

Nine-Eleven: Forever Remembered

Psalm 46

On the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, I was driving to my church in Colorado Springs when I heard the news on the radio of the Twin Towers in New York City being hit by hijacked airliners. At that moment the magnitude of what happened didn't sink into my consciousness. When I arrived at the church I found my secretary already there with a television on in the office. I stood next to her watching the attack over and over again. My emotions ranged from numbness to disbelief to anger to confusion.

That day I did not shed any tears. It was all too overwhelming. The day after was different. I went to the church but went home to have lunch with Susan while we watched the television. For the first time the tears came. I told Susan that it was much more emotional than the day before. She quietly reflected that now we were putting a face to it. She was right. On Tuesday we saw airplanes, fire balls, smoke, and then the twin towers collapsing. Beginning on Wednesday we saw people up close and personal, the faces of those fighting fires, looking for the entrapped, stretcher bearers with both the wounded and the dead, and people handing out coffee.

Each of you can look back ten years to the day from this morning with equally clear remembrances of where you were and what you were doing when you heard the news of Nine-Eleven. There are not very many events in history that embed themselves with unfading clarity in our memories. For me, the other one is the assassination of President Kennedy. I was sitting in an anti-submarine warfare class when someone walked in to tell us. People of my father's generation distinctly remember the first time they heard the news that Pearl Harbor had been bombed.

What do we do when we are suddenly confronted with a destructive evil that robs us of life and our sense of security? We turn to God, and on Nine-Eleven we did so in droves. Standing in the church office with my secretary on that fateful day, I finally cleared my thoughts and knew what I needed to do. I walked over to our phone tree system and recorded a message that went out to the congregation announcing a prayer service for that very evening. At 7:00 p.m. the sanctuary was full. We held each other, openly shared our emotions, and we prayed. It was a time of beginning a long healing process.

The other thing that happened was a huge weekly influx of people into our churches on Sundays, not just in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, but across the country. Churches that were normally half-filled were now crowded. People who didn't go to church were suddenly going to church. I thought at the time that some good things had to come out of Nine-Eleven. This looked like it would be one. Unfortunately, it lasted only about six weeks. After the dust had settled and people got over their fears, they returned to their previous lives. Churches were again only partially filled. It was a sad commentary for me on our human fickleness that so many only needed and wanted God when they didn't have any control over what was happening in their lives. Once they felt some normalcy and control return, they no longer felt the need for God.

Ten years later, what images do you still have of Nine-Eleven? Here are some of mine:

- Two trapped firefighters walking out of the rubble to a cheering throng after a heavy beam that blocked their escape finally had been removed.
- *The Star-Spangled Banner* being played at the changing of the Queen's Guard at Buckingham Palace in England.
- People donating blood and giving money in unprecedented ways to help the suffering.
- Leontyne Price singing *America the Beautiful* at the National Cathedral.
- American flags everywhere – on the damaged Pentagon, at the rubble of Ground Zero, at a Pennsylvania field, outside of homes, and on vehicles.

While Nine-Eleven was perpetrated on our soil, we must not forget that national foreigners from over seventy countries also perished. Nine-Eleven was not just an act of war against the United States; it was an act of war against the world and against creation. Thus, it was an act of war against God. It had to be dealt with; we did not have a choice. We had to respond to an insidious and continuing threat against all of God's people. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." Given a choice, we would prefer peace. But there are times in our nation's history, such as Pearl Harbor and Nine-Eleven, when we don't have a choice, not if want to preserve what was started 235 years ago. There are times when we reluctantly, albeit necessarily, acknowledge that an enemy puts us into a situation where the only way to achieve peace is to first respond with force against the evil.

The first question that was asked on Nine-Eleven was, "Why?" The second was, "Why did God let this happen?" The answer to "why" is relatively easy – it was an act of pure evil perpetrated by very evil men. As such it was an abomination to God. As to the second question, we must remind ourselves that God created us with free will. We have the power to choose good or evil. God wants us to come into a loving relationship with him. Christ wants us to live our lives according to his teachings and example. Many do. Many do not. When the world sins against itself, it sins against God. If everyone everywhere came to God and lived fully according to the precepts of their particular religion, then the Nine-Elevens of the world would never happen. But not all people do. God allowed Nine-Eleven to happen only in the sense that we are not his puppets but rather his creation, and he calls us to freely choose his ways. When we do not, God weeps and also mourns, and he holds his arms out to us.

In addition to the death toll of Nine-Eleven, there was a dramatic shift in our national psyche. We learned we were vulnerable. We also collectively became paranoid about anyone with brown skin, anyone who wore a burka, anyone who practiced Islam. Middle Easterners were suddenly not to be trusted. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims in our own country, most of whom were American citizens, were mistrusted and mistreated. It has taken many years since Nine-Eleven for us to begin to realize how wrong and unfair our reactions were towards them. Unfortunately, there is still a significant number of people who still feel threatened when they encounter a Muslim. The terrorists were and are today a very small number of radical Muslims who have ignored or distorted their own *Quran* teachings. God calls us to embrace the millions of mainstream Muslims as our brothers and sisters. They decry terrorism as much as do we.

