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Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

November 15, 2015; the 25th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: 1 Samuel 1:4-20; 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8.

Responding to Terrorism

It is impossible to hear today's Gospel reading and not think about Paris. It is good that we can be together today to pray as a community for all who have been touched by the terror, those who died, those who were injured, those who were traumatized, and all of us who once again have to face the reality that we are living in this time of terrorism.

What emotions did you feel as you heard the news---grief, sadness, anger, fear?

On days like this, I wonder, what does our faith have to offer us?

Can ancient texts give us something to hold on to, something to ground us, while the world seems to be flying apart all around us?

How does our understanding of God, of Jesus, of the Spirit inform and support us as we move forward...how does God want to support us?

The disciples looking at the Temple, admired it, such great large stones and buildings...did they feel secure looking at the temple?

But Jesus said, "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

And then as they sat with Jesus looking at the Temple, they asked "when?" When will this happen?

And Jesus responds with a warning...don't let people lead you astray by focusing you on the trouble, the coming destruction.

Our reading from Mark is often referred to as the "little apocalypse."

Apocalyptic literature, the Book of Revelation being a prime example, tells

about the end of time and all the related chaos and suffering that accompanies the end times.

The Gospel of Mark was written around 70 a.d., at the time of the Roman Jewish war, which did result in the destruction of the Temple.

For the followers of Jesus in the years after his death and resurrection, many people in those first decades, believed that the end of time was upon them, and certainly the destruction of the Temple was major labor pain on the way to new life.

Mark's Gospel directed the 1st century followers of Jesus, through the Spirit speaking through the scripture, not to be distracted by the events of the day...and we are given the same message today. For most of us, we are not tempted to focus on those who will interpret the terror in Paris as a sign of the end times in the Biblical sense...that's not our focus in the Episcopal Church.

But we too can be distracted.

We can be distracted by those who spend many hours analysing what happened. I know I can find it hard to turn off CNN...what if there is a new discovery or a new bit of information that can help explain it all.

But after the tenth time I hear the same basic information, I know I would be better served by saying some prayers rather than hearing the on-going commentary.

But it was gripping, and it reminded many of us of 9/11, on a small scale of course, but nonetheless, similar: people going about their daily lives with no thought that it would be their last day, innocent people killed, families devastated...a nation under attack...a few people with so much hate and power to kill and hurt..that a nation closed its borders.

What happened is frightening on so many levels.

And they tell us it is just the beginning.

For those who work so hard and will work hard to protect France, and

the world, our city, from such terror, we are thankful and we pray for them, but few if any of us work in the world of security in that way.

What are we called to be about in face of terror?

How does God want to help us; how are we to respond?

Well, God has given us each other...to support each other...it is important that we are here together on days like this, and every week for strength, for support to support each other.

For the world is pretty much the same week by week.

God has given us as a community to the world to be a place and a people of peace and hope.

The Sunday after 9/11 2001, I was working at St. Paul's downtown, and Fletcher Lowe, retired rector from Holy Comforter, was and is still, priest-in-residence there.

That Sunday after 9/11 Fletcher gave the sermon, and I've always remember what he said, an illustration he gave, and you know it was very good because I don't remember much from sermons given 14 years ago.

Who will we be in response to terror?

Fletcher said that when an egg is exposed to boiling water, it becomes hard.

When a carrot is exposed to boiling water, it becomes soft.

When coffee is exposed to boiling water, it transforms the water.

As people of faith, as people who follow the Way of Jesus, we are called to be agents of transformation in response to the terror.

Well, that sounds great, you might say, but how?

God will show us the way, in the circumstances of our lives, in the opportunities as they present themselves, we will follow the Way of Jesus, which is often less simple than the way of others.

For example, almost immediately after the killing started, people on TV were wondering if one or more of the terrorists had come into France as a refugee.

And what followed from that thought was of course, refugees from Syrian could pose a threat, will we continue in Europe to welcome them, and will we welcome them in U.S?

This is of course related to the larger issue of our Muslim brothers and sisters.

One of the ways that we follow Jesus in response to terrorism, is to say publically as often as we need to, Islam and terrorism are not the same; that we have friends, neighbors, fellow citizens who are Muslim and love peace.

It pains me to say this because I feel I shouldn't have to, but we do, because others will say hateful things about Islam and Muslims in response to the attacks in Paris.

And we need to say "yes," we want to welcome Syrian refugees who are fleeing terrorism; 50% of the refugees are children, btw.

We are beginning conversations in our church about sponsoring a refugee family from Syria if that becomes possible...if our nation does in fact welcome them.

In our defence those who are Muslims and in our openness to consider helping a family from Syria, we are following the way of Jesus and avoiding the distracting voices that would have us focus on fear.

Jesus, in Mark's Gospel, basically says, you are not in control; you are not going to know or control the events of world history.

Do not get distracted from what matters most every day, in days of peace and in days of war, your relationship with God...God's relationship with you.

This does not mean that we deny our pain, our anger, our fear, but instead of turning to CNN for the solutions, we turn to God.

What happened in Paris brings back disturbing memories for us of 9/11...I remember how in the first days following, we didn't know if the attack was over, much as Paris hasn't known, doesn't know what will happen next.

The prayers that we will use today come from the *Feasting on the Word Worship Companion*, edited by Kimberly Bracken Long, I chose them for this Sunday because I remembered these from when we used them about two months ago...I really liked them; I was on a retreat the Sunday we used them, and I thought it would be great to experience them with you. One of the petitions reads:

We pray for Muslims and Jews, Hindus and Buddhists, people of indigenous religions everywhere, that their paths may lead—with ours—to greater understanding of the goodness of faith in its many languages and forms. God of love, hear our prayer.

This is a great prayer for any Sunday, and today, it really feels like a good one to pray...for we do earnestly pray for greater understanding, respect, peace with all; we want to pray for the Muslims who will be treated badly by some because of terrorism with which they have nothing to do....but are seen by some as guilty by association.

In these prayers, there is also a particular place to pray for “nations in trouble” and for peacemakers and diplomats as they work to shape and reform people.

Going around Twitter Friday night, and I'm sure since, were tweets basically saying: “don't pray, do something.”

Well anyone who would say that doesn't know what prayer is...we are doing

something, following the Way of Jesus, connecting with God who is Love, who is Peace,

and grounding ourselves in our convictions, perhaps growing in our convictions and understanding of who we are and what we are about as people of faith and followers of Christ.

Before all this happened on Friday night, I had been working on a sermon for today focused on Hannah, on our reading from 1 Samuel.

While I won't preach another sermon to you now, I will note a couple of things about Hannah that could be helpful to us in knowing how to respond to terror as people of faith.

For Hannah was having her own personal apocalypse, as we all do from time to time during our lives, when things are falling apart, when something is ending or seems like death, and we cannot yet see the new creation.

Hannah was barren, unable to have children, in a culture that required that she have children to be seen as worthy, a righteous person.

She seemed to be in a situation to which there was no solution...sort of how we might feel about something in our lives or in our world when we think about war and terrorism.

Hannah is honest, real; she expresses her desire to God.

She is persistent, even though the situation seems hopeless.

She is not thrown of course by these who do not understand her; she stays focused.

In the end, God grants her request for children; and in that action, the scripture affirms that God is the one who brings the transformation and the new life...not us apart from God.

Let us pray: O God of love and peace, we pray for Paris, for France, for Beirut and other place in the world where people suffer owing to terrorism, for all who died, were injured, who were traumatized by the violence, and those around the world witnessing it. We pray for your help to focus on You, not to avoid the realities of the world, but to better address them, as You call us to do. Give us the faith, the courage, and the persistence of Hannah, to never lose hope, as our hope is in You, O God, our Mighty Savior. Amen.