

## **America on its Knees**

Romans 8:28-39

09 11 2011 *The 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of 9-11*

Sam Jones United Methodist Church

### **Scripture: Romans 8:28-39**

#### **Introduction**

The **horrific images** are forever burned into our collective conscious. Kamikaze planes, billowing smoke, imploding buildings, panicked crowds, broken bodies. The maimed and murdered numbered in the thousands; but we always remember that each individual was a precious soul with a name, parents, family, and loved ones.

To borrow from Roosevelt's speech after the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, September 11<sup>th</sup> was "*a date that will live in infamy*". Every American old enough at the time remembers when s/he first heard the news.

The initial report reached the church office just after nine o'clock. Someone phoned to say a plane had hit one of the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center. We initially assumed a private plane accidentally struck the tower. Then the reports accelerated. The plane was a commercial airliner. News next came of a second plane. A third strike occurred at the Pentagon. Another aircraft went down in Pennsylvania. The Twin Towers collapsed.

Everyone I encountered appeared dazed. We shared the same reactions of shock, denial, impotence, fear, anger, and outrage.

**September 11<sup>th</sup> irrevocably changed** our lives and our nation. We are not the same people today that we were ten years ago. Americans lost a sense of innocence and invulnerability. A spirit of fear and anger infected our land. Much that was precious has been lost; but much that is important has been gained.

I do not pretend to understand what motivates a terrorist. The cold-blooded murder of innocent men, women, and children is beyond my scope of understanding. I also cannot comprehend what the architects of September 11<sup>th</sup>'s atrocities planned to accomplish. Maybe they hoped to bring **America to its knees**. If this was the goal, then the terrorists succeeded beyond their wildest dreams.

#### **Service**

America was brought to its knees at the **World Trade Center**. While thousands escaped out of the burning buildings, hundreds of emergency personnel rushed *into* those very same towers. They crawled on their hands and knees in the fire and smoke, searching for victims. When the buildings crumbled to the ground, these brave men and women died the way they had lived—on their knees, helping others.

Many tales of heroism and valor emerged from the dust of the Twin Towers. One of the more widely published stories featured **Father Mychal Judge**, a Roman Catholic

priest. He had served as a NYC Fire Department chaplain since 1992. When word of the disaster reached the parish house, the 68 year-old priest immediately responded.

Mayor Rudi Guilliani saw Father Judge outside the towers. The mayor yelled to him: "Pray for us, Mychal." The chaplain gave him a wave and shouted back, "I always do." Then he followed the firefighters into the dust and smoke.

Accounts of the priest's final moments are confusing. However, some witnesses recall Father Judge kneeling beside a fallen firefighter and civilian. The priest removed his helmet to administer Last Rites to the dying. Falling debris struck him in the back of the head. He was the first officially recorded fatality after the attacks.

Father Judge represented all of the men and women who rushed into the towers. EMTs, firefighters, police officers, and more. September 11<sup>th</sup> taught us a new appreciation for First Responders. Their actions revealed humanity at its best.

Jesus told his disciples: "*Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*" (John 15:13). Our fellow Americans in New York City did just this. Fire fighters, police officers, steel workers, military personnel, and lay volunteers knelt in the rubble and dust. A mile long human chain cleared the debris one bucket full at a time. In twelve plus hour shifts, they labored even when the mission changed from search and rescue to evidence and body recovery.

College students sold ribbons of red, white, and blue to raise money for the Red Cross. Women baked cookies, made sandwiches, and cooked soup for the weary workers. Businessmen handed bottles of water to the passing laborers. Others simply stood along the roads and applauded the volunteers who worked on all of our behalf. Across the United States, people gave blood and made donations,

In part, the heroes of 9/11 inspired us because they were ordinary people who responded in extraordinary ways. For example, Father Judge was hailed as a hero, but he lived an extremely controversial life. He often used rough language. He was a strident advocate for gay rights. The priest was also a recovering alcoholic.

