

Sermon: "10th Anniversary of 9/11"
Sunday, September 11, 2011
The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector
Christ Church, Shaker Heights
Proper 19, Year A: Ex. 14:19-31, Matthew 18:21-35

On September 11, 2001 I was the curate at Trinity Church in Torrington, Connecticut. As the stark reality of the terrorist attacks unfolded that morning I felt as helpless and frightened as I have ever felt in my life. The anguished cry of the psalmist was my own; "Do not be far from me [O God] for trouble is near and there is no one to help. " (Ps. 22:11)

The sidewalks of the busy intersection where the church was located were filled with people who were equally as helpless and frightened as I was. In this moment of terror and uncertainty we were people seeking comfort, a word of hope, a place to be together. Not knowing what else to do, I hurried to open the big, heavy, red doors of the church, turned on the sanctuary lights, lit the Paschal candle and placed an impromptu newsprint sign on the sidewalk that said in big block letters, "Church Open for Prayer." Throughout the day the rector and I sat in the church offering prayers, scripture readings and intercessions. In between we planned an ad hoc service for that evening with our music director. Dozens of people streamed through our doors during that day and the evening service drew hundreds more.

And they kept on coming . . . at least initially.

The emotional pain and search for answers after Sept. 11 had many Americans flocking to religious services in numbers that hadn't been seen since the hey-day of church attendance in the 1950's. A surge of spirituality occurred as people examined just how fragile life was and struggled to evaluate what was really important. Answers were hard to come by in the days and months that followed the 9/11 attacks, and many sought solace in the Church and in a higher power.

But, like many of the initial post-attack phenomenon, church attendance has since returned to normal and for many denominations has dropped even further.

Why is this? If everything changed in our culture post-9/11 as the pundits proclaimed, why didn't that surge in religious attendance hold in the intervening decade?

The answer to that question is multi-faceted and complex. To untangle it from other significant forces impacting the role of religion in our culture in the 21st century would take a year long, post-graduate course, and then some.

Certainly one contributing factor for this drop in post-post-9/11 church attendance is the message people heard from pulpits, especially in mainline churches. That message can best be summed up in the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. "You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good,

and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mt. 5:43-48)

When the dust of 9/11 had settled and the reality of the wonton death and destruction began to register, what many people felt was hate, not love. For these folks it was anathema to come to church and hear that God made the sun to rise on both the evil and the good and the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous. That was not a god who was going to satisfy people’s desire for revenge fueled by the fear and hatred that stoked their hearts. And so people stopped coming to church, or they found alternate places in the religious and political spheres that fed and reinforced their fears and prejudices; places that happily preached a god who endorsed hatred, vengeance, retribution, violence and war. In other words, not the God of Jesus Christ.

The sad reality is that it was the message of this god who many people listened to in the aftermath of the attacks.

As we remember the 10th anniversary of 9/11 the question we need to ask ourselves is this, “In the last decade where has heeding that god of hatred, vengeance, retribution, violence and war gotten us?” Has this pagan god in any way whatsoever helped us understand how fragile and precious life truly is, all life, everyone’s life? Has this idolatrous god added one iota of understanding to what is really important for humanity and peaceful co-existence? What has the god of hate, fear, retribution and violence done to build up God’s reign?

The answer is: nothing.

And the reason is, that this god is not the way, the truth and the life. Ultimately following that god only leaves you feeling even more helpless and frightened, because that god robs you of your humanity. This is a god of death, which is why he is not the God of Jesus Christ.

If we can sift one truth from the rubble of 9/11 and how life has unfolded in the world in the decade since then it is this: The message of the God in Jesus – the God of non-violence, the God of peace and justice, the God who makes the rain to fall on all people, the God who calls us to love our enemies as well as our friends – this God who was rejected by many, is in fact the authentic, one, true God. The God that Jesus proclaimed is the God who has always been, is now and will be forever.

For those who doubted or disregarded God’s voice in the chaos following 9/11, I have Good News for you! It is never too late to know the God of Jesus, to hear God’s voice, heed God’s way. Maybe doing that is the most valuable gift we can give ourselves today as we move forward in this post-post-9/11 era.

Heeding God’s way certainly was the gift Joseph gave to his brothers in our passage from Genesis this morning.

You remember Joseph and his amazing technicolor dreamcoat. Well, it was only a technicolor dream coat according to Andrew Lloyd Webber and Broadway, but it was a pretty nice garment in the scripture too.

Let me offer you the Cliffs Notes version of his story.

Joseph was the youngest and most favored of Jacob's twelve sons. The scripture says that Jacob, "loved Joseph more than any of his other children" and therefore he had made for him "a long robe with sleeves." His elegant wardrobe, a pampered lifestyle and being his father's pet went to Joseph's head and he became a spoiled rotten, arrogant little brat. He treated his brothers condescendingly and as a result they came to loath Joseph. They plotted to get rid of him and ended up throwing him into a waterless pit, planning to abandon him to the elements. But they decided that rather than leave him to die they can actually make a few dollars out of their pesky brother and so they sell him to a passing caravan of traders. Faced with the conundrum of what to tell their father Jacob, they fake Joseph's death by pouring animal blood on his elegant robe, which they bring back to Jacob. Understandably he is grief stricken at the loss of his favorite son to a wild animal attack.

The caravan of traders end up selling Joseph into bondage in Egypt where through his intelligence, ability to interpret dreams, and his wit he manages in time to endear himself to Pharaoh and rise to the second most powerful position in all of Egypt.

In the book of Genesis the leit-motif is how God repeatedly takes evil circumstances and uses them for good. The Joseph saga powerfully conveys that theme.

Eventually there is a famine in the land of Israel and the elderly Jacob sends his sons to Egypt, where the granaries are full due to Joseph's astute management. As they encounter Joseph to buy grain from him, his brothers do not initially recognize that he is their brother but he knows exactly who they are. Eventually Joseph is overwhelmed by emotion and love and he reveals to them who he is. The key thing to note in the story is that Joseph is not moved toward vengeance and retaliation against his brothers despite their evil deeds toward him. His response takes them by surprise. We hear:

"Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear. (Gen. 50:18-21a)

"Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good..." The Hebrew word 'hasab' translated as "intended" can best be understood as "has a plan." Even in the midst of the evil done to Joseph and all the pain inflicted on many others that resulted, God has a plan for the good. God can and will bring good out of this evil and all evil.

Regardless of how much we humans plot and connive, no matter what kind of violence and hatred we visit upon one another, God will not be stymied. God will persevere. God will stay the course always

bringing forth plans for life, love and human wholeness, because God's purpose is to bring to fruition the Kingdom of peace and justice.

The Joseph story reveals the nature of the true response required of Christians and people of goodwill in relation to evil. Is the cycle of violence, war, pain, fear and hatred going to continue or will we – like Joseph - break it?

That is the critical question we need to be asking ourselves on this 10th anniversary of 9/11 as we face the future.

We have set before us the way of death and the way of life; the way of unimaginable blessings or of endless curses. The God of Jesus Christ calls us to choose life so that we may truly live. (paraphrase of Deut. 30:19)

Amen.