

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 19—Year B

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 116:1-8

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

Some anniversaries seem to mark time differently than others. If you've ever lost someone—**5 years feels poignant. 10, 15, 20 years on, it hits a deeper place.** That's how this **20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11** feels, and maybe it's all the more present because it comes so close on the heels of the withdrawal from **Afghanistan**—the **war** that unfolded in response to that fateful day 20 years ago.

**As we sit with 9/11 and our lessons today, it's a mixed bag.**

Certainly, there are ways that we lived **Isaiah 50**. Teachers emerged who **sustained us with a word**. There was a **humility** forced on us from **9/11** that held the *potential* to **waken our ears** to hear whatever it was *that we had been unable to hear up to that point*. There was certainly a **setting our face like flint** and a **longing to be vindicated**. There was a **resolve**—that **spirit of Isaiah** that could proclaim, “**Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together.**” And in those **days following 9/11**, we *did* **stand up together** in heroic ways, *and the world stood up together with us*. There was a **steely resolve**: “**Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.**” And yes, there was a **laying claim to God** with a sense that **God was on our side**. Plenty of precedent for that in our tradition. **Isaiah** says it this morning: “**It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty?**” That can take us to a **not-so-good place**, that can take us to a **place filled with hubris**—**God is helping us**, and *we feel free to act with impunity*. ***So many have died, military and civilian, trying to right what went wrong on 9/11.***

Holding up **9/11** to the **psalm** this morning takes us into **trickier waters** still. Some of it is spot on: “**The cords of death entangled me; the grip of the grave took hold of me; I came to grief and sorrow.**” Yes, yes, we felt that to our core. But then the **psalm** takes a turn.

- 3 Then I called upon the Name of the LORD: \***  
**“O LORD, I pray you, save my life.”**
- 4 Gracious is the LORD and righteous; \***  
**our God is full of compassion.**
- 5 The LORD watches over the innocent; \***  
**I was brought very low, and he helped me.**
- 6 Turn again to your rest, O my soul, \***  
**for the LORD has treated you well.**
- 7 For you have rescued my life from death, \***  
**my eyes from tears, and my feet from stumbling.**
- 8 I will walk in the presence of the LORD \***  
**in the land of the living.**

***Is that what happened for those praying on the top floors of the twin towers? Did God watch over the innocent on that bright morning? Were they rescued from death? Did tears not fall like rivers from all of our eyes? How many feet stumbled down stairs, or in the streets as the dust swirled, or in the halting steps that families took in the days and weeks and months and years that followed? How many did not get to walk in the land of the living that day? How many innocents have not walked in the land of the living in the years since?***

*Don't get me wrong, I believe that God was absolutely present on that day, but there is no easy theology that can address what happened on 9/11. The psalmist's profession of faith and hope aside, God's presence doesn't keep innocents from dying. No, faith takes us deeper still, to a harder place where our hearts have to hold much, much more.*

I think our passage from Mark today takes us closer to where we need to be. Jesus asks his disciples some hard questions: "But who do people say that I am?" *How did people answer that question after 9/11? Vindicator? Comforter? Abandoner? Companion? Crusader?* Think about how Muslims, particularly American Muslims, might have answered that question. They might have said, "Jesus, you are a threat to *my* life because so many of *your* followers see *me* as a terroristic threat."

Then Jesus asks the question to end all questions, "But who do *you* say that I am?" "*Who do you say that I am? I'm not asking you for the theologian's answer, or the preacher's answer, or for the Christians-over-there answer. No, I am asking YOU, who do you say that I am? Who was I for you on 9/11? Who am I for you today?*" There is no escaping the question. Jesus puts that question to you and to me. We've all got to wrestle with it. You can feel the tension of the question, that put-on-the-spot feeling. It's like we're sitting in a class and *nobody* wants to raise their hand and answer the Teacher's question.

