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Even Now, the Cross: Reflections on 11 September 2001

Isaiah 41:1-4, 6-8; Romans 8:18-39
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[a transcript]

Questions

Tuesday morning my mother-in-law called from Enterprise, Mississippi, a small town near Meridian. Sue calls every time she watches the Weather Channel and it looks like bad weather is coming near Wilton. We tease her about it but we know she calls because she cares about us and wants us to be safe. Tuesday morning she called while I was at the computer, but it wasn't about the Weather Channel. Instead, she said, "I just wanted to be sure that you weren't in the City today," and I said, "Why?"

I turned on the television and like many of you, and like millions, perhaps billions, of other people around the world, Angie and I began to watch the events of the day unfold. That afternoon the Town of Wilton Crisis Team was called together. One of the redeeming parts of this week is that I have seen what this town can do in a crisis, and it can do a lot. Wilton firemen were immediately called into the City; Wilton police were immediately at work. Teachers and administrators immediately began to be age-appropriate with what they were sharing with children, even though, at one of the schools, one of the teachers knew that her son worked in the area of the attack, a son who is still missing today.

I've been amazed by this community and I know that's happening all over, not just in Fairfield County but all over much of the world, but particularly here as at the epicenter and then out across our country.

Wednesday night we gathered as an interfaith body at Wilton Congregational Church. The place was filled and words were spoken. The service was good and meaningful but it didn't really connect for me until near the end, when the church's bell tolled for five minutes for all those who had experienced the tragedy firsthand, for those who we knew in Wilton were missing, their names projected on the wall at the front of the sanctuary. I think that was the first realization for many at the service that a friend or a neighbor was missing, as there were gasps heard across the room.

Something began to happen to me as the bell began to toll and I realized in my soul what I already knew in my mind: this didn't happen in Northern Ireland, this didn't happen in Kenya or Somalia. This happened here, about forty miles down the road, and what happened there has affected us. Our world has changed, and I don't think we're going to be the same.

I was sitting at the Congregational Church and the words of the preacher, John Donne, began to wash over me: "No one is an island." If a piece of a friend's estate is lost, it's as if you've lost your own. If you hear the bell tolling for one who has died, don't ask, "for whom the bell tolls, the bell tolls for thee."

We have all been touched, and we all have questions. It is a good thing to ask our questions.

There are four questions I want to address today. We have already heard in scripture and in song and in hymn echoes that address these questions, but I invite you to spend some time with me now asking some questions. We don't have all the answers to those questions, nor do I ever feel like it's my job as a minister to defend God. There are folks who want to know, "Where is God in all of this?" That's one of my questions, too.

God wants our questions. It is okay to be together and ask questions. It is okay to be together and to be reminded of God's faithfulness. (This room that we worship in was built in 1864. Do you remember what was happening in this country in 1864?)

So we come together to hold each other up, to remember the ways of God that can conquer evil and to stand again before the cross.

"Is This the End of the World?"

The first question I heard from some people, and occasionally heard voiced on the news was, "*Is this the end of the world?*" Of course that is always possible, but I caution us, particularly as Americans who have so much, to be aware that in that question is a little bit of arrogance, for we are experiencing today in this country what people all over this world have been experiencing for years.

When the genocide in Rwanda was taking place, we never asked, "Is this the end of the world?" We never asked when Catholic schoolgirls in Northern Ireland were dodging bombs thrown at them as they walked to school, "Is this the end of the world?"

It may be the end of the world—and I think God has good plans for the next one—but let us be present to this moment and the challenges of this moment and not be fearful about the end of the world, for the God who was present in 1864 and the God who was present at the dawn of time is the God who is still in control today.

Perhaps by experiencing what we have experienced we can remind ourselves that the world is a very dangerous place, even in this country. It has been in my lifetime that bombs were going off in Birmingham, Alabama, and in Montgomery, and American school children were dying because of hate. This world is a dangerous place.

There are people who persecute people of other faiths. There are Christians around the world being persecuted in great numbers for their faith, many dying, and, somehow, because we have been protected from that, we are oblivious to their fate. Right now, in our own country, because a whole people have been smeared with the acts of a few brutal, violent, angry people who wish us harm, other people who claim to be Christians are attacking Arab-American Christians and Muslims. The world is a dangerous place.

But I remind you, too, that, much more than that, the world is a wonderful place. I see it in the faces of children, when they smile and they want to show you how many teeth they have lost. I see it in the presence of families, who hold one another and care for one another. I see it in the blazes of oranges and reds in the evening sky. I see it every time I go to Kent Falls and see the falling water and the cool mist that sprays off the rocks.

I saw it the other night as one of the science channels replayed the Apollo 8 mission to the moon. As Frank Borman and his partners are coming around the moon for the first time, we see the earth for the first time from outside the earth, that beautiful blue ball is just hanging there. I can see God at creation saying, "Oh, I like that one. I made it and it's beautiful."

The world is a dangerous place, but it is a wonderful place, too.

