

The Last Trumpet

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

I have a difficult challenge this morning. Today we join the world in remembering an attack motivated by religious fundamentalism against the advance of modern Western civilization, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the tragedy of 9/11. Individually and collectively we then must take up the unending task of ministry and mission in the name of Christ, in the light of these tragic memories. As the Apostle Paul once wrote, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed . . . struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible . . .”¹

It seems to me that today’s memory is not unlike what we do each year on Good Friday, remembering the horrific events of the cross in the context of what happens next – Easter! Our text today speaks a word of hope about what happens in our understanding of tragedy when Easter becomes our horizon. When we can hear the distant sound of that “trumpet”, we become changed and we know “our labor is not in vain,” that everything we do to make the world a better place contributes and is used by God for the redemption already begun.

We all have our own memories of that day ten years ago. Mine are not unique but the events of 9/11/2001 hit close to home. On New Year’s Eve that year, when the 20th Century became history at the dawning of the twenty-first, my family celebrated in New York City. We attended a play on Broadway, enjoyed dinner in Little Italy, and then spent the night at the Marriott Hotel in lower Manhattan – at the World Trade Center. That hotel collapsed just nine months later. Manhattan was less than an hour from our home in New Jersey. It was a playground for us for over a decade.

Monday morning, September 10th (the day before), I took the train into New York to meet with a young couple I was to marry in November. He was from my old youth group in San Diego, now a lawyer. She was from the city, also a lawyer. She is Jewish, so a Rabbi was to co-officiate. We all met that day at the Fulton Street Fish Market in lower Manhattan (the location for the wedding) to discuss details of the service. We were planning for an interfaith religious ceremony less than 24 hours before the attack, just a few blocks from where the first two planes hit. One of my first thoughts the next morning, when the shock began to dissipate, was “Did David tell me he was planning to fly home to California tomorrow? Is he on one of those flights from JFK?” Thankfully the answer was no.

¹ II Corinthians 4:81-0

Tuesday, September 11th, I began the day in my office on the Princeton Seminary campus. Just before 9:00 a.m. I received a phone call from one of my staff that a plane apparently had flown into the north tower of the World Trade Center at 8:48 a.m. That plane originated in Boston. I quickly went downstairs to the closest television in the media center. We turned on the TV just in time to watch the second plane slam into the south tower, 15 minutes after the first. I called the president of the seminary to alert him. 50,000 people worked in the World Trade Center. Many of them lived in Princeton and commuted everyday. We watched the horror of that day in “real-time,” but it felt like some disaster movie.

At 9:00 a.m. a class of international students began their orientation at the seminary. Newly arrived for the academic year from some 26 different countries, they were gathered together in one of the new “smart” classrooms on the other side of campus. I made my way across campus to interrupt the class and inform those students of what was happening. We turned on the large projection unit that filled a screen the size of a wall and watched as news of another plane that crashed into the Pentagon came over the airwaves, and then the collapse of the south tower at 10:05 a.m. and the north tower at 10:28 a.m. Stunned and shaken, I suggested to the class that we pray and encouraged each to pray in the language most comfortable for him or her. A cacophony of prayer arose, like that on the day of Pentecost, with languages from around the world. The outpouring of empathy and disbelief was remarkable. Of those killed that day, there were at least 30 different nations represented. It was indeed a World Trade Center.

In New York city people were walking north out of lower Manhattan. Mass Transit was shut down. Several Presbyterian churches began distributing water to the dust covered refugees pouring up 5th and Madison Avenues. Cell phones were largely useless due to the large volume of calls. People were desperate to contact loved ones but fearful of what they might learn. My wife’s counseling office back at Princeton High School was filled with students who had a parent or relative working at the WTC or in lower Manhattan. One student’s father walked home, first north into Connecticut because the tunnels were closed, then west to New Jersey. Another’s uncle died at Cantor Fitzgerald, the firm on the floor where one of the planes hit.

The death toll exceeded that of Pearl Harbor, but these people were non-combatants. They were going to work, engaged in everyday activities like you and me. That the death toll was not higher is a testimony to bravery of many. Humankind - at its worst and at its best - was on display that day.

Some say we must never forget. But if we only remember to stir within ourselves our desire for revenge then we have not remembered well, as Christ would have us remember. Let us remember in a way that addresses the cause of such violence rather than simply to stir us toward retaliation. Christian faith calls us to self-examination as an act of spiritual discipline. So let me ask, "What have you done these past ten years to make the world a better place to live?"

What has changed in the last ten years? Certainly airport security has changed. Ten years later, the word "Islam" is still the most frequent topic in religious news in 2010, according to the *Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life*.² More than 40% of the coverage centered on three stories: the Planned Islamic Center near ground zero; a Florida Pastor's threat to burn the Qur'an,, and the tenth anniversary of the attacks themselves.

I'm not sure we have moved very far toward rebuilding. The Pentagon is repaired and a new building is emerging from ground zero but I'm not sure we are living in a better, safer world. We may be better at preventing, detecting, and deterring attacks but have we done enough to address the underlying discouragement and hopelessness that led to such massive death and destruction?

