from it, nor did he call us to isolate ourselves into Christian ghettos, safe from the temptations of the world and the questions or sufferings of its people. He never told us to forget about the injustices of this world because everything will be fine in heaven. He has sent us into this world and not just to call more people out of it. God's demand for justice in human societies is no less today than it was in the time of Israel's prophets. God's compassion for the lost and the broken is no less than it was when Jesus went about healing the sick and forgiving the sinful.

I have told our confirmation class that we live by trusting and serving Jesus during what I have termed the time “in between.” The obvious question is, “In between what and what?” and the answer is that we live in the time between Jesus’ resurrection and the complete triumph of God’s love most people call his “second coming.” Theologians call it the *consummation*, meaning the full realization of God’s victory over sin and death—the day when all that opposes God’s love and mercy will be gone forever and all the hurts will be healed. That day is promised to us.

Many Christians and churches, however, have chosen either to ignore that promise or to exploit it. Those who ignore the promise seek God’s help and strength for dealing with life and its troubles in the day at hand while trusting God to receive them into heaven when they die, but their hope for this world is severely limited, and their faith is almost entirely personalized—it’s all about them. Other Christians whose faith seems mainly to inhabit the pages of Revelation, the Apocalypse, exploit the promise by turning it into Doomsday to scare people into believing what their churches tell them to believe. The one way tempts us to ignore the promise as an unrealistic hope; the other rejects the world as a lost cause and is quite content to see the majority of the world’s people left behind.

Let’s listen to Jesus through John 14. He has not left us on our own. Jesus is present for us by the coming of the Holy Spirit who lives among us and even within us. But don’t mistake the Spirit for your own conscience. The Spirit is greater than your conscience or mine, because the conscience can be a terrible liar. My conscience, on its own, speaks only what it has been taught to speak. Despite the popular wisdom of Disney’s Jiminy Cricket who says, “Let your conscience be your guide,” the conscience becomes a reliable guide only when it is being retrained by the Spirit in the way of Jesus. Suicide bombers die with a clear conscience, but they do not act according to the Spirit of truth.

Jesus says that, if we love him, we will keep his commandments, and he gives us his new commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you.” Those who love him keep his word, and so become children of God because he and they now belong to God together. The Spirit works quietly to teach, guide, and transform us into new people living life a new way. The Spirit makes Jesus and his teaching present to us and effective at changing our minds. So, Jesus is able to give us a peace, a wholeness, the world cannot give, and we can live in that peace in the midst of trouble and find that wholeness within this world’s brokenness and our own.

Jesus has gone from us, and we do not see him. You and I have never seen him. We don’t even know what he looked like. But he also says, “I am coming to you,” and so we trust in his presence today and look forward to his coming.

We live in the time in between. Through Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, God’s love and mercy already have triumphed over sin and death. Now, look around you. Then, look within yourself. Neither sin nor death has gone away. People still get hurt and broken. Prejudice and hatred are not only out there in the world but inside us, waiting for some fear or offense to fan them into flame. Injustices are built into all the systems of human societies— economic, political,

educational, and social. We must not take the gospel of Jesus Christ away from the world's needs. The fact that we cannot solve all the problems does not excuse us from holding to the promise and dealing with people in terms of that promise. Because of Jesus, we can see what is wrong, and we are not to accept what is wrong simply because we lack the power to change it. The promise of wholeness, justice, and peace keeps hope alive. We deal with the world, not on its terms nor ours, by on Jesus' terms. We live in the present but do so in hope for the future God has promised.

We have been praying for peace and justice in the Middle East. Do you realize how futile such prayers seem realistically? The more I read about that region and about the histories and attitudes of the groups involved in the conflicts, the less hope I can find anywhere in the whole, extremely complex situation. The need, the lust, for revenge seems built into all of life there because it is deeply imbedded in the people's minds and even in their consciences. Still, we pray for peace and justice for people who seem to want neither. Why? We pray for them because God wants them.

The Doomsday preachers might take another view. They might actually be encouraged by all the conflict in the Middle East, hoping it will blow up into a full-scale Armageddon. Then, maybe, all the bad people will get burned to a crisp or just left behind, while God's people will be taken away from this doomed world into glory. Because God so hates the world? No, we continue to pray for peace and justice for all people because God so loves the world.

