

**“Twenty Years Ago, Yesterday”  
(2 Peter 1:1-7,12-15)**

Sept. 12, 2021  
Rev. Koyama

**Remembering & Urgency**

I went away from the prescribed readings for today and chose a reading from Second Peter as the springboard for this morning’s sermon. The reading highlights two emphases in the Bible that I think are relevant on this weekend as many of us Americans look back on September 11th. One emphasis is on the importance of remembering and the other is on the urgency of responding to God’s call.

The reading is from the beginning of a letter attributed to the Apostle Peter, written to a group of Christians we can no longer identify with certainty. And in it, he admonishes them to put all their knowledge, self control and endurance into the service of God’s love. He wants them to continually remind themselves to do this and to remember why these things are so important.

The matter is urgent for Peter, because he feels that his time is short, and that he must pass on his knowledge of what is truly important to those who remain.

I think that putting a stress on remembering is important, partly because the reasons behind the good we do are often in response to painful events that we would rather not revisit. We don't want to remember things that are trouble us and so we need encouragement to look back.

But this is something I think we must do, because in remembering these past experiences we are able to rediscover why we do what we do and at the same time we find the resolve we need to recommit to what is truly important. And what is truly important is that we ensure that the tragedies of the past are not repeated and that our lives witness to a better future. So here's how I remember it.

### **The Event**

It was twenty years ago yesterday that two airplanes slammed into the World Trade Centers in New York City. I was living in Hawaii and someone called us and told us to turn on our TV. I remember seeing the smoke covering lower Manhattan, where incidentally my sister's family were living at the time. Later I discovered that they had gone down to Battery Park and been put on a ferry that took them up the Hudson River and deposited them safely on the Upper West Side.

## **The Lingering Horror**

One of my lasting memories of that year is of seeing the footage of the airplanes crashing into the World Trade Centers. It was so unbelievable, that it seemed that they had to show it over and over. I remember feeling as though I was being overdosed with feelings of grief and horror.

### **What kind of Creature are We?**

A question that arose in my mind often during that time was, “What kind of creature are we, that members of our own species would do this to each other?” How is it that we, human beings, who are capable of thinking so deeply, of creating great art, building great cities and showing such tenderness, are yet capable of deeds of such immense cruelty? Can we not grasp the simple fact that every human being has the same basic needs for shelter, food, meaningful work and trusting relationships? Can we not see that God has provided enough for everyone to live abundantly, as long as we manage these gifts in ways that are consistent with that His love?

### **A Metaphor for our Times**

I think that part of what gives these memories so much staying power is in the way the WTC makes such a compelling metaphor. Those

buildings represented for us the apex of our civilization. They were an astounding technological achievement, a nerve center in the vast network of global finance and communications. They were also an expression of pride. And in that sense, they were the closest thing we had to a “Tower of Babel”.

And so, part of what was so shocking about seeing them fall, was how vulnerable it made us feel. Those buildings, standing as seemingly permanent symbols of our power, literally disappeared in a matter of seconds. And just as frighteningly, the event exposed a deep hatred and resentment, coming at us from people who saw themselves as victims and adversaries of that power. It was shocking to see that the culture we viewed as a benevolent export, could generate such a violent negative reaction.

The way the aircraft crashed into the buildings, and the ordeal that followed, also provided us with a powerful visual metaphor for the unease we felt about where our civilization as a whole might be headed. It had a movie quality to it, like watching the “Titanic” (1997) or “The Towering Inferno” (1974). Both movies had as their settings a form of spectacular monument to technological achievement. In Titanic it was the biggest ship ever built and in the Towering Inferno it was the

tallest building in the world. Both represented human technology in its highest form; technology as a kind of “housing” designed to protect the occupants and to maximize their interests and desires. And in both cases, a catastrophic event turned these settings into a death trap for the people inside.

I think the symbolism around 9/11 is even more poignant today, because the global system which the WTC towers represented feels even more precarious now and the irrational violence of that day still looms so threateningly over us today. The effects of global warming pummel our infrastructure and ecosystems with storms of increased severity. The pandemic is pounding our health care system and economy, and the radicalization of politics to the point where people would literally rather die than make compromises with the other party - all of these things taken together are like the slow-motion footage of a giant aircraft hitting the side of our civilization and shaking it to its foundations. And we are like the people caught on the highest floors, desperate for an escape route that will restore our lives to normalcy.

### **The Meaning of Life in an Instant**

There is a documentary that explores the events of that day from the perspective of religion. It is an episode of Frontline called “Faith and

Doubt at Ground Zero.” It is the best documentary on religion that I have ever seen. If your heart can take it, watch the whole thing. Otherwise catch the last five minutes. This film reflects on 9/11 in a way that exposes us to that which is most horrifying **and** most beautiful in our human experience and in our relationship with God.

One of the most agonizing, yet beautiful moments in the film comes near the end, when two people, with no place to go and with the building under them burning, hold hands and jump off of the top of the building together.

In some ways this event becomes the final focus of the film, as if to suggest to us that the entire purpose and meaning of religion, the deepest impulse and meaning of our lives is expressed in the fact that those who jumped joined hands as their final act; The meaning of life revealed in one sacramental moment.

### **The urgency of our faith**

The reality of what confronted those two people and how they reacted is almost impossible to understand. It was dramatic beyond anything we can imagine and yet it happened. I have stood in the observatory that was at the top of the Trade Centers. It had a glass floor at the

edges, so you could see cars like specks below. The thought of jumping from there is unimaginable.

Thankfully the future that confronts each of us is not so unimaginably dramatic. And yet, in some ways we share the same life and fate that confronted them, do we not? The saving power is the same. It is the deep impulse within us to reach out to each other, to comfort and care for each other in spite of all that may exist to the contrary. And as with them, this impulse has the power to define us and justify our existence even in the face of unfathomable blindness, cruelty and certain death.

I think that the main difference between those who held hands and jumped and us is that we have more time. While they had no more than seconds to give final meaning to their lives, we each have days, months, perhaps years. If we are fortunate, our final moments in this life will be quiet and peaceful, with loved ones by our side.

But there is a sense of urgency for us too. The civilization of which we are a part is badly shaken and our time is not unlimited. Today we have the time to lean as fully as possible into the love that was represented when the two (strangers, friends?) joined hands atop the World Trade Center.

That love that joined them together in mutual support is the answer to all that goes wrong in the world. It is the love which, for us as Christians, has been laid out and expressed most fully in Jesus Christ. And it seems to me that trusting and leaning into that love is the only way to live. It is also the only way to know what should be done next, and it is the only way to meet death without dying. There is no ugliness or brutality in the world that can wipe out the beauty of a life that puts its trust in the power of God's love and lives accordingly.