

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

17th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

Duane M. Harris

September 11, 2016

Text: Psalm 27

Title: “15th Anniversary of 9/11: Whom Shall I Fear?”

Fifteen years ago on a Tuesday morning I walked over to the church and the janitor met me in the hallway. He asked me if I had heard that one of the Twin Towers in New York had been hit by a plane. I said “no”. Went in to the office and Joy asked me the same thing. I walked back home to talk with Lynn and she had already turned on the morning news. Both of us just sat there glued to the images. I couldn’t pull myself away. I remember trying to absorb what this meant. No one knew. The first one hit and I remember thinking it must have been a tragic error, a malfunction on the plane, something. But then we watched the second jet hit and we knew it was more than that. This was an intentional attack, a horrific act of violence against innocent people.

The range of emotion ran from deep shock to disbelief to outrage and anger at anyone who could do such a thing. Whoever they were.

Anyone over 19 years of age probably remembers where you were that day and what you were doing. All those images will never leave us, and they have shaped us in ways the WWI & II and the great depression shaped older generations. As people of the United States, that day will be with us forever.

Later that morning, my friend and colleague, Bob Harvey called me and said, “Duane, I think we need to have a time of worship today.” He told me that when President Kennedy had been shot, the church he was attending at the time invited people to come together just to be together and share the grief, the fears, and to affirm faith in God’s power in the face of fear.

So we held a service that day. We sang hymns of faith that day. “We shall overcome”, I think. “How Great Thou Art”. Hymns reminding us of the deep well of having confidence in God even in the face of fear. And Bob preached. Same message: hanging on to hope in the midst of confusion and chaos and fear. I prayed for those who lost their lives that day, for the firefighters and police officers and first responders who so courageously charged in to save those they could, many of them losing their own lives as they fulfilled their oaths to serve those in peril. I prayed for leaders who would be faced with difficult choices in the days and weeks and months to come. I prayed for all of us as citizens of this nation as we struggled to make sense of and respond to whatever this act of violence would mean for us as a people. I prayed.

And then we invited people to speak. Many shared the shock we all felt. Some shared fear. Some anger. Others expressed their hopes that we would not as Christians retaliate in kind using violence to kill our enemy.

It's been 15 years to the day. And here we are--in worship, a place and time in which to open ourselves to the power, grace & mercy of God, a place and time to be in community because we need God and we need each other. Because 9/11 and the ongoing threats we face from those who use fear to inflict terror are still with us. Fear is still with us. The question for us still is: what do we do with the fear?

It has been said that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but fear. If you know your Bible at all, you know that God is consistently telling people not to be afraid. Over and over again in the face of fear, God tells people through messengers like Moses and Isaiah and Jesus: "Do not be afraid".

Through the voice of Psalm 27 we hear from one who reminds himself that there is no reason to fear because God was with him.

¹The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold^[a] of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

Over and over again, he reminds himself that because God was with him, he did not need to be fearful. "Evil people may want to destroy me. Armies may be surrounding me. Yet even if they attack, I will be strong and confident because God is with me. "

Another Psalm just a few pages back in the Bible proclaims the same deep confidence in God. President George W. Bush quoted these verses when he addressed the nation on the night of September 11, 2001:

⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley,^[d]
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.
(Psalm 23)

That is the good news of faith isn't it? To realize in the midst of fear that God is with us and that nothing can separate us from the love of God, even the threats those who use fear as a weapon cannot and will not separate us from God. The Apostle Paul addressed the same thing when he wrote to the Romans and proclaimed so convincingly:

³¹What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,³⁹ nor height, nor

depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Romans 8)

These are the promises of God that instill hope and trust in the God known in Jesus Christ. These are the promises that invite us to walk in faith and not in fear. Psalm 27 calls us to this walk in faith in the face of fear. And after he reminds himself that God is with him and therefore he need not be afraid, he turns on a dime and shifts attention from the evil people and the armies to the most important thing in his life—the relationship he has with God. He longs to be in the house of the Lord as we are this morning. He wants to be sing praises to God. And then he tells God something we wouldn't say in our everyday conversations. He says:

⁸“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”

Your face, LORD, do I seek.