Our hope for what God has promised keeps us from giving up, and the Spirit keeps us from giving up—on people, on life, on human societies, or on ourselves. To live trusting Jesus and serving him in this time in between his resurrection and his coming is to refuse to stop loving this world. It is to refuse to give up the world or its people to destruction, even if they seem to want it. We are to persist in hope, not because we can see how it will triumph, but because God is the one who has promised us that day when love and mercy will overcome all opposition in the world and within us. Amen.

Comment: Why this Sermon?

What does this sermon have to do with September 11, 2001, and why is it included in this book? The reasons for its inclusion are to be found, not in direct references to the attacks of 9-11 or to terrorism in general, but in the issue of Christian attitudes toward the world and Christian understandings of the times in which we live.

For the apocalyptic Christian, the only time that matters is the end time. The only real question is, "Who will be taken (up in the rapture to glory) and who left behind?" This type of Christianity has little use for the world as such and values time only as an approach ramp to the end time. Social issues of justice, freedom, equity, reconciliation, and human dignity are seen as mostly irrelevant, because these times are evil and are passing away. So, endure the evils of the present without losing faith and wait for the time to come. Does something that happens seem tragic and

senseless, never mind; it will all make sense when that final day comes, or else it will be left behind in its own, forgotten, meaninglessness.

We do live in the end time in the sense that we are moving toward something of God's making and not toward our own destruction and meaningless oblivion. The end time, however, is also the time in between, and it is a time that matters very much, not just a ramp to eternal bliss or eternal torment. We live in the time between Jesus' resurrection, in which the triumph of life is accomplished, and his coming, in which the triumph of life will be realized and consummated. We live with hope for what we do not yet see, but we are also (and most importantly) to live with love for what we do see. God loves this world, and any Christian theology or teaching which abandons that truth (and this world God loves) has abandoned Jesus.

For Doomsday Christianity, the only trouble with September 11 is that it wasn't big enough. The whole world did not end in a blazing inferno from which God would, at the last moment, snatch the faithful to glory.

Jesus was always among the people left out and left behind. He still is. Whenever we write people off as a lost cause, an unworthy time commitment, a doomed lot, Jesus will be among them. He is the Savior of the outcast, the unrepentant, the lost.

This sermon is included because it speaks to the question, "Why, God?" applied to September 11 and all the other events in life and history that make people suffer, die, and grieve. Here, the question is not, "God, why did it happen?" but, "God, why does it matter so much to you that it did it happen, and why should it matter to us?" If days such as 9-11 are just warmups for Doomsday, then what of it? But, if they are, instead, days akin in the mind and heart of God to the day of Jesus' crucifixion, then God still cares very much about our world and its people, and life matters to God more than we know.

We must not abandon this world and its people. We must not, in the name of Jesus, devise any theology or message which says people don't matter unless they are the right people, by any definition whatsoever of right people. Jesus gave himself for God to the wrong people, and he died as one of them.

Our modern Christian notion that, in terms of salvation, people are strictly individuals makes no sense. To contrast salvation with social justice makes no sense and has no biblical validity. Who is a person all alone, with no relationships to other people? That person would be no one, a nobody—an animal with a large brain, perhaps, but not a person. It is impossible to see people as people without recognizing their relationships and dealings with each other, because no individual exists alone. Love, friendship, neighborliness, and compassion are not just realities of human life, they are realities of utmost importance to God. How can anyone read the Bible and imagine that social justice is not a matter of highest concern to God? I know the answer: it's the nonsense about dispensations. According to these fabricated, unbiblical dispensationalist theories and schemes, we are in the last days when God supposedly no longer cares about all the matters of earth that once

concerned God so deeply God sent Jesus to suffer and die to redeem them and earth's people. Someone has told us we no longer need to care about peace, justice, mercy, equality, and freedom, and some of us have believed the nonsense. How convenient! Now, we can just put rapture bumper stickers on our cars and trucks and wait for it to come. To hell with the world—literally.

This sermon is included in the book because the events of September 11 matter to God and must matter to people seeking to follow Jesus. The strife between Israel and Palestine matters and needs, somehow, to be resolved into peace with justice—not fanned into Armageddon. God still loves this world, and so must we.

Sermon for June 16, 2002
Lessons: Genesis 3:8-21 and Ephesians 2:11-22

HEALING THE HUMAN COMMUNITY

I am amazed at how current Genesis 3 continues to be in our world. When human beings turn from God and try to live as gods to themselves, the harmony of creation is broken and all our human relations with each other are disrupted. In the Genesis story of our downfall, the human beings reject the grace of God in favor of life on their own terms. They will be “as gods” to themselves and to each other, and they will decide for themselves what is good or evil. Their first loss is not merely innocence but dignity. Having chosen the self, the ego, as their center of life, they become self-conscious and suddenly realize they are naked. For the first time, they feel the need to cover up. God finds the would-be gods hiding in the bushes.

