
"Facing Treachery"

Elmbrook Church Message from September 15/16, 2001

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We have been through a harrowing week. It is good that we are here to worship today. Every evening since Tuesday hundreds of people have come together here to pray and to be with each other. This week people have gathered in churches all over the world with a deep conviction that this is a time to pray and to seek God. Whatever you have brought with you to this time of worship in your mind and heart--be it fear or rage or confusion or compassion or hurt or confidence or anxiety--you are meeting with God who gave you life and who knows you better than anyone else knows you and even better than you know yourself. He is the one who loves you enough to work in you to give you a peace that passes all understanding.

Let's turn today to the truth of God's word in psalm 25:

Psalms 25 begins with these words:

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul;
in you I trust, O my God. Do not let me be put
to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over
me.

No one whose hope is in you will ever be put
to shame, but they will be put to shame who
are treacherous without excuse.

When treachery stares you in the face, what do you do? I am not in the FBI, so I cannot chase down terrorists. I don't live near New York City or Washington, D.C., so I cannot help with crisis needs. The meager pint of blood I donated late Tuesday night seems so little. So what should we, what can we, do?

Tuesday morning my wife and I were in my daughter's school cafeteria for a meeting when someone came in and said, "a plane has hit the World Trade Center." The conversation around our table stopped for a moment, then continued, and I thought to myself: that must mean a small airplane accidentally clipped the building. This couldn't possibly be an intentional act of violence. That is unthinkable. Unthinkable.

The unthinkable has happened.

Yet this is hardly the first time the unthinkable has happened. One day Jesus left the temple in Jerusalem

and was walking away when his disciples came up to him, drawing his attention to the impressive buildings around them. The disciples, who were Galilean country folk, probably swiveled their heads around whenever they were in the great city of Jerusalem. Look at those buildings! Look at the temple! Clean, flat stones rising up in beautiful symmetry. Magnificent doors, great courtyard. A building more important than any other. The symbol of national pride. A house for God's own purposes. They looked up with much more pride and fascination than any of us who have walked the streets of New York City and have admired the Empire State Building, and the World Trade Center--when it still stood.

Then Jesus said to them: "Do you see all these things? I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

What did he say? That couldn't be. Unthinkable. Unspeakable.

Yet about forty years later that is exactly what happened. A Roman army rolled across Judea. It struck at and struck down these most important symbols of national identity. The shining temple became a pile of rubble on that flat hill that had originally been the threshing floor of Araunah a thousand years earlier in King David's time. The lesson of that treacherous day was that when we see the most familiar things around us come crashing down we know we need a Savior for our souls. And we still do.

David knew about treachery. He was terrorized by his enemies, and wrote Psalm 25, a prayer that any of us who are in pain and anguish today could pray:

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul;
in you I trust, O my God.... No one whose
hope is in you will ever be put to shame, but
they will be put to shame who are treacherous
without excuse.

We too have seen "treachery without excuse." But how can we respond?

The first thing we can do now that we have come face to face with this treachery that has incinerated human lives and seared our consciousness is to refuse to be ashamed or defeated. We can assert a firm moral clarity and say of those who have wantonly destroyed innocent people: shame on you! Shame on you! "They will be put to shame who are treacherous without excuse."

The most important thing for us to do is to turn to God. We pray "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul" because there is no one else to whom we can lift up our souls. There is no one else who is "good and upright" as it says in verse 8, "loving and faithful" (verse 10)." Only God can "rescue"; he is our only "refuge" (verse 20).

In Psalm 25 there are three things David asked of God: God, please *guide* me, please *forgive* me, and please *protect* me.

We must ask God to guide us. Verse 5 says "guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long." And verse 9 says "He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way." We desperately need God's guidance to help us know how to respond wisely. Treachery is not just an issue of international conflicts and terrorist attacks. Treachery happens in our own streets every day. It happens behind the closed doors of homes that seem peaceful, but are the scenes of unreported crimes and other cruelties.

Many people are wondering now what to do with their anger over the brutal assaults of Tuesday. There are things we can do. Anger is an inbuilt instinct designed to move us to action in the face of danger and injustice. It produces a hot energy. That heat can harm or it can work. It may turn into an anxiety that renders us sleepless or irritable, or mean-spirited. But there is an alternative. The anger you and I experience needs to be transformed into the energy of a driving engine, not the eruption of a volcano.

What we can do is to turn that energy into *resolve*. Resolve is *firm purpose*. It is thoughtful, calculated, passionate commitment to a good cause with constructive ends in mind. This is a time to face treachery wherever we find it.

If ever there was a time to say, "I resolve to stand against treachery in the streets of my city," it is now.

If ever there was a time to say, "I resolve to advocate civil justice, and to be a citizen of principle," it is now.

If ever there was a time to say, "I resolve to be an honest and loving spouse and parent," it is now.

If ever there was a time to say, "I resolve to watch out for my neighbor," it is now.

If ever there was a time to say, "I resolve to be more impassioned to give than to take," it is now.

If ever there was a time to say, "I resolve to seek God with all my heart," it is now.

If ever there was a time to say, "I need to find a deeper and true faith in God," it is now.

True faith is an issue for today. We live in an age when people say, "it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere." But let's consider this chilling fact: the suicide radicals who worked deliberately for months on a plan to fly jetliners full of people into buildings packed with people, were acting out of a belief system. They sincerely believed that God would send them straight to heaven at the moment of their treachery.

There is true faith, and there is false faith.

The true God is Love and Truth and Justice. Everything about the true God stands against treachery in any form.

1 John 5:20 says: "We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is *true*. And we are in him who is *true*--even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the *true* God and eternal life."

We must ask God for forgiveness. Verse 7 says "remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD."