⁹ Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.

James Moore, a popular pastor and writer whose material many of our Sunday school classes have used, wrote a small booklet when the 10th anniversary of 9/11 took place. 9/11: What a Difference a Day Makes is the title. There he recounts a story of a young man whose wife had died in the attacks. He was left alone with a small son. They went home the day of her funeral and went to bed as soon as it was dark because there was nothing else he could bear or think to do. As this young father lay there in the darkness with the pain of loss weighing upon him, the shock, the aloneness, the numbness that comes with such deep sorrow, he heard his son's voice break through the darkness:

“Daddy, where is Mommy? When is she coming back?”

The father tried to get the boy to sleep but there was no use. The boy was understandably confused and the questions kept coming. So after a bit, the father brought the little boy to bed with him. Yet, even that didn't work. He was still restless, still confused and the questions kept coming. Finally, the boy reached out with his little hand toward his father, touched his face and asked, “Daddy, is your face toward me?” His father assured him that it was and he could tell by the touch that his father was telling the truth. The little boy said, “Daddy, if your face is toward me, I think I can go to sleep.” Not much after that, the little guy was quiet.

The father just laid there with his son sleeping beside him. And like his son had just done with him so he offered his own pain and confusion to God as he prayed something like this: “O God, the way is dark right now, and I confess that I don't see my way through; but if your face is toward me, somehow I think I can make it.”

This is what faith sounds like, isn't it? Because God is with us, because God's face is toward us, we walk in faith, not fear.

Faith isn't just the absence of fear but also about walking in hope and not in despair. Moore recounts another story of a man who was interviewed after the events of that day. He worked in the south tower. After the first plane hit the north tower, everyone was immediately evacuated from the south tower where he worked. He was on his way out when the second plane hit that building. It shook the building he said and everything went dark in the stairwell where he and others were trying to escape. He had no idea what had happened but he smelled smoke. Because it was dark he became confused, wasn't sure where to go, what to do—terrified—so he just held on to the wall in the darkness.

As he did, he felt a hand on his shoulder. It was a police officer who told him, "Follow me. I know the way out." The officer took him by his hand and led him out of the building to safety.

When the man was interviewed later, he told the reporter, "You can't imagine the incredible relief I felt when that policeman said, "Follow me. I know the way out."

This is the Good News of Christ: "Follow me. I know the way out." As Moore puts it: "Here is One who knows the way out—the way to safety and life. Here is One who can save you, and that is our hope."

We are people who walk in faith, not fear. We are a people who also walk in hope, not despair.

One of the enduring images in the aftermath of 9/11 is that 17 foot steel cross workers discovered in their relief efforts. It has become iconic for people of faith, that out of the expression of such evil hatred, the symbol of God overcoming evil rises up from the rubble. What more powerful symbol of God's presence could we find that reminds us that through the suffering of the cross, the love of God endures?

I remember attending a seminar not long after 9/11 and Tex Sample was the teacher. He called 9/11 a crucifixion event, and he was right to call it that. It was yet another expression of evil and hatred thinking that such violence and death can defeat enemies, that such violence is the pathway to power.

But that cross of Jesus is an overwhelming reminder that we do not believe what the terrorists believe. We believe in the God whose love overcomes evil and death. We believe in love not hate as the way of God. Our God is not an easy chair kind of God who rules from afar and doesn't get involved. Our God is not the God of taking innocent lives as a display of true power. Our God is One who endures suffering and walks with the suffering and the fearful and proclaims that God's goodness cannot be defeated. It is stronger than hate. It is more powerful than fear. It is the kind of love that can say to those doing the killing, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." It's the kind of love that says, "Follow me. I know the way out."

Therefore, as we remember the events of this day, it may be that just repeating these words of encouragement will not alleviate all of our worries. We have personal realities to deal with, of course, and the truth is that fear is still used as a weapon and a tool for gaining peoples' attention, but when those moments of fear do come remember that we are people who walk by faith, not fear. We are people who walk in hope, not despair and we are a people who walk in

love, not hatred. And when we find ourselves disconnected from such confident faith, hope and love, we can take solice in the words of the psalm to bolster our courage:

¹³ I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.

¹⁴ Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!