The next casualty is the delight the man and woman found in each other. Now, he is blaming his own failure on the woman and on God for giving her to him. There will be pain in bearing children, and the labor pains will be the least of it, because the children of Adam and Eve will be jealous of each other and will kill each other. From that jealousy come endless cycles of fear, suspicion, and revenge. The humans are alienated from the animal kingdom and even from the soil itself. Work will become the toil, not of productivity and accomplishment, but of mere survival and futility.

As Genesis continues painting its picture of us and our world, brother murders brother, revenge becomes a twisted mark of honor, and humanity is divided into tribes and nations which do not understand each other. The entire painting, of course, provides the backdrop against which the Bible begins the story of God's long work of redeeming this world, of taking it back. The rest of the Bible tells of God's intervention into human life and God's stubborn refusal to give us up to our own fears and ambitions. What amazes me is how painfully well those early chapters of Genesis portray our own world right down to these so-called postmodern times. We are Adam and Eve, the would-be gods of our own lives who end up hiding in the bushes. We are Cain the jealous and murderous but, also, Abel the victim. Lamech still lives in our world. Do you know Lamech? He is a

descendent of Cain who brags about his own brutality in taking massive revenge for even the smallest offenses. No one can mess with Lamech and get away with it. He always strikes back harder, much harder, than he was hit. Lamech not only lives in our world today but has been put in charge of the world's ongoing conflicts. He is on both sides of the hatred and violence between the Israelis and Palestinians, and he has been on all sides in Lebanon. But Lamech is not confined to the Middle East. He thrives wherever people take pride in brutality and find honor in revenge. Since September 11, Lamech is fighting to take control of America.

Bridgeton has some choices to make about its place in Genesis, chapter 11, where we find the story of the Tower of Babel. The people give up their grand design of building the tower, but they do not then go on to build what they really need, which is a community of understanding and respect for each other. Instead, they break into their separate ethnic and language groups and go their separate ways. What does this ancient story have to do with Bridgeton? Imagine people abandoning community and the promise of working together for mutual well-being only to separate themselves into groups that do not understand and will not respect each other. In the story, the tower they abandon is just a mud-brick monument to the foolishness of human pride and pretense. The tragedy is that the people also abandon each other. Understanding each other is a project they do not undertake. In Bridgeton, we still have choices. We can still choose to work at understanding each other and building, not a proud tower of Babel, but a community.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, the apostle presents Jesus crucified as the one who brings together in his own broken body two alien and hostile groups, in this case the Jews and the Gentiles who together become the early church. The tragedy here is that the reconciliation was subsequently rejected, not only by Judaism, but much more vehemently and brutally by Gentile Christianity, which went on to turn Jesus' cross into a symbol representing to Jews, not reconciliation or love or mercy or grace, but false accusation, contempt, and murder. In the Dark Ages, our Christian Holy Week became a time for European Jews to fear for their lives, their homes, and their women.

Still, what we read in the Letter to the Ephesians stands as the model for reconciliation and healing in our strife-torn world. We need to pray and pray hard for that healing in many different areas of life where humanity is wounded and bleeding. I would like to say that, while continuing to pray, we should also *work* for healing, but I think that, before we can do much work together, we need to *think* and think very hard about healing and our need for it. We cannot work effectively on problems we do not understand. Before people can work together, they need to listen to each other and keep listening until they can see and feel life from the other side of the division or conflict.

We find salvation personally when we see and feel our own sin, shame, and suffering in the broken body of Jesus and we are led to realize the love that brings him together with us in a redemptive bond of suffering. That's when we begin to find healing for ourselves, but how do we find healing and reconciliation for the human community, which is anything but a community? We need to see Jesus' suffering, not only in our own, but in other people's suffering. We need to learn to feel each other's pain, not just our own. It's not about saying, "I feel your pain," and it's not about

pity. Nobody wants pity. It's about compassion, which means "feeling or suffering with" someone else. Pity reaches down, but compassion reaches out—person to person, equal to equal.

Very sadly, the cross of Jesus no longer qualifies as a symbol of reconciliation in much of our world. It's not Jesus' fault nor God's nor even the world's. The established churches and European Christendom turned the cross into a symbol of Western power, and power does not reconcile peoples to each other, especially not those who believe they have suffered under the very power the cross came to symbolize.

