Proper 19C

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St. Dunstan’s

The Rev. Patricia Templeton

Then and Now

We all remember where we were and what we were doing that day. I was getting ready for work, about to scoop up 4-month-old Joseph Henry from the bed and leave when I heard the news bulletin – a plane had hit the World Trade Center.

I sat down, riveted by the pictures of what I assumed must be a tragic accident, when, unbelievably, another plane hit the second tower. Even watching it happen, it took a moment to sink in.

This was no accident. This was a deliberate act of terrorism, an attack on our nation.

I looked at the baby in my arms and wondered what kind of world he would grow up in.

That night, like many churches across the country, St. Timothy’s in Chattanooga, where I was then the interim rector, held a special service in a sanctuary overflowing with shocked and grieving people.

Here is part of what I said that night:

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Throughout this long and horrible day two images have recurred in my mind. They are both memories of experiences I had three summers ago.

The first is standing on the 95th floor of the World Trade Center. I was there with a group of Episcopal priests from around the country, participating in a leadership conference.

We were visiting the offices of the senior warden of Trinity Church on Wall Street, who was the president of the firm that occupied this imposing real estate.

The office was as plush as you would expect – equipped with a telescope to view the boats and the Statue of Liberty in the harbor below, and filled with expensive art and furniture. Gloved men in white jackets served us wine and appetizers.

What must it be like to have this kind of power and wealth, to live this kind of life? I wondered as I gazed at my surroundings.

Today I pray for the people who worked in that office – both those with great power and wealth, and those who served them.

The second image is from later that summer. I was with the youth on a pilgrimage to New Mexico. We stopped in Oklahoma City to pay tribute at the site of the Murrah Federal Building, at that time the scene of the most horrific act of terrorism in the nation’s history.

Next to the gaping hole in the earth where the Murrah Building once stood is a Catholic church, which has turned its grounds into a memorial to the 168 people who died in the bombing.

Standing tall in that garden, his back turned away from the ravished earth, his shoulders hunched over in grief, is a statue of Jesus. Tears run down his cheeks.

Inscribed at the base of the statue is the shortest, but perhaps most poignant verse in scripture – “Jesus wept.”

This night, as Jesus looks over the cities of New York and Washington, over the field in Pennsylvania where a fourth hijacked plane crashed, over the homes of the people who died in those plane crashes and in the buildings that were hit, he weeps once more.

He weeps for those who died or were injured, and for those who mourn and love them.

He weeps for the hatred that pollutes the hearts of God’s people – hatred that leads to such horrific acts and hatred that fuels the calls for vengeance.

He weeps for the panic and fear that grip not only this nation, but much of the world.

He weeps because he knows that this is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that God’s people have caused such harm to one another.

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That was 21 years ago, a time when we all grieved what had been done to our country from those outside its borders.

But even in the midst of the shock and grief, I had hope then that this horrific event would somehow pull us together as a nation, that we would listen to our better angels.

I had hope that we would not act out of fear and a desire for vengeance, that we would pay honor to those who had died by seeking justice, yes, but also working for peace and understanding between people of different cultures and beliefs.

On the 10th anniversary of the attacks, a New York Times editorial expressed the same sentiment, remembering that along with the shock, grief, and fear of the days following September 11, 2001, there was also something surprising in the national mood.

“It was an enormous, heartfelt desire to be changed," the editorial said. "People wanted to be enlarged, to be called on to do more for country and community than ordinary life usually requires, to make this senseless horror count for something.

“It was also a public desire, a wish to be absorbed in some greater good, a reimagining of possibilities in our national life.”

But 21 years later, our nation is more polarized than any time in our memory.

And sometimes when I look at my now 21-year-old son, I still wonder about what kind of country he will spend his life in. But my concerns now are more about the internal state of our nation than worries about external foes.

The rise of white supremacy, increasing hate crimes against Jews, Muslims, and gays and lesbians; the erosion of truth and denial of science; the assaults on our democracy -- all these things concern me more than a potential attack from outside our borders.

Today we remember the tragic events of September 11, the lives lost and those forever changed. But we also remember that assaults on our nation and our democracy can come from within.

Our nation's greatest president, Abraham Lincoln, ruled at the time of our greatest polarization, the Civil War. As the war was ending, Lincoln knew that the divide in our country would not end with the surrender of the Confederate army.

In the last months of his life he increasingly looked at what needed to happen after the war was over, at how the Confederate states could be brought back into the Union, at how African Americans could live into a life of freedom and prosperity, at how our great divide could be healed.

In his famous Second Inaugural Address there were no calls for vengeance or demeaning of those with whom the Union was still at war.

Instead, Lincoln humbly asked for God’s forgiveness of the entire nation—North and South—for both the blight and sin of slavery, and the awful and violent means used to end that evil.

Throughout his presidency, Lincoln called upon our “better angels” to help us understand the catastrophe of civil war and what it would mean for our future.

We must humbly call on those same better angels today as we remember September 11.

At the close of his Second Inaugural Address, a little over a month before his assassination, Lincoln said these words:

“With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.”

Amen.