Time and again we see in the Bible how God uses the most unlikely of people for his purposes. Paul wrote: "*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*" (2 Corinthians 4:7)

We too are called to get on our knees in service to others. Jesus said that the world would know that we are Christians by our love. We are called to lay down our lives for others. On rare occasions, this might mean that we literally give our lives as the First Responders did on 9/11. More often it means smaller acts of sacrificial love in daily life.

Dr. Fred Craddock once said that we imagine giving our lives to God is like laying a \$1,000 bill upon the altar. In a burst of enthusiasm, we offer to give our lives up in some spectacular display of Christian martyrdom. Most of the time God sends us to the bank in order to change the \$1,000 bill into quarters. Christian ministry is spent a quarter at a time throughout our lives.

Father Mychal had a prayer that he often used in his ministry:

*"Lord, take me where You want me to go;  
Let me meet who You want me to meet;  
Tell me what You want me to say,*

*And keep me out of Your way.”*

## **Remembrance**

America was also brought to its knees in acts of **remembrance**. Following September 11<sup>th</sup>, an impromptu memorial appeared in downtown Cartersville. It was reenacted in countless towns across our land. I watched people drop to their knees before the site. Some paused to gaze at the memorial. Others knelt to add their own offerings. Poems, pictures, a fire fighter’s turn out gear, a police officer’s badge, and other items bore mute witness to the injured and dead.

Today is a holy time of remembrance. We remember:

- The flight crews and passengers on American Flights 11 and 77 along with United Flights 93 and 175.
- Office workers who died in the World Trade Center.
- Emergency personnel who perished when the twin towers collapsed.
- Military personnel who died at the Pentagon.
- Workers and emergency workers who survived.
- Family members who lost loved ones in the tragedy.
- Military personnel who even now fight for our freedom and safety
- Their families who make quiet sacrifices on our behalf.
- Our entire nation.
- Ourselves

## **Prayer and Worship**

America was brought to its knees in **prayer**. An entire nation knelt together. We did not engage in ACLU approved, politically correct “moments of silence” or “personal meditation.” God’s people prayed.

We prayed in churches, cathedrals, synagogues, and mosques. We prayed at home, work, school, and worship. We prayed at flagpoles, street corners, courthouses, city halls, and seats of government. We prayed in words, song, silence, and tears. We prayed in ways we may have never prayed before.

People also turned to the **church** for comfort and consolation. In the aftermath of the attack, believers and non-believers alike attended worship services in record numbers. Church attendance increased a dramatic 25% in the days following September 11. It was a time of spiritual renewal and revival in our nation.

Within one month of the tragedy, however, a Barna survey revealed that church attendance dropped back to normal levels. The crowds that had packed sanctuaries in September found better things to do in October. The immediate crisis passed, a semblance of normalcy returned, and people seemed to remain the same.

Military chaplains say that there are no atheists in a foxhole. Life-threatening crises often evoke a temporary faith. People play *Let’s Make a Deal* with the Lord God Almighty serving in Bob Barker’s stead as the game show host.

As a minister, I have witnessed countless people attempt to strike a bargain with God: “IF you (FILL IN THE BLANK: save my marriage, heal my body, get me a job, let me win the lottery), THEN I will (FILL IN THE BLANK: attend church, serve as a missionary, give you praise, tithe my winnings).

There are no atheists in a foxhole; but it doesn’t take folk long to lose their faith once the crisis has passed. Perhaps this observation is too harsh. It might be more accurate to say that people lose any URGENCY about their faith on the far side of a disaster. However, in the aftermath of September 11, we dare not be the same people or nation ever again. We are called to live faithful lives as citizens and Christians.

### **Questions of Why**

9-11 brought America to its knees with **questions of “Why?”** The question of *Why* is ultimately a religious question. If these questions were stated completely, then they would actually ask, *Why, God? Why me, Lord? Why did this happen, Father?*

The problem of suffering has haunted humanity since we could first reflect theologically. It is one of the most profound struggles of faith. *Why do bad things happen to good people?* And the corollary of the question is: “Why do good things happen to bad people?” The innocent suffer and the good die young; the wicked prosper and the righteous perish. Why does such evil occur? And where is God in the midst of such a seemingly senseless world?

In his book *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick **Buechner** succinctly sums up the problem with three statements:

God is all powerful.