In the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, St. Paul *Pioneer Press* editorial cartoonist Kirk Anderson responded with a forceful illustration entitled, “Counter-Terrorism.” Above the caption, he drew firemen carrying children to safety, people lining up to give blood, people writing checks to relief agencies and churches that love might counter terrorism. It is a dangerous place, this world, but it is a wonderful place, too.

“How Will We Get Over This and Feel Safe Again?”

The second question I’ve been hearing again and again is, “*How will we get over this and feel safe again?*” Some things you don’t “get over.” Some wounds you carry with you. It is important to be honest about that. Some fear that with all the help that the clergy, the counselors and others are offering right now that there might be sent the message that we are supposed to “deal with this now and then move on.” The markets will open on Monday. Life will be “okay.” “We’re going to pray for those folks we lost at work and we’re sorry that tragedy has touched the neighborhood, but we’ve got to move on.”

God didn’t make us that way. God made us to be honest with our feelings. God made us to feel the sense of sadness that we feel. God made us to feel the numbness some of us have already felt this week when we’ve just had to get away from it for a while. It will take us a while to “get over” it, but we need to know that if we will enter into even this tragedy God can help us grow, and God can make us strong.

A surgeon told me once that the incision that’s made in the heart for open-heart surgery, if properly cared for and allowed to heal, becomes the strongest part of the heart muscle. When a bone is broken, the place where the bones fuse together again, if they are allowed to heal as God intended, becomes the strongest part of the bone.

And so, let us be honest with our feelings and deal with our pain. Let us be nurtured by the power of community, whether it’s in our church, or in our town, or whether it’s from people who love you and live all around this country and have been calling to let you know they love you and are this morning praying for you.

We may be feeling a bit vulnerable, a bit insecure, a bit uncertain and a bit heavy but in the midst of that I think God invites us to walk a little slower, drive a little slower, breathe a little deeper, hold our children a little closer, to linger in each other’s presence a little longer, to remember that each day of our lives is a gift from God and none of us knows—none of us knows—whether this is the last day we will be gifted with, or not.

Now, I want you to know that that doesn’t scare me, because I believe that, in following Jesus, I’m a citizen of two worlds. I’ve got one foot in this world, which is very important, but I also live in a world where the City of God has already come true, where the love of God has already come true, and there is no more crying. A world where the tears we cry and the pain we feel will be redeemed and already have been redeemed; and Christ at the cross is suffering not just in some past time, but suffers now, for you and for me.

You see, God is outside of time but God chooses to enter time, to enter our chronology. Because of that, I think it is theologically true and biblically true, that while it is a fact that two thousand years ago Jesus died for us, the sense of God that Jesus is lifts him up out of time. That is why we read in scripture that Christ died for all, reaching back into the past to Abraham and Adam and Esther and Sarah. Christ died and is dying in that time, in 33 A.D., but also, being lifted out of time, he is suffering with those who suffer, even today.

How can I feel safe again? I find my safety and security in Christ, who has already conquered whatever the world throws at me.

“What About the People Who Did This?”

“Is this the end of the world?” is one question I’ve heard. “How will we get over this and feel safe again?” I’ve heard. I’ve also heard, “What about the people who did this?”

When our daughter was seven, seeing reflections of the Oklahoma City bombing on the television, she said something with pure childhood faith. Hearing about the bombers, she said, “Well, I guess they just don’t know Jesus. Maybe someone should tell them.”

This Jesus we follow is tough, because he tells us to love our enemies. That is not very easy to do right now, but that’s what he tells us to do.

The First United Methodist Church of Oklahoma City experienced considerable damage in the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building. The Sunday after, Nick Harris, pastor, led his congregation in a prayer for the bombers: “If we are going to be a church and not a social club, we must pray for those who did this.”¹

“Love your enemies.” That’s what Jesus said. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good,” wrote Paul.

Sermons about war are for another day—and I do believe that there are times in our lives when we must choose the lesser of two evils. And I do believe that the God of mercy is the God of justice. But even in the midst of considering war as the lesser of two evils, we must remember that we are called on to love our enemies.

“Where Is God in All of This?”

Probably the most difficult question that has been asked has been asked in more than one way. Some have asked, “*Where was God?*” or “*Did God cause this?*” or “*If God is so powerful and good, why did this happen?*”

Last week, a Baptist minister who spends a lot of time on TV said that God allowed the terrorists to attack because of God’s anger at the United States, because the United States has sinned—and certainly we have. What Rev. Falwell has said is that God lifted God’s “veil of protection.”²

When I hear that, I think about thousands of Rwandan Christians. I think about Christians and Jews during the Holocaust. I think about people who’ve had their lives rained on by “terrorists” called abusive husbands and narcissistic bosses. I don’t think God did this. God doesn’t choose to inflict suffering on people.

We could argue that a lot of the bad in the world happens as the end result of human beings not following God’s rules, design and will for their lives. We could argue that in some ways the “wrath of God” is that God allows the cumulative effect of bad choices to come to its logical end, but I don’t think you’ll ever find in God an excuse for what happened on Tuesday.