After the September 11 attacks upon America, I said in more than one sermon we need to see that terrible day as a cruciform event, an event of horror and suffering bearing the form and likeness of Jesus' crucifixion. I also said, however, that we can make September 11 a cruciform event only as we become willing to see other peoples' and other nation's sufferings as cruciform, also. Not just our own, but theirs as well.

The goal of this sermon is not Christian self-indictment but an awareness of the need for good, long, hard thinking about healing the human community. The cross is still the answer but not—at least not yet—as a symbol in itself. Let me use September 11 as an example because that has become a symbol of American suffering and victimization, as well as American heroism and determination. Can we learn to see September 11 and its horror in the sufferings of other peoples and nations? Can the Israelis learn to see something of the Holocaust in the suffering and humiliation of the Palestinians, or will they forever see only their own suffering and displacement? Can the Palestinians learn to see their own pain and outrage in the long homelessness and marginalization of the Jewish people?

"Well you don't see my side!" people are always saying. Do I see their side? Do they see mine? Do we even want to?

"The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit. . . ." What a wimp! He's bigger, stronger, and thinks he's smarter, and it's all her fault? What is this division between the two God-given partners in the human community? The two are given to each other because we need each other in life and not only as married couples but as men and women in society and in the world. God created us together in what Genesis calls the "image and likeness of God" – "male and female" *together*. How did we end up with faceless women in burkas and faceless girlies in the office? What folly of sin is it that makes so many men in our world afraid of the very strength we need from our partners in our humanity, in the image of God? We need to think through what manhood, womanhood, honor, and dignity really mean because our world has substituted dominance for dignity and brutality for honor. We and our world need to learn that fear is not respect and submission is not partnership.

If we can learn to see images of our own pain in the sufferings of others, we can start to listen. People may even go further and see images of God's suffering in the pain of people toward whom they have been hostile or just indifferent. The cross takes many forms in our world: slave

ships, bread lines, death squads, closed doors of opportunity, and labels that speak contempt and hatred.

Let me conclude with a modern story of the cross, a cruciform story in the image of the suffering and death of the Son of God. In his book, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, Thomas L. Friedman tells of a father, a Druse merchant, and his fifteen-year-old son who had already fought against the Christians in the Lebanese Civil War. “See this boy?,” the father says with pride. “He was in the fight, too.” Then, the boy speaks: “I was in school, but I quit and came here because they were killing our people. If we don’t fight they will kill us all.” A few weeks later, Friedman related the story to a psychologist who counseled Lebanese students deeply affected by all the fighting. The counselor said this: “When will there be peace in Lebanon? When the Lebanese start to love their children more than they hate each other.”¹⁷

Whose problem is the healing of the human community? It is the problem of all who love their children, which certainly makes it God’s problem. And ours. Amen.

Comment One: Lamech

An obscure character in Genesis, Lamach is a descendent of Cain who boasts to his wives of his brutality:

“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:
I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for striking me.
If Cain is avenged sevenfold,
truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold. (Genesis 4:23,24 NRSV)

In the Old Testament, numbers are used expressively. Sevenfold revenge is not literally 6 + 1 of the enemy killed for every one of Cain’s tribe; it is full, complete retaliation. Likewise, seventy-sevenfold is not a literal numerical count, either, but wholesale and almost unlimited revenge. Jesus uses the same contrast to create a new spirit in human relations, that of forgiveness. When Simon Peter asks how many times he must forgive his brother who sins against him, as many as seven times (a full measure), Jesus says not seven, but seventy-seven (or seventy times seven, as a variant reading). In the spirit of Lamech, revenge governs human relations, and in Lamech and his kind of person that spirit flows freely, without limits. In the spirit of Jesus, grace governs human relations, and that spirit also flows freely to reverse the tide of revenge. Using a different image, we can say that revenge moves in cycles, as one hostile group takes vengeance upon the other; round and round it goes, and truly no one can say when or where it will stop. Jesus seeks to establish new cycles of understanding, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

¹⁷ Thomas L. Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, p. 230.