Religious fundamentalism is not unique to the Muslim faith. All three monotheistic faiths have their own versions of it. The fundamentalist ideology that perverts Islam, called Wahhabism (the alleged faith of Osama Bin Laden), is akin to the KKK or white supremacy in Christian religion, in my judgment. It uses religious language and symbols to take an extreme position that is the antithesis of what faith teaches. The faith that brings you to church today does not represent crosses burning in the yards of black families in the South. But to a Muslim watching on Al Jezera in Saudi Arabia, it may be difficult to distinguish the two. How much do you know about Islam? How much have you tried to learn these past ten years? One thing that I hope has changed is our indifference to what is happening in the rest of the world. Religiously sanctioned terrorism existed in the world before 9/11 and was tragically brought to our shores. Let's be sure that the faith we proclaim provides no sanction for terrorism in any form.

The Lord who we worship is the one who carries on his body the marks of terror. Christ's hands bear the scars of the nails that were driven through them to hang him on the cross long ago. His side carries the scar still from where they speared him and his brow from the crown of thorns when they tortured him. He told Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands.

² Makari, Victor. "Reaching Out to Neighbors in Faith" *Presbyterians Today* Vol. 101 No. 7 September 2011 p. 19.

Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe. Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"³

"He was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with grief . . . but he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole and by his bruises we are healed."⁴ When we join Thomas in the proclamation of faith saying, "My Lord and My God", we become agents of that very transformation that absorbs suffering and evil and in return offers hope.

The tragedy of Good Friday was transcended by the events of Easter Sunday by God's immeasurable grace. The power of God unleashed by those events absorbs and transforms human suffering still. That's why Paul writes, "We will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of any eye, at the last trumpet. . . . Thanks Be to God who gives us the victory."⁵ When we get that reality deep in our souls, we too become "steadfast, immovable, excelling in the work of the Lord, because we know our labor is not in vain."

James Loder describes such an awakening. He and his family were off on vacation to Canada in their camper on Labor Day weekend 1970. Along the road outside of Kingston New York, they pulled off the highway in front of a car with a flat tire and a middle-aged woman standing next to it waiving a white glove. Alarmed at her precarious situation, Jim Loder pulled over to help. Just at the moment he was leaning under the front of her car to find a place for the jack, a 64-year-old man fell asleep at the wheel on the freeway and plowed into the back of the Oldsmobile, which ran over Loder and trapped him against his own camper. There was just enough room for his head and shoulders to rest just to the right of the point of impact. He never lost consciousness, despite having his thumb ripped off, five ribs broken, a bleeding lung and skin scrapped and gouged all over. His wife of barely five feet tall lifted the car off her husband saying "In the name of Jesus Christ" and losing consciousness while she did so. A vertebra in her back was broken in the effort, from which she recovered in just a few months.

Loder describes his experience this way, "As I roused myself from under the car, a steady surge of life was rushing through me, carrying with it two solid assurances. First, I knew how deeply I felt love for those around me, especially my family. My two daughters sat crying on the embankment, and a deep love reached out of me toward them. The second assurance was that this disaster had a purpose. These were words with which I repeatedly tried to

³ John 20: 27-28

⁴ Isaiah 53: 3-5

⁵ I Corinthians 15:51-52

reassure my wife and children, 'Don't worry; this has a purpose.' Walking from the car to the embankment, I never felt more conscious of the life that poured through me, nor more aware that this life was not my own. My well-being came from beyond my natural strength, and I lay down on the grass mostly because I thought I ought to. When my three-year-old daughter, Tami, came to sit on my broken chest, I was able to comfort her with a story." He went on to write, "The adrenalin activated aggression toward the driver who had caused the collision, but the flow of life in me was both a stranger and quieter force, so that the thought of retaliation was subdued. By far, the most significant and memorable effect was not the pain, nor the anger, but the gracious nature of the life I was experiencing."⁶ He experienced that life that never, ever dies. He said, "I knew then, I was going to live. I was either going to live here or there, but I knew I was going to live."⁷

Dr. James Loder was a Harvard-trained Ph.D. whose transformational experience on the road of life changed him forever. He went on to lecture and teach, to write more books until ten years ago (also in 2001) when he died suddenly on the floor of a bank while he was waiting to make a deposit. He died then but was transformed 30 years earlier. He lived for thirty more years here, and now he lives there, sustained by the same life-giving and evil-absorbing presence that he knew then, but knows in much greater abundance now.

I hope that by God's gracious intervention on 9/11, the innocent experienced that same assurance that they were going to live, either here or there. And I'm beginning to discover in this life what power there is in Christ Jesus to become "steadfast and immovable" in the face of life's challenges and tragedies because we know we are going to live. May 9/11 change us all so, like the heroes that day who acted not in self-preservation but to right the wrongs and protect the innocent, we too might seek to reverse the evil in the world as an act of faith.

So let us take up our lives more bravely, and seek to be more faithful in duty, and more loving and helpful to others for the sake of those who are with us no longer here on earth. Send us back to the daily routine of duties more eager to do your will, as though in the presence of death we had learned to know the deeper meaning of life. And when we too are called to leave this world of love and beauty, of joy and sorrow, when we hear the Last Trumpet – may we be ready within our hearts to meet our forerunners who have passed within the veil. By your bruises we too are healed, O Lord.

We celebrate the hope that endures and the life that overcomes evil and never ends on this somber occasion. Thanks Be to God.

⁶ Loder, Dr. James *The Transforming Moment: Understanding Convictional Experiences*, 1981, Harper & Row, New York, p. 2

⁷ Engelmänn, Kim, "Remembering Dr. James Loder: Reflections on the Moments We Shared", *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* Vol. 23 No. 1 2002 p 71.