What? Why pray for forgiveness? David was a victim, wasn't he? He was being chased down by vicious and shameful enemies. Why should a beaten-up man pray for forgiveness? David did so because he was a very wise man. He knew that--even when he was face to face with treachery--he needed to keep praying a humble prayer of forgiveness because that is the only way to keep your heart soft enough for God to shape

it, the only way not to become bitter, or vengeful, or self-righteous, or (worst of all), treacherous.

And we must ask God for protection. Verse 21 says "may integrity and uprightness protect me because my hope is in you." One of the things that many are dealing with right now is fear. We have seen terrifying things and have heard terrifying stories--and we will hear more. David prayed for God's protection in Psalm 25 because he was afraid:

(beginning with verse 16)

Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.

The troubles of my heart have multiplied; free me from my anguish.

Look upon my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins.

See how my enemies have increased and how fiercely they hate me!

Guard my life and rescue me; let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.

May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope is in you.

If you are struggling with fear right now, let me offer a few perspectives. On a week like this it is like we are taking a telescope and looking at one part of the world where awful things have happened. But this is not just a quick glance in a telescope, it is video tape being rolled through again and again and again. The fact of the matter is--reality is--that there is not a bomb on every corner, thousands of planes take off and land safely every day. One of the great realities of life is called the "common grace" of God. The sun rises every day, the rains water the earth and bring forth the crops we eat, children get on buses and go to school and return home at the end of the day, bankers and teachers and check-out clerks and computer technicians go to work every normal day. Millions of kids will play soccer or football this week and millions of them will cheer when they score and will mumble when they don't like the ref's call. I was out on the field this weekend watching soccer and football, and the grass still smelled the same, the breezes still felt the same, and the cheers of the crowds still sounded the same. This is the way things are in "the normal." The abnormal and rare events of treachery put us on alert, and make us more responsible, but no one can ruin, no one can abolish, the common grace of God.

Out of the rubble of tragedies always come opportunities. We need to open our eyes to the many redemptive opportunities that lie ahead in the weeks, months, and years to come.

We have an opportunity now to be more compassionate toward the rest of the world. In some ways our country has now joined with people all over the world who suffer at the hands of treachery. If we join with others who suffer, seeking a compassionate understanding of their plight, we will be morally enriched because we will be seeing the world the way God sees the world.

We have an opportunity now to become a more unified country. Wouldn't it be a blessing if we lost some of our interest in the trivial, and deal with issues that really matter in life. Wouldn't it be wonderful if multitudes of people realized that their lives will have fuller meaning if they are participants in and promoters of God's goodness, instead of just trying to make it to their retirement years in comfort.

We have an opportunity now to find faith in a deeper way, and to help others who don't have any idea where to turn spiritually.

We have an opportunity now to understand the mission of the church in a deeper way than we have in the past. The Bible does portray this world as a battleground between good and evil. But what are the weapons of such a battle? While national governments now plan how to wage a war on terrorism, the church should remind itself of its universal call to proclaim the heart-changing message of Christ in every corner of the world. If someone could disarm every ill-intentioned person in the world, that would still not bring peace and righteousness. Only God can do that, one person at a time he does that, and we have the immense privilege as the church to be involved in that mission.

Now I'd like to say some things specifically to the children and young people in this service. This is a week that you will remember the rest of your lives. The question is, what will you remember besides the images? I would like to ask you to remember one thing: *this* is why you need Christ and the community of Christ, the church. It's possible for any of us to slide from one year to the next in the church and forget what the church is for, and why we keep talking about having a relationship with Jesus. Your life is like an airplane that has taken off, moving toward some kind

of destination. We want you to have a safe journey. We want you to see marvelous things in your lives and do honorable things with your talents. But you live in a world where there is a push and pull between good and evil. And the battleground is not really out in remote places; it is in our hearts. That is where we can, by trusting in Christ, open the whole of our lives to his goodness--to be filled with all the fullness of Christ. There are only two directions in life: to move closer and closer toward God or further and further away from him. All it takes to move closer toward Jesus is faith. This week you'll remember flags planted in the ground and on buildings all over the community--but you can also make this a week when faith in Christ is planted in you more deeply and more firmly than ever before.

Finally, let me point us to a phrase that the Bible repeats again and again: be strong and courageous. Deuteronomy 31:6 says: "Be strong and courageous. The LORD your God will go ahead of you. He will neither fail you nor forsake you." 1 Chronicles 28:20 says: "Be strong and courageous and do the work. Don't be afraid or discouraged by the size of the task, for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you nor forsake you." 1 Corinthians 16:13-14 says: "Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; have courage; be strong. Do everything in love."

Remember some of the heroes this week.

Remember 31-year-old Jeremy Glick whose wife told him on the cell phone to be strong as she told him that two other airplanes had crashed into the World Trade Center. Jeremy talked to his wife for 20 minutes on that cell phone before deciding with a few others that they ought to try to rush the hijackers. They told each other many times over that they loved each other, Jeremy set the cell phone down, and minutes later the jet ploughed into the earth, the only crash that day not to produce casualties on the ground. Jeremy and the others probably saved the White House or the US Capitol.

Remember the pictures of firefighters going up the stairs of skyscrapers toward the fire in the last moments of their lives, and remember that Jesus--the eternal Son of God--walked straight into the jaws of death, for you and for me. They looked for his body three days after his crucifixion, and they couldn't find it, because he walked away from death, so that we could be forgiven and liberated.

This is the "greater love" that Jesus talked about. "Greater love has no one than this, than he lay down his life for his brother."

May we know the loving embrace of God in these days like we have never known it before. And may we agree with the Apostle Paul who said: "I resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified."