

For Such a Time as This  
Isaiah 24: 18-20; Philippians 4: 4-6  
(About 9/11/2001)  
James H. Slatton

The over-whelming reality within which we meet for worship today is the devastating attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon this past Tuesday. I have heard no one capture the impact of this tragedy better than a twelve-year-old girl whose words I found in the newspapers this week.

*...I could never have imagined anything of this magnitude in the U.S. When I saw the plane hit the second tower, [the] bubble I had been living in popped. In an instant, the world was real, threats of wars and bombings suddenly so much closer. When the towers went down, I thought it had to be a dream. I thought I'd wake up and everything would be OK. But I didn't wake up, and it wasn't a dream.*

*When the Pentagon was hit, it was terrifying it was so close to home. I thought that if New York, the largest city in the country, and the Pentagon, the military base for all of America, weren't safe, what was? I'm just a kid, but on September 11, it felt as though I grew up in one horrendous hour.*

The bubble popped indeed. If those massive and iconic buildings at the center of the greatest of our cities, and the military headquarters in our nation's capital were not safe, "then what was?" I don't think the question can be better put. I have a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach which has not gone away since Tuesday. I don't know when it will. Perhaps you feel the same.

The words of the prophet Isaiah, uttered so many centuries ago, seem to leap the intervening centuries into our own moment. "The *foundations* of the earth do shake, Earth breaks to pieces, Earth is split in pieces, Earth shakes to pieces...To rise no more!" Indeed! If his description of the shaking of the very foundations of our world expresses our sense of things here and now, perhaps his resounding affirmation can be a word from the Lord as well: "The world itself shall crumble, but my righteousness shall be forever, And my salvation knows no end."(Isaiah 24; 18-20).

So timely, also, seem the words of the Apostle Paul in this morning's epistle reading. He begins by wishing the church *joy* in the Lord! Not exactly our first sentiment at this moment! Urging his readers to be magnanimous, he next offers what sounds like impossible advice: "*Do not be anxious.*" Do not be anxious? Instead he advises, "*Let your requests be made known to God in prayer.*" That is more like it. Many of us found ourselves resorting to prayer all unbidden this week. Finally, says Paul, "...*The peace of God, which is beyond all understanding, will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.*" (Philippians 4:4-6)

***But First, Grief....***

I think where we have to begin today is with *grief*. Whatever else we have come to do, we have come to *grieve*: To mourn those who were lost in the planes crashed into buildings and into the earth; to mourn the unsuspecting victims in those great office towers and at the Pentagon; to mourn those who died trying to help them—firefighters, rescue workers, medical and emergency people. John Donne was right: "Any man's death

diminishes *me* because I am involved in *Mankind*; And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*.” (John Donne, *Devotions*)

No one is a rock or an island alone. We are all part of one single humanity, bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh. Every one of those deaths cuts into us. We must mourn brothers and sisters whose faces and names we will never know.

As the twelve-year-old girl’s letter so poignantly states, we mourn not only the dead. We mourn also the loss of something more. Not only have we lost fellow Americans, sister human beings, we have lost something else, something we had a moment before and now possess no longer. We have lost something both intangible but also quite real. Call it “the way things were.” Call it a “way of looking at things,” or “a way of life.” It is as if a *state of being* went down in the same erupting cloud of destruction with those great buildings and their human victims. In the words of Isaiah, the earth is shaken to pieces to rise no more. What seems lost, and what we have begun to mourn, is a sense of freedom and security in which we moved about just a few short days ago.

That young girl’s letter took my mind back to a time when, like her, I was a child of twelve. The year was 1945, very near the end of the Second World War. I heard one day a radio broadcast describing the use of a powerful new bomb on a city in Japan. They called it an atomic bomb. It was so powerful it could wipe out a whole city in a single blast. I understood at once that this was no ordinary event. If there was now a weapon that could vaporize cities in the blink of an eye, that clearly changed everything. A shiver went through me that I can still recall. Many of you remember! Our whole world passed under the shadow of a mushroom cloud.

Perhaps in the excitement of the moment I am blowing things out of all proportion here. Maybe in some better or worse future we will look back on this September and see this horror less earth-shaking than it now seems. But at the moment, I truly believe we’re in the midst of another “existential shock,” not as big as the breaking forth of the nuclear age, perhaps, but certainly another shaking of the very foundations, another “sea change,” not only in world and national affairs, but in our national psyche. I fear it is one that does not bode well for us or for our future. Such a passage calls forth grief and tears over what we have lost. We’ve come to mourn a while.

A few words about grief seem in order. Our losses must be appropriated. We must allow them to “sink in.” That is what grief is, the painful process of letting losses become so real we can begin to make peace with them. In the journey called grief we actually withdraw, over time, the emotional investment of ourselves we have made in someone or something we’ve loved and lost. As we do so, we are enabled gradually to reinvest ourselves in new loves and new commitments. Grief is the gradual and painful move from what was to what is and what is yet to be. So, dear friends, scarcely able to keep ourselves together, we have come together to mourn as we sing these great hymns and lift up our prayers of love for our nation and devotion to God.

Another part of grieving is the struggle to get our minds around a loss. We are hungry to understand what has happened. We want answers. In the face of last Tuesday we have a million questions. How did this come to be? Who were those people who flew airliners into buildings? What did they hope to accomplish? We think if we can only know more fully we might find some way to regain control of what is happening to us.

Perhaps if we could understand, we could reduce a horrifying reality to manageable proportions. At least with better understanding we might reduce the pain.

Grieving, we instinctively seek some kind of “closure.” We feel the need to pull things together. If only we could pull together all the broken pieces of the tragedy, wrap up all the chaotic parts of the disaster, we might find our way to some kind of resolution. Then we could pronounce a benediction over it all and begin to move on. Unfortunately, especially at this early stage, we sense no resolution. We cannot even imagine a satisfying closure. No worthy benediction comes to mind. That huge mass of wreckage in New York, the wound in the side of the Pentagon, and that scarred field where the last airliner bit into the earth, all are open wounds.

One of the moods of grief, of course, is anger and rage. Our lives have been broken into and violated. Our safety has been threatened—perhaps for the rest of our lives. *We are enraged!* This country has terrible power. When that power is awakened, it is awesome beyond description—and dangerous! Once again the sleeping giant has been awakened! I was at lunch this week with some respected companions. As you would expect we were talking about this very matter. It happened that one of my friends, an elderly physician, was a Yale man and the son of Presbyterian missionaries in Egypt. He was born in Egypt, spent his earliest youth in Cairo, spoke fluent Arabic, and cherished an enduring love for the region and its people. I asked him what he thought the terrorists were trying to accomplish. Almost without pause he answered, “They wanted revenge. They wanted revenge.” I couldn’t help but say, “But revenge is a dead end. Revenge is a dead end.” He nodded in silent and frustrated agreement.

It is a frightening new world. We grieve our losses. Grief has many moods, and one of them is rage, the rage we feel right now. Rage is inevitable and must be entertained. It belongs to grief, but it is just one of the moods of grief. Sometimes rage issues in a quest for revenge, but the wisdom of our faith through the ages is that revenge is a dead end street. Revenge is not the answer. It must not be our answer.

### *...A Matter of the Eternal*

Whatever else these events are about, they confront us with religious and faith issues. The people involved in the plot made it clear they saw their act as bidden and sanctioned by God. They drove the airliners into their unsuspecting targets with prayers and praise to their God on their lips. Evidently they believed passionately their targets were God’s targets and they themselves martyrs with certain and instant passes admitting them to paradise as the eternal reward of their unspeakable deeds. Suddenly, religion no longer seems the harmless diversion many people seem to think. The difference between good religion and bad, no longer seems merely academic.. Our hands have been called on who God is and what God wants of us. As we’ve already heard, Isaiah says that when the foundations we’ve depended upon and trusted are shaken, when those things we’ve put our hopes in are shattered, we are forced to reach out for that which remains. Can there be any doubt the question of this week’s events is essentially a religious question? Is it not clear we are thrown back upon some serious theological work? At stake is the *vision of God*. Who is God and what does God require of us?

You may remember the widely viewed and highly praised series of televised conversations between Bill Moyers and the renowned professor of world religions, Joseph Campbell. In that dialogue there was a moment when Campbell mused on the religious imperative to love one another. He said he found the love teaching to be central

and common to virtually all of the world's great religious traditions. The problem, said Campbell, is that the devotees of those religions too often apply the demand to love one another only to their own kind—to those in what he called their “bounded community.” In other words we apply the teaching of love only to those within our own sacred circles—fellow Christians, but not Muslims, fellow Muslims, but not Jews! Unfortunately, those outside the sacred circle of our own bounded community too often are seen as other, alien, less than fully human. Sometimes they are seen as loathsome beasts. The love demand doesn't apply to them. In the words of a bit of popular doggerel, “Men drew a circle that shut me out, Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.” Too often in the world's bloody history people of faith have felt free, as in the case of last Tuesday, not only to reduce the outsider to the less than human, they have felt compelled even to hurt or destroy him. So, who is God? The God of vengeance and holy war, or the heavenly Father of us all, who loves each as God loves all, and who loves all as God loves each. And who is my brother or sister?

Also crucial is how we understand what Isaiah calls the righteousness and salvation of God. The great twentieth century American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr continually warned and worried about the tendency of every nation and every religious group to define their own truth as ultimate and final truth. We identify, he said, our own limited theology with the ultimate and absolute truth and our limited brand of justice with absolute justice. When we do that, we then turn a jaundiced eye on the beliefs and practices of others. We even go so far as to hold alien nations, religions, and cultures in contempt. From there it is only one short step to finding justification in the name of God and truth to do harm and even violence to the despised other.

Niebuhr goes so far as to insist every political establishment exists as a temporary compromise with some degree of injustice. What if that is true? What if every human order, whether in church or state, whether ours or another, is no more than partially just, no more than partially right and true? What if all our human institutions fall under the transcendent judgment of Almighty God who, alone, is Righteousness Himself? That nothing is God but God and nothing is absolute but *the Absolute* is one of the most important and profound of all religious insights. It is, in fact, *the* protestant principle, and it is biblical! “As the heavens are high above the earth, so are my ways above your ways, says the Lord.” Did not Paul conclude his hymn to love “Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face. Now we know in part, then shall we know as we are known?” (I Corinthians 13:12)

I recently overheard someone say he was tired and fed up with the theory of relativity, with the idea that everything was only relative—morals, values, social norms, and religious doctrines. I thought to myself, “Does he not understand? That mindset is what brought down the towers at the World Trade Center. It is the absolutist mindset—what I call the one hundred percent mentality. It is the fanaticism of the true believer who has no patience for ambiguity, no truck with the unfinished and incomplete. He doesn't see through a glass darkly, he thinks he sees face to face. He doesn't know in part, he thinks he has the whole truth.

On our own part, shall we mirror the fanatics; insist with equal vigor on the complete justice of our own cause? What happens to humility in that picture? Like you, I find it painful to hear criticism of the things I treasure— my theology, point of view, politics, heroes—you name it. When Isaiah says that God and God's righteousness and

salvation abide when all other foundations are swept away, he sets that solid foundation in contrast to all the perishing foundations we build—our most cherished beliefs and institutions. We deal here with the transcendence of God over against the finitude and limitations of the human. This essential understanding of what is eternal, including as it does the love of God and the brother/hood sisterhood of all human beings is what stands between us and the folly of fanaticism.

Considering times like this when the foundations are shaken, the theologian Paul Tillich turned to Psalm 102. “Thy years are throughout all generations of old. Thou hast laid the foundations of the Earth. The Heavens are the work of Thy hands. They vanish, but Thou shalt endure. They wear out like a robe. Thou changest them like garments. But Thou art the same and Thy years shall have no end.” Tillich continued in his own words: “When Earth grows old and wears out, when nations and cultures die, the Eternal changes the garment of His infinite being. He is the foundation on which all foundations are laid, and this foundation cannot be shaken. There is something immovable, unchangeable, unshakeable, eternal, which becomes evident in our passing and in the changing of our world. On the boundaries of the finite, the infinite becomes visible. In the light of the Eternal, the transitory-ness of the temporal appears.”

I think we see some of that with our own eyes today! After the towers came down, in the midst of the carnage, there was God. God was in the dust-caked and tear-streaked face of a New York fireman. I think I saw God also in all of those who in the best tradition of firefighting raced up the stairs, lugging their heavy gear, faces to the flames, while everyone else was rushing downstairs trying to escape. God is with us, I think, in the avalanche of compassion that has been released by this tragedy, for God and good are within us and between us as we reach out to each other. Thus we lit this morning the paschal candle to remind us of the presence of the Christ in the midst of chaos, and that “nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Today’s Old and New Testament texts link up just here. The abiding salvation and righteousness of God is synonymous with the love of God in Christ Jesus from which we cannot be separated, and which, in turn enables us to “be not anxious” as Paul enjoins in his Philippian letter. This is the perfect love that casts out fear and imparts that “peace that passes understanding” and “keeps our hearts in Christ Jesus.” My associate in ministry put it unforgettably in a prayer last week: “Hate took love and buried it. Yet love was returned to us triumphant. Death took life and made away with it, but life rose again from the tomb. Evil slew holiness, yet holiness came back to life again.” (Dr. Robert Dibble, unpublished prayer at River Road Church, Richmond.)

The Buddhists are right, of course. Their first law says life is sorrowful. Nor does the Biblical witness promise God will put an invisible shield around us to fend off the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” Sooner or later, as Frederick Buechner once said, the worst happens to all of us. The bubble breaks. Our basic insecurity is revealed. The antidote to anxiety is not that we’re perfectly protected. The antidote to anxiety is “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

With all this in mind, what is left to say? Perhaps one cautionary word. I never shall forget some words of my uncle Durwood McCrary, an inveterate outdoorsman. The subject of rattlesnakes came up more than once on our hunting and fishing expeditions in West Texas. He told me, “Jimmy, always remember, the main thing about a rattlesnake is

not what he can do to you. The main thing about a rattlesnake is what he can make you do to yourself!” The “rattlesnakes” we encounter today, the kind that blow up buildings and people are dangerous indeed, lethally deadly, fanatically so. But they are not half so dangerous in what they can do to us as they are in what they can make us do to ourselves.