

September 10, 2011

Romans 8: 31-39

John 1:1-5

“Neither things present nor things to come”

Friends, when I was thirteen years old in the mid-1960’s, my family spent a year living in Vienna, Austria. I was in the eighth grade. One rainy day my class went on a field trip. Our destination? Mauthausen Concentration Camp. A number of my classmates were Jewish. We toured the grounds, the barracks, the stone quarries where emaciated prisoners hacked at the ground. We viewed the museum, filled with photographs and first person remembrances.

My mother tells me that I had to sleep in bed with my parents for many weeks after that trip. I began to notice how the city of Vienna was not rebuilt yet, following the end of the Second World War. There were areas of rubble from bombed out buildings scattered through the territory my brother and I traveled to school. I remember thinking, “This is a different world--- it’s not like in the U.S., where there is no one alive who remembers war on American soil- who has SEEN the rubble—not since the aftermath of the Civil War.”

On September 11, 2001, that changed. We all saw the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. Many of us saw it televised WHILE IT WAS HAPPENING. We saw the rubble of the Pentagon. We saw the crater in a Pennsylvania field. We were horror-struck. I think for so many of us the litany in our minds and hearts was, “This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening.”

On that day our view of the world changed. We began to see how profoundly interconnected the whole human race is, and that what is believed and felt in one place can impact the world far away.

This past week, a church member e-mailed me a series of photographs of the attack in New York City and of its aftermath. The photos were sent as an attachment. I realized, as I opened the attachment, that I felt afraid. What might be pictured here? What might I see? My ten-year old grandson was with me in my office. I made him go into another room!

If I felt afraid this week, afraid and protective of a precious child in my life, what kind of fear was experienced by those present during each of the attacks? What about the fear of the first responders, who were on the scene? What about the fear of the families of those first responders, of those on the planes, of those in the buildings?

Then came the sorrow of loss multiplied as the magnitude of the deaths became clear over the days and weeks that followed the attack. Jerry Sitser is a professor of religion at Whitworth College. Driving on a lonely road in Idaho with his family, his whole world changed. In an instant a tragic accident claimed three generations of his family: his mother, his wife, and his four year old daughter. He has written of his experience in a book titled "A Grace Disguised". The book was given me by a man in my congregation who lost his wife in a car accident.

Sitser's words may speak for many of us as we consider with sorrow our losses as a nation on 9-11:

Catastrophic loss wreaks destruction like a massive flood. It is unrelenting, unforgiving, and uncontrollable, brutally erosive to body, mind and spirit. Sometimes loss does its damage instantly, as if it were a flood resulting from a broken dam that releases a great torrent of water, sweeping away everything in its path. Sometimes loss does its damage gradually, as if it were a flood resulting from unceasing rain that causes rivers and lakes to swell until they spill over their banks, engulfing, saturating, and destroying whatever the water touches. In any case, catastrophic loss leaves the landscape of one's life forever changed.

He writes of the accident:

I remember those first moments after the accident as if everything was happening in slow motion. They are frozen in my memory with a terrible vividness....I remember the realization sweeping over me that I would soon plunge into a darkness from which I might never again emerge as a sane, normal believing man.

Ours is a world filled with darkness- filled with tragedy and evil. How do we find our way?

Rabbi Joshua Kazan is the preacher today at Congregation Habonim, a Conservative synagogue in Manhattan. He, like all preaching this weekend, struggled with what to say. He drew on the words of a first century rabbi, Rabbi Akiva: *Sometimes something is so tragic, that there aren't words. Silence is a fence protecting wisdom.*

In that spirit, I invite us all to pause for a moment in prayer as we grapple with the realities of the world's darkness. Let us pray for first responders who face crisis and danger as their daily work. Let us pray for their safety, for wisdom for all who struggle in darkness.

(Silence)

How do we deal with darkness? As a people of faith, we turn to our God. On Sept. 11, 2001, a teacher on his break turned to the devotional magazine he often read during the day. He had just watched the news footage of the attacks. The reading was from Psalm 62:

***For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.
He alone is my rock and my salvation.
My fortress; I shall never be shaken. ...
On God rests my deliverance and my honor;
My mighty rock, my refuge is in God.***

***Trust in him at all times, O people;
Pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us.***

God speaks to us. God speaks through writers of books, who have struggled in darkness. God speaks through friends who offer their love and compassion. God speaks through the words of Scripture.

Our readings for tonight were selected by Pastor Bromleigh, as well as the sermon title. These words are a gift to me, and through me to you.

We have a God whose light SHINES in all darkness. We have a God whose power is greater than anything in the universe. We have a God who is with us ALWAYS.

From Romans we learn:

God is FOR us.

God gave his SON for us.

NOTHING can separate us from God's love, made known in Jesus Christ; Not death; not life, not angels, not rulers, nothing in the past, nothing in the present, nothing that is still to come, nothing in ALL CREATION can separate us from God's love.

God's Word became flesh in Jesus. Christ came to bring us light. That light SHINES IN THE DARKNESS, and DARKNESS will NEVER overcome it.

These promises are meant to lift us up, to strengthen us, to offer us hope, to give us confidence, to bring us peace.

But that's not the whole story. Jerry Sitsler writes, *The experience of loss does not have to be the defining moment of our lives. Instead the defining moment can be our response to the loss. It is not what happens to us that matters so much as what happens IN us.* (emphasis mine)

God calls us to be light bearers. God calls us to carry the light in the darkness. May this anniversary of the tragic losses of ten years ago lead us to a renewed commitment to be God's representatives in this world. May we be God's agents in his transformation of the world. So may it be. Amen.