I shared with the congregation last year one of the most challenging moments of ministry in my life. It came on a Christmas Eve when the mother of two young daughters was killed in an automobile accident while driving her minivan. That evening, we gathered in the sanctuary for our traditional “Service of Lessons and Carols.” I have to confess that for a few years “Lessons

¹ Quoted in *The Christian Century*.

² *The Washington Times*, September 14, 2001; CBN, *The 700 Club*, September 13, 2001.

and Carols” had become routine for me, and I found myself restless as each person stood to read from the scriptures.

Something happened that night, though, and I heard it differently. A young man named Matthew stood to read words of hope for healing, and I heard it differently. The accident had brought poignancy to that service that had not been present before. As he read of shepherds and angels and the glory of God shining around them and words about a baby and hope and “FEAR NOT,” I was taken to another place and that service was over too soon.

That night I drove to visit with the family. The girls had already been put to bed so I visited with their dad and members of his family and their mother’s. Afterwards, I left to make the ride from their neighborhood, turning and traveling up Ellerbe Road several miles to my home. All along the way, it’s Christmas Eve and the Christmas lights are shining, the white and colored lights are shining, on homes decorated for the holiday.

I turned onto Dumbarton, the road that leads to Dunmoreland, the street where we lived, and it seemed to me that all of those lights began to change. I no longer saw colored lights and white flashers and holiday decor. There was not a sense of present time but it was as if I had been caught up in a swirling miasma of lights that were moving and swirling. In my mind and heart, I felt transported to another place where I began to hear a Voice that said, “Fear not.”

At first I wondered if it was the voice of a well-loved wife and mother who had died. “Tell my family, fear not.” Then I thought it was God’s voice. “Fear not.” As I listened longer in the midst of that transcendent moment, the Voice turned to weeping.

Anne Weems, the poet, heard the Voice and the weeping. After her son Todd’s sudden death, an hour after his 21st birthday, she wrote these words,

“In the quiet times this image comes to me: Jesus weeping.

Jesus wept,
and in his weeping,
 he joined himself forever
 to those who mourn.
He stands now throughout all time,
 this Jesus weeping,
 with his arms about the weeping ones:
“Blessed are those who mourn,
 for they shall be comforted.”
He stands with the mourners,
 for his name is God-with-us.
Jesus wept.

“Blessed are those who weep, for they shall be comforted.” Someday. Someday God will wipe the tears from Rachel’s eyes.

In the godforsaken ... quicksand of life,
there is a deafening alleluia
rising from the souls
of those who weep,

and of those who weep with those who weep.
If you watch, you will see
the hand of God
putting the stars back in their skies
one by one.³

Where was God when evil arrived in our country in such a violent way? He was there. He was there and He shared the pain and He shared the shock of the blast and He shared the cries of the victims. He shares with us in our anguish. God was there.

I know God was there not just because of an inner conviction but because God has said it is so: *“I will be with him in trouble ... My heart cries out ... I drench you with my tears ... I have seen the affliction of my people, and have heard their cry ... I know their sufferings, and I have come to deliver them ... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for Thou art with me.”*

God, whose name is *Immanuel*, stands together in solidarity with those who weep. God is at work even now in those who are working to rescue. God is with us now in small and hidden ways healing our hearts.

In the context of World War II, Paul Tillich preached a sermon called, “Love Is Stronger Than Death.” Here is the last paragraph of that sermon:

It is love, human and divine, which overcomes death in nations and generations and in all the horror of our time. Help has become almost impossible in the face of the monstrous powers which we are experiencing. Death is given power over everything finite, especially in our period of history. But death is given no power over love. Love is stronger. It creates something new out of the destruction caused by death; it bears everything and overcomes everything. It is at work where the power of death is strongest, in war and persecution and homelessness and hunger and physical death itself. It is omnipresent and here and there, in the smallest and most hidden ways as in the greatest and most visible ones... it rescues each of us, for love is stronger than death.⁴

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁵

³ Weems, Anne, *Psalms of Lament*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995.

⁴ A passage I first learned through my friend Ray Vickrey, printed in Tillich’s book, *The New Being*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955.

⁵ NRSV, Romans 8 (selected).

It is a good thing to bring our questions to God, for while we may not find all the answers, we can find the Answerer. The One who will hold us, the One who will go with us, the One who will help us see that whatever the world does, He is stronger, for He is love and He loves us.

PRAYER: Abba-Father, we need to hear your voice. We need to touch the hem of your garment. We need to know that the bleeding can be stopped, the hemorrhaging can be done away with, the pain that we have experienced can be healed. And while we may be changed by what we are experiencing, we know you can redeem this moment, for you see into eternity what we cannot see and you can take even the most tragic, traumatic and unspeakable evil and you can create the world anew. Help us to be people who let go of our lives and step with security into You. In Christ's name, AMEN.