*Ah, thank God for Peter! "You are the Messiah."*

It's interesting, but in Mark's version, Jesus *doesn't* indicate whether or not Peter's right. In fact, he sternly orders them not to tell anyone about him. Maybe Peter didn't get it as right as we've always thought because Jesus *doesn't* actually claim "Messiah" for himself. He takes a different tack.

Then [Jesus] began to teach them that the *Son of Man* must undergo great suffering, and *be rejected* by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and *be killed*, and after three days *rise* again. He said all this quite openly.

Jesus joins himself to ALL of humanity. Jesus plants himself at the center of suffering and rejection and violent death. *Here is a God* that can stand at the heart of 9/11. *Here is a God* that can sit in *that* tomb of death. And *here is a God* who can help us rise again, in time.

*Peter didn't like that answer. Peter like the Messiah answer; maybe Peter preferred the Vindicator answer. Peter definitely didn't like the suffering Son of Man answer. And Peter always goes in where angels fear to tread. He took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.*

But turning and looking at his disciples, [Jesus] rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Jesus then pans out to the crowd, along with the disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." He helps them understand that if you cling to trying to save your life, you lose it, and that losing it, releasing it, is often what opens up the salvation, the wholeness, we seek. Jesus minces no words, "You can gain the whole world and forfeit your life."

When we pan out to all the ground we've covered the last 20 years, ground gained, ground lost, where did we lose our little lives for the sake of a larger one?

Where did we cling to our life under the rubric of *security*, and what did we lose in the process?

What have forfeited along the way?

Where did we take up the cross and join the Son of Man amidst suffering humanity?

*And* where did we abandon the cross and chart our own course instead?

Where did we die with Jesus, and join him in the tomb, and rise with him again, and where did we help others rise too?

*And* where did prefer to hold onto former visions of *who we thought we were*, clinging to them for dear life, all the while *missing* the life that Jesus was bidding us to claim in this utterly changed world?

Not easy questions.

I want to pause here, and just say a word about *remembering*. *Remembering* is a potent, powerful thing. *Remembrance* comes up a lot in the eucharist: “*Do this to remember me*,” Jesus says. The word in Greek is *anamnesis*, and it’s a rich and deep concept. You *remember* something from the past *in order to bring it into the present with the power to transform the future*.

*It is very different from nostalgia*. *Nostalgia* is a yearning for the past—it can be positive, *and* it can be negative. We might yearn for the innocence we felt before 9/11. *We can also fix our gaze on all the fear that got unleashed on that day*. *Nostalgia* tends to lock us in and fix our sight closing off other possibilities, and it will kill us.

*Remembering* lets die what must, but with deep faith in the rising that is always to come. *Nostalgia* can’t let go of the past. *Remembering* doesn’t deny the past, *remembering* allows the past to be present, and trusts always in the *process of transformation* that we call death and resurrection.

We don’t need to be nostalgic on this 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary; we need to *remember* and let it keep transforming us into the peacemakers that Jesus calls us to be.

I’m also mindful of James’ counsel today: “The tongue is a fire...a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.” *How* we speak about this day, *how* we speak about “the other,” *how* we speak about our enemies, *how* we speak words of blessing and *how* we curse those who are made in the likeness of God no less than we—*how* we speak *matters*.

Maybe as we think about this particular anniversary of 9/11, maybe it is a holy silence that best addresses the magnitude of 9/11 and all that has been since. I don’t think our words can hold all that needs to be held on this day. On occasions like this, I am eternally grateful that *the Word was made flesh*, the *Son of Man* holds ALL of humanity, and most especially holds ALL of humanity *when that humanity suffers*. The *Son of Man* held us on 9/11, and the *Son of Man* holds us now.

May we *remember* 9/11, *not* with nostalgic sentimentality, but with a commitment to join the *Son of Man* as he joins suffering humanity, being transformed more and more into his likeness. May we take up the cross that is ours to take up and follow him, losing what needs to be left behind, letting die what needs to die, and trusting always in the power of rising.

This day, as we mark this 20<sup>th</sup> 9/11 anniversary, let us proclaim as the Burial Office does so boldly, “All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: ‘Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.’”\* Amen.

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