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St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
11th September 2011
Evensong of Remembrance, Hope, Peace

There's an odd thing that happens in New York City with the first snow. The city becomes quiet. Traffic seems to disappear. People are nice to each other. On September 11, 2001 we had a snowfall. But it was a snowfall of ashes, lost hopes, destroyed lives, death. At first the traffic northbound on Manhattan was clogged and then traffic seemed to disappear. People reached out to each other with compassion and mercy and heroism.

***** (The following to the next ***** was said, liberally amended, from the aisle.)

On that morning, I was with three fellow seminarians – Christopher, Jay, Amanda – in the Sacristy of the Chapel of the Good Shepherd at The General Theological Seminary. It was Tuesday, my team's day to prepare the chapel for Morning Prayer, Eucharist, and Evensong. Things were humming along with a quiet rustle – one took care of the hymn boards, another set the Bible for the readings, and I was going through the pews straightening books and setting up the Prayer Book, Psalter, and Hymnal for the Officiant.

Another seminarian burst into the chapel: "There's been a terrible accident! A plane has crashed into the World Trade Center!" Ohmygosh, that's awful. How could this be? It's a breathtakingly beautiful clear day in New York! But imagine the loss of life. We quickly said a prayer for those presumed to be dead less than two miles from the seminary.

Another seminarian burst into the chapel: "Another plane has crashed into the World Trade Center! It's a terrorist attack!"

Oh.
My.
God.

My friend Jay went to Seabury lounge and café. It had one of the few televisions available. He came back to the Sacristy. "Yes, it's true," he reported. "Two planes seem to have been hijacked and flown deliberately into the World Trade Center. There may be four or five other commercial jets bound for attack."

Hearts stopped.

We rang the bells. We tolled for those dead, for those who would surely die that day, we rang the circle of bells of death for our fear, through tears of bewilderment and outrage and grief. Outside, the traffic on Ninth Avenue was stilled. The only sounds we heard were those of emergency vehicles. We could look south down Manhattan Island and see plumes of smoke. Little did we know that another jet was headed for the Pentagon, and a fourth headed for its own destruction in Pennsylvania; little did we know that the Twin Towers, beacons of

American enterprise, would soon collapse, burying hundreds more who were even at that moment trying desperately to escape the burning, broken buildings.

We tolled for the dead and for those who would surely die that day.

Little did we know, too, that thousands more would die in the years to come – innocent people, wicked people, people of faith and people of no faith, a world at war against terrorism, individuals of one religion at war with individuals of another, extremists and those who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

We tolled for the dead.

I was chair of the Community Council then, and we called an emergency meeting with the Dean. What could we do? What should we do? What should we *not* do?

Many in the community wanted to rush to the scene. Some wanted to pray, some wanted to serve as emergency personnel, a few, perhaps just needed to see the events unfold to know that they were real. That our country had been attacked and that people of many faiths and nationalities had died in the Twin Towers.

And we all agreed that we needed to be our best. We needed to open up the Seminary grounds and chapel to the surrounding neighborhood. We needed to welcome our neighbors, to pray with them, to invite them into a quiet, safe place. And so we did.

The grounds, fenced and normally locked to “outsiders,” were opened. We created a quiet space in the chapel. Someone would be present around the clock if anyone needed to talk – and many did. People came into the gardens and sat. Quiet. Confused. Angry. Grief-stricken. Mostly confused. Ashes were falling into the trees and flowers of our own oasis. Ashes of death.

We became the church at its best. A place of refuge, a place of sanctuary, a place where the God who seemed silent might be perceived and held onto and yelled at and wept with and...

We had a class of new seminarians, the Class of '04. Some of them were from the rural areas of America; many were from small towns, a few were from big cities. Some were quite young and needed to let their families know they were alright – Manhattan is actually a rather large piece of real estate and most non-New Yorkers wouldn't know that General Seminary is quite a ways from the World Trade Center. *Everyone* wanted to call “home,” wherever “home” was. And many were frightened. “Is this why I came to New York City?!?” Seminary is supposed to be a reflective time, a time for study and for prayer and for music – not a time for disaster, certainly not a time for war.

And so some of us comforted them, too.

And on that day and in the days to come we began to remember the Gospel of Christ.

We began to remember that God is a God of peace, a God of love. That we are called not to vengeance but to compassion, that we are called not to war but to peace, that we are called not to hate but to forgiveness, to mercy, to love.

The complexity of our emotions that day, and the complexity of our emotions this day, ten years later, must be acknowledged. On the one hand we want to get the bad guys. Those horrible people whose extremism led them to barbarism. On another hand we want to understand the underlying issues of fear and hatred. On yet another hand, if we had three hands, we want to, *want* to live our faith. I *want* to love my enemy, but I am so angry! I *want* to love my enemy but I am so afraid of him.

And so, when our whole system is shaken – this is *America!* How could anyone attack *America?!?* – when our whole system is shaken we must turn to one another and we must turn to God. We must allow ourselves to feel all those complex emotions and we must try, we must *try*, to remember the Gospel of Christ.

We suffer. The world suffers immeasurably. And God builds from our suffering. God takes our suffering and places it at the foot of the Cross, in a crucible of tears and anguish and grief, and our sides are pierced and we look up into the face of a savior.

The world is a broken place. Humanity is wounded, and perhaps it was wounded in a different way on Nine-Eleven, for we had never imagined such an audacious act. But we must remember the Crusades, we must remember the Holocaust, we must remember the murders of John F. Kennedy, Bobby, and Martin Luther King, Jr., we must remember Pearl Harbor and Wounded Knee and all those times when humans have been at their very worst and we must pray to be better.

We must fight the cause of extremism with gentleness. We must wage peace. We must search for reconciliation. We must fight poverty and totally unnecessary sickness and infant mortality, we must combat racism and oppression and we must open our hearts to love.

Our generations will not forget Nine-Eleven. I suspect most of you know exactly where you were and what you were doing that morning as I do. We shall not forget.

But we must not live in the past, for that is not God's desire. We must live in the present with a yearning for peace and for justice. We must trust that at its deepest, humanity is good and lovely and sweet, and we must trust that God's great yearning is a world at peace.

And from our suffering, from our brokenness, and from that trust, we will move forward with broken hearts into the Kingdom, a healing people, a healed people. And we will learn our lessons again.

Amen.