God is all good.

Terrible things happen.

He then goes on to say: *You can reconcile any two of these propositions with each other, but you cannot reconcile all three. The problem of evil is perhaps the greatest single problem for religious faith.* (p. 24)

In Luke 13, Jesus was teaching his followers when a group of people arrive with news of a terrible tragedy. They reported that Pilate ordered a group of Galileans killed while they were making a sacrifice in the temple. Their blood flowed upon the floor and mixed with the blood the animals just sacrificed.

Jesus asked the people: *Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way?* He then went on to recall another recent tragedy. Eighteen people died at Siloam when a tower collapsed. Jesus asked: *Do you think that those who died were worse offenders than all the others who live in Jerusalem?*

And even while they began to nod their heads, the Lord emphatically declared: *Altell you, no!* Our Lord distinctly denies a direct link between all suffering and sin. Disaster does not equal disobedience.

God is not the author of evil. Tragic events are not necessarily the result of personal sin. Yet this still does not answer the original question asked of Jesus. *Why did these persons die in such a way, Lord? Why do such evil events occur?*

One expects Jesus to offer some sort of theological explanation to the crowds. After all, he brought the whole subject up to begin with. Here is the perfect teaching moment to explain suffering in the world. Instead of offering philosophical arguments, however, Jesus challenges the people to live a new life!

After declaring the victims did not die because of personal sin, the Lord goes on to say, *“But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish!”*

Where did THAT come from!?!

Christ had a way of making the abstract concrete and the general specific. He did not normally speak in general terms with philosophical arguments. Instead, his questioners found themselves being questioned. *“Do you see evil in Pilate= actions and sin in the death of these others? I say to you to examine your own hearts and repent of your own sin or perish!”*

Jesus suggests that disaster and death around us are **signs** for our own lives. Suffering and death are not a question of *“If?”* but *“When?”* The lives and deaths of others remind us to seek meaning in our own. In his poem *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, John Donne wrote: *“Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”*

Sign: fragility of life, inevitability of death. Could have been one of us. No one is safe. Reminds us to live each day for the Lord. Be prepared for day of death.

### **Changed Lives**

The best way we can remember September 11 and honor those who have fallen is through changed lives.

<b><i>In the face of:</i></b>	<b><i>we choose:</i></b>
➤ Destruction	creation
➤ Death	life
➤ Darkness	light
➤ Evil	goodness
➤ Hatred	love
➤ Curses	prayers
➤ Persecution	blessing
➤ War	peace
➤ Despair	hope
➤ Doubt	faith.

The historic **Trinity Church** is located on Wall Street in lower Manhattan just one block away from the World Trade Center site. Originally established in 1684, it is among the oldest churches in America. On the morning of September 11, 2001, a small group had gathered in the sanctuary as the organ played. At 8:46, Flight 11 hit the North Tower, and people fled the church. No one thought to turn off the organ.

When the Twin Towers collapsed, Trinity Church remained largely unharmed; however, the caustic, corrosive dust inundated the organ, all but destroying it. The congregation reluctantly decided to install a digital instrument to replace it.

I have a colleague in ministry, the Reverend Beth Brown Shugart, who is the Pastor of Worship at John’s Creek United Methodist Church here in the North Georgia

Conference. The church is in the process of building a new sanctuary and needed an organ for the facility.

This past winter Trinity Church in New York donated their old organ to John's Creek. The church is spending several million dollars to restore the damaged instrument to its original glory. The renovation process will take several years. The next time it is played will be the first time since that morning ten years ago on September 11, 2001.

Out of dust, recreation. Out of grief, joy. Out of tears, laughter. Out of despair, hope. Out of devastation, music.

### **Conclusion**

In the aftermath of September 11, we dare not be the same people or nation ever again. We are called to live faithful lives as citizens and Christians.

America was brought to its knees on September 11. As God's people, we are challenged to remain upon our knees in service, remembrance, prayer, and changed lives.

In the midst of uncertain times, we also remember that our lives are based upon the firm foundation of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Even if all else around us falls apart, our God will care for us this day . . . and forever more.

Amen.