There are so many scriptures I could have chosen for today. I picked Psalm 46. The psalmist speaks clearly about God's presence with us in the midst of chaos and calamity. I want to share two more images of what I see as the providential hand of God in the moments of people's horror following the terror of Nine-Eleven, where God was "a very present help in trouble" (v. 1b).

- Time and time again, no panic was evidenced among those seeking to reach safety from the Twin Towers. People proceeded in a hurried but orderly manner and helped each other to get out. Doing so saved countless lives, and many stories emerged from those who survived the towers of feeling calm and collected as they sought safety.
- A man in the first tower that was hit was trying to help an injured person out and couldn't find a way. They were trapped. He knelt in the debris and smoke, and began praying the Lord's Prayer. At that moment the second tower was hit and he felt the shock wave. Getting up, his instincts immediately led him to a way out and he brought the injured person to safety. Later he learned that his sister was a passenger on the plane that hit the second tower. The man said he believed that at the moment his sister died, her spirit showed him how to get himself and the other person to safety. And, he added, that could only have happened because God's Spirit was behind his sister's spirit.

There are so many images that we have from Nine-Eleven. Today there are many other images to overlay what we remember from ten years ago, images of strength in adversity, of survival, and of hope. Here are a few of mine:

- Two days ago, on Friday, I was touched by watching the workers at the Twin Towers Memorial stop for a time of silence at the exact time the first plane hit on Nine-Eleven. It reminded me of Psalm 46, verse 10a: “Be still and know that I am God.” It is my favorite verse in the Bible.
- Yesterday I watched the dedication of the memorial at Shanksville, Pennsylvania, commemorating the lives of the forty passengers and crew of United Flight 93. President Bush, President Clinton, and Vice President Biden all spoke. The service ended with Sarah McLachlan, one of my favorite vocalists, playing and singing her song *In the Arms of an Angel*. The prominent lyric of the song is:
 In the arms of an Angel fly away from here;
 You are pulled from the wreckage of your silent reverie.
 You're in the arms of an Angel;
 May you find some comfort here.

That song is so appropriate to honor those who sacrificed their own lives by crashing Flight 93 into that Pennsylvania field before it could reach and hit the Capitol. As I watched and listened to McLachlan sing it, I had tears in my eyes.

- On Friday I received an email from a friend with an attached video explaining the memorial that is being dedicated today in New York City. The memorial is beautiful. The twin towers were each built on a one-acre footprint. Those same footprints are now waterfalls, each cascading water down seventy feet on all four sides. It is the largest human constructed waterfall in the world. The names of those who perished there are inscribed in stone around the edges of both waterfall sites. In the video, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg said that the memorial doesn't seek to describe what happened there. Rather it is intended to invite each person to reflect on their own thoughts regarding Nine-Eleven.

One year after Nine-Eleven, Susan and I took our grand-children to New York City to see Ground Zero. It was a large hole in the ground, still with a lot of debris around and within it. We wanted them to see what had happened, because we knew that in one way or another their lives would be affected by it. After the visitor center is completed next year, we would like to take them back and show them how the devastation has been transformed into a thing of beauty and serenity.

Lastly, I want to share something of which you may not be aware. Yesterday, the *U.S.S. New York* sailed into New York City harbor for today's memorial dedication. The *New York* is a 25,000 ton, 684 foot long, San Antonio-class amphibious transport dock ship. She is named for the state of New York and was commissioned into active service a little less than two years ago. Seven-and-one-half tons of steel was reclaimed from the Twin Towers wreckage. From it, the bow stem, the strongest point within any ship, was forged for the *New York*. The *New York's* commissioning crew adopted the ship's motto as “Never Forget.”

Three sister-ships have come out of Nine-Eleven. In addition to the *New York*, the *U.S.S. Arlington* is named for the county in Virginia where the Pentagon is located, and will be commissioned in mid-2012. She has steel in her bow stem from the Pentagon wreckage. The *U.S.S. Somerset* is named for the county in Pennsylvania where Flight 93 crashed. Still under construction, her bow stem has steel in it from the melted down crane that was used at the wreckage site.

Psalm 46, verse 5 says, “God is in the midst of the city...God will help it when the morning dawns.” God was and God did. But then the Psalm follows in verses 6 and 7a with, “The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us.” There are clearly times in history when God stands with good people against evil. In both World Wars, God stood against evil. On June 6, 1944 a miracle happened over the English Channel. Severe weather threatened to delay the Normandy Invasion and was forecast to continue for a few days. Suddenly, early that morning, the stormy weather lifted and the roiled seas calmed. The invasion proceeded and led to the defeat of the evil known as Hitler. I see the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the demise of Communism, and the tearing

apart of the Iron Curtain, among other historical events, as the hand of God standing with people who are united in opposition to evil. It is so in the war against terrorism. It will be so in the future. Yes, God's time is not our time, and we must leave it with him. Such is part of our trust and faith.

We have survived Nine-Eleven and we are stronger for it. There will be other challenges to our nation. We will deal with them as we always do, with resolve and determination to preserve our Union and freedom. Let us forever remember those who were sacrificed on Nine-Eleven. Let us continuously heed the words of Psalm 46: "Be still and now that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us" (vv. 10-11a). Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 11 September 2011