Lamech is in our newspapers and on our televisions almost every day. As I write these words, the morning paper tells of another suicide attack in Jerusalem and of reactions to it. The article says, “Ultraorthodox Jews stood behind police barricades, shouting, ‘Death to the Arabs . . . We want revenge.’ Some held up signs reading: ‘It’s us or them.’”¹⁸ Where is Lamech? He’s on both sides, bragging still about his vengeance. The article told us that Ariel Sharon has committed Israel to taking more Palestinian territory in retaliation for every attack, even as militant Palestinian groups commit themselves to ceaseless suicide bombings as long as Israelis occupy Palestinian territory. So, both sides have committed themselves to doing exactly what the other requires to keep warfare and death ongoing. Lamech is having the time of his life. From his viewpoint, things couldn’t be going better. From God’s, how could they be going worse?

“We want revenge.” In the name of our God, we want revenge. Does anyone want peace with justice? Can anyone see the other’s suffering?

Comment Two: Conclusion?

Every book must come to an end, but this one cannot reach a conclusion. September 11 is not over; for at least three reasons, it continues to be a present reality for us. The first and most obvious is that the grief of that terrible day continues for those left behind and, to some extent, for all of us. The attacks and threats of attack on America also continue because the hatred of America persists and may even be increasing in parts of the world. And, September 11 continues because it was not an isolated American event but part of a worldwide linkage of conflicts and hostilities. What happened in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania cannot be separated from what is happening in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Middle East.

The questions persist, also. As long as people suffer senselessly, as long as we inflict pain or deprivation upon each other, as long as God’s promises and the world’s realities continue to contradict each other, the questions will and must persist. In many ways, it seems more important that we keep asking the questions than that we settle on answers—unless, of course, our settled answers can actually change the world’s conditions and overcome the contradictions to God’s love and mercy, which they cannot. Otherwise, answers often serve only to harden positions and hearts. Instead of formulating answers as explanations, we hold to the promises of God in the midst of the world’s turmoil, evil, and suffering. At the same time, we also see and affirm much in the world and in human life that is noble, that comes from love, friendship, integrity, and honor. The world is a mess, but it is a messy world God loves, and so we must love it, too. The book’s focus on September 11 does not suggest beauty or lightheartedness, but there is still much in our world of kindness and joy. That day last September has given us much to grieve but, also, much to admire in humanity.

¹⁸ Michael Matza and Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Thursday, June 20, 2002, p. A14.

In one paragraph, the sermon speaks specifically of Bridgeton, New Jersey, where it was preached. I almost removed that paragraph, thinking perhaps there was no need to discuss my particular community in the book. I left the paragraph in because Bridgeton is not unique, and we all live in particular communities, and healing is needed in every one of them. All New Jersey is filled with people of various races, nationalities and ethnic groups, religions, and languages. So is America. So is the world. For me, Bridgeton is of particular concern because my family and I have made our home here for nearly seventeen years, and as a community Bridgeton struggles to bring its different groups of people together. May the struggle continue with that goal in mind: to bring us together.

It is important, I believe, that we see the work of healing and reconciliation as a unified task. Small strife is related to larger scale strife. The way people get treated in towns and villages around the world relates to the conflicts among nations. The ways men and women treat each other in everyday interactions perpetuates itself, for good or evil, to the next generations.

The sermon ends with the children, and so should the book. Jesus says the kingdom of God is for them. The Bible presents the fracturing of the human community as the evil done by our turning from God. So, then, is the healing of the human community not to be a result of God's reclaiming us and turning us back to grace? Whose problem is the healing of humanity's hurts and conflicts? It is the problem of all who love their children, and it is certainly the problem of all who follow Jesus and call him Savior, Redeemer, and Lord.

ADDENDUM: THE LABEL "CHRIST KILLER"

In the comment on the sermon preached for the Interfaith Community Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving, reference is made to the label "Christ Killer" applied to the Jewish people. The purpose of this addition to the book is not to review the history of the Christian teaching of contempt for the Jews in general or that hateful label in particular, but to refute the twisted theology that could produce such a label in the first place. The question is not, "Who plotted, arranged, or carried out the execution of Jesus?" but, "Who bears responsibility for his crucifixion?" The only theologically legitimate Christian answer to that question is twofold: "I bear that responsibility personally, and we bear it together."

Jesus suffered and died for me and, also, because of me. Whenever I eat the bread and share the cup of the Lord's Supper, I am confessing both that the love and mercy which took Jesus to the cross are given to me and that God's love and mercy had to be given in such a horrible way *because of me*. When Christians confess Jesus died for their sins, they are saying exactly that—*for their sins*. We are admitting our sin is the reason for his crucifixion. If I bear no responsibility for his suffering and death (which would mean I had no sin), then I have no place at the Lord's Supper because it is not for me. Jesus said he did not come to call the righteous but sinners.

Likewise, we bear responsibility for his crucifixion together as the world and, especially, as his church. We have communion in the sacramental remembrance of his suffering and death because it is only by his suffering and death that we are united with God and with each other. People who are not guilty of his crucifixion need not and should not be part of his church. Furthermore, they need no salvation in him and can have none.

From the standpoint of Christian theology and faith, if Jews alone were responsible for Jesus' crucifixion, then Jews alone could have salvation in and through him. The rest of us would stand outside the need for salvation and the possibility of it. As Christ's church, the communion of people who put their faith in him, we find both our guilt and our forgiveness at the cross. In Jesus' crucifixion, we see our alienation from God, each other, and ourselves, but we find also our reconciliation with God, each other, and ourselves.

The Christian hymn, "Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended," expresses the confession of all who find salvation in Jesus' suffering and death. The second stanza says:

Who was the guilty? Who brought his upon Thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone Thee!
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied Thee:
I crucified Thee.¹⁹

How, then, and why did the church ever develop the notion that the Jews bore sole or even primary responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion, that they were the "Christ Killers"? Historically, there are probably many answers combining the human need for scapegoats with greed and sadism. Theologically, the answer lies in the church's abandonment of the *theology of the cross* in favor of the *theology of glory*, also called *triumphalism*.

The Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall traces this change extensively in his three volume work, *Christian Theology in a North American Context*,²⁰ but here a brief summary will serve. After the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine, when Christianity became the established religion of the empire, the church became less and less the servant, more and more the ruler. The Christ exalted at the right hand of God the Father Almighty suited such a church much better than the suffering and humiliated Christ crucified. So, the theology of the cross and the way of humble service were put aside in favor of a theology of glory and a way of power and prestige. The rulers of the church became the regents on earth of the exalted Christ in heaven.

¹⁹ Johann Heermann, c. 1630, translation by Robert Bridges, 1899.

²⁰ The contrast between the theology of the cross and the theology of glory runs throughout the work's three volumes, but an introduction to it may be found in the first volume, *Thinking the Faith*, pp. 22ff.

The cross, however, could not be ignored or forgotten because Jesus' crucifixion is much too prominent in the New Testament and too central to Christian faith as a whole. Jesus' cross stands as our primary symbol. No, the cross had to be kept, but the Christian understanding of it could be twisted to serve the needs of a church triumphant. The resurrection could be seen as Christ's triumph over the evil done to him in his crucifixion, rather than as God's vindication of his suffering love for the world's people. Christians could see themselves as the church of the resurrected and exalted Christ. Who, then, did the evil to Jesus in his crucifixion? Who represents the vanquished killer? The theology of glory required an evildoer over whom to triumph, and the church's choice was the Jew. It was easy. The Jews were a people set apart, and they had rejected Jesus as their Messiah. So, they became the scapegoats for triumphalist Christianity. In times of pervasive ignorance and superstition, it was also easy to develop ridiculous but hateful *blood accusations* against the Jews and silly but effectively alienating legends such as that of the "Wandering Jew."

Not the Jews, not the Romans, but I am responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus—I, the church, and the humanity in which I and the church both participate. The church is the communion of faith in Jesus that accepts this responsibility and the salvation his crucifixion brings, but the church is not the exclusive recipient of the love and mercy of God Jesus embodies in his brokenness on the cross. He suffered and died because God so loves the world. By accepting ourselves as the people for whom and because of whom (and so, in that sense, *by whom*) Jesus was crucified, we commit ourselves to living as the people of the crucified Christ and following him in the way of the cross. We, therefore, are committed, not to the way of power and prestige, but to the path of a love that is willing to suffer. The church should always be a servant people.

By choosing a scapegoat to hate and persecute for the crucifixion of Jesus, Christians deny their own belonging to him in his crucifixion and renounce their own salvation. By teaching contempt for Jesus' own people, the Jews, Christians heap their contempt upon him. Ridding ourselves of the label "Christ Killer" and all it represents as it has been applied to the Jewish people is not just a matter of tolerance, kindness, or open-minded pluralism; it goes to the very heart of our confession of faith in Jesus and to being his people, his church. If he did not suffer and die for us and because of us, then we have no place in him.

The hymn already quoted, "Ah, Holy Jesus," after confessing responsibility (and guilt) for his death, goes on:

For me, kind Jesus, was Thy incarnation,
Thy mortal sorrow, and Thy life's oblation;
Thy death of anguish and Thy bitter passion,
For my salvation.