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Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

September 11, 2016; the 17th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10.

Responding to 9/11, Fifteen Years On

Jeremiah describes with gripping images the outcome of human folly: "I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins."

Fifteen years ago, it looked like chaos would overwhelm creation.

Images of planes flying into skyscrapers in New York City, against a the background of a beautiful blue sky...such images for us who were watching on that day, come to mind easily on this day.

Jeremiah's words to a people and a context long ago, name, in a sense, what we saw...and many wondered...how can this be...where is God?

"I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light.

I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro."

The ash and dust blocked light from heaven at ground zero; the buildings were quaking like the mountains of Jeremiah's vision.

Jeremiah names the people as foolish, stupid, having no understand, but being skilled in doing evil.

Jeremiah is speaking to people under the threat of defeat at the hands of the Babylonian empire, and

the prophet calls on the only people he could,
 his own, to change so that God will bless
 them rather than let them be
 defeated.

Jeremiah's worldview and theology -- one that
 named God as responsible for everything, all the
 good, all the bad...that it was all God's will for
 God's people -- this is not our worldview or
 theology in the Episcopal Church as a
 whole.

Certainly we know that we need to repent and others do
 but God did not allow 9/11 because we were bad --
 as some fundamentalist preachers actually said
 after the event.

But Jeremiah is a companion for us today, for in his
 visions he found, "the horror so spellbinding that he
 cannot take his eyes off it--fixed in terror at what
 he sees."¹

It was hard for many of us to stop watching that day, that
 week, even though it was the same set of images
 being shown hour after hour.

So much was lost that day...it is impossible to describe.
 The thousands of innocent lives lost...the thousands of
 lives broken with pain, and grief, and an end to
 innocence for so many...even for those who
 thought they had seen a lot before that day.

The "new normal" came to be, and it was horrible.

Barricades went up; and have not come down.

Fifteen years ago this happened the Tuesday after our

¹ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol., 3*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, Epub., George W. Ramsey, "Exegetical Perspective," Loc 2156 of 12899.

Welcome Back/Home Coming Sunday at St. Paul's
downtown where I worked at the time.

The most of the staff was at Roslyn that day for a retreat,
but we hurried back downtown once we realized what
was happening, and I saw the barricades up.

Yet, even Jeremiah with his vision of the destruction,
tells us that God was not done, "For thus says the
Lord: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I
will not make a full end."

Even in the dark predictions of Jeremiah, God who
created the heavens and the earth will not give up on
the people and the creation.

On this day that we remember 9/11, we are also observing
our Welcome Back Sunday and holding a ministry
fair.

When I first thought about the mix of things, emotions,
energies, of this day for us...I wondered if all went
together.

But quickly I sensed the Spirit in the mix...yes, it all works
together because rather than crushing our spirits,
days when the worst happens, on such days
we remember that

*God strengthens us to be an answer to the
question...where was God...where has God gone?*

We are the answer---God with us---God working through
us...to be people of hope and compassion...to be
Christ to others who suffer, to be Christ to each
other in our grief.

We have been created in the image of One who never
gives up and always searches for the lost.

Jesus was so clear about this.
And people knew it.

People were drawn to Jesus...“All the tax collectors and
sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus.”

People were against Jesus...

“And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and
saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with
them’.”

And so Jesus tells them two stories...two parables, which
tell us everything about who God is for us and our
world.

If one has a hundred sheep and loses one, doesn't that
shepherd go and search for the one who is lost, and
finding the sheep, lays it on his shoulders and
rejoices?

And then invites others saying, “Rejoice with me, for I
have found my sheep that was lost.”

Or what woman does not search for her one lost
coin...searching everywhere until she finds it?

And when she finds it she says, “Rejoice with me, for I
have found the coin that I had lost.”

Jesus makes the point that there is great rejoicing and
much joy in heaven when what was lost is found.

God is all about searching, finding the lost, and rejoicing.
God searches for us in all of our confusion, when we feel
lost, when we have our personal 9/11s, and God
does this often through people in our lives.
God does this through us, for others.

Having a ministry fair and celebrating who we are as a
church is a good thing to do on the 15th anniversary

of 9/11...it is a hopeful thing.

While we continue to grieve everyone and all that was lost
that day, we live as people who are companions with God in
searching for the lost...be that people or
peace...individuals and communities.

In the face of evil, we stand united with each other and
with God to be children of light in the world...those
who proclaim and claim the love of God...that the
love of God is unstoppable...that our faith
community, Holy Comforter, exists in
this world to be an alternative to
hate and destruction.

And that is no small thing.

Our faith community does much, our ministries,
that helps sustain and change lives...much that
makes real God's promise that God is always
with us.

Faith, religion, it can get so complicated.
But in many ways it is so simple...God calls us to come
together as a community to find the lost and what is
lost; God calls us to come together strengthen
each other in every circumstance.

Consider today how you can make a difference through
this Church...how you do...by being here to worship
today...that is important, and a first step...now
consider taking another step, if you have not
already.

Every Sunday is the first step...our worship prepares us
for all that we will do for each other and God and the

wider community throughout the week.

We walk this path together; we journey on, remembering
the past with its share of dark days and joyful days.
God has brought us together for a reason, for many
reasons.

On the 15th anniversary of 9/11, I think having a
“Welcome Back” Sunday, a sort of “renewal of our
commitment” Sunday, is exactly the right way,
certainly
one way, to respond to the evil that was 9/11 and to other
evil/darkness/situations of loss.

Welcome back to church at the start of this new program
year...welcome back (even if you were here last
Sunday) to ministries that shine a light into the
darkness.

I conclude with the last verse of our sequence hymn,
words written by Carl Daw in response to 9/11,

“Help us to know your steadfast love, your presence near as breath;
rekindle in our hearts the hope of life that conquers